US President Donald Trump confirmed his intention to end nearly two decades of war in Afghanistan and reduce the number of US troops in the country in his State of Union address to Congress on February 4. About 14,000 members of the US military are currently deployed in Afghanistan, as well as 17,000 troops from 39 NATO member states. However, according to the Trump administration, it aims to reduce the number of US troops in Afghanistan to 8,000-9,000 as part of a peace agreement to end the conflict.

Putting an end to the war in Afghanistan was one of Trump’s pre-election promises during his campaign in 2016. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that this remains one of the most pressing issues as Trump has begun his reelection campaign. In his speech, Trump emphasized that the USA is negotiating with the Taliban (the movement is banned in the Russian Federation) and the government of Afghanistan in order to reach a peace deal. Nevertheless, he once again hinted that the US could secure a win in Afghanistan, but that would lead to a large number of casualties, including civilian deaths.

It should be noted that, as of yet, Washington’s talks with representatives of the Afghan leadership and the Taliban (banned in Russia) leave no hope for the possibility of signing a peace treaty between these parties and ending the armed conflict in the foreseeable future.
Over the past two years, the United States and the Taliban have been actively conducting negotiations to resolve the situation in Afghanistan and have resumed talks in December. According to US officials, the sides did come close to making a deal, but the latest round of negotiations has come to a standstill, this time on the issue of reducing the degree of violence—an integral part of the peacemaking process. The Afghan government wishes to instill a month-long truce, and the Taliban have suspended some of their attacks, though only in cities and on major roads.

However, according to some reports, the United States and the Taliban have recently managed to define the main terms of a future peace deal:

- The Taliban guarantee that they will not allow international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda (banned in Russia) to use Afghanistan as a training ground for attacks abroad; 
- The US must withdraw its troops from the country. In particular, the terms include the following: About 5,000 US soldiers are expected to be withdrawn immediately after the peace deal is signed, and the remaining troops will leave the country within the next two years; 
- Against the backdrop of an indefinite truce in Afghanistan, the conflicting parties should begin an internal political dialogue.

The Kabul government, however, is not taking part in those talks at the insistence of the Taliban, which considers the current official government to be a puppet. But the US is in favor of Kabul reaffirming its commitment to the peace terms, because otherwise the last condition of the agreement will not be fulfilled. Ultimately, the Taliban wants to see the complete withdrawal of US troops from the country, while the US would like to see the Taliban and Afghanistan negotiate the distribution of power in the government. If they succeed in making a peace deal with Washington, the Taliban would obviously view it as their unconditional victory and a sign of the United States’ weakness.

Meanwhile, the number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan is growing year by year. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 3,804 people, among them 927 children, died in 2018 during clashes between militant groups and the government forces. At the same time, according to a report published by the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health, in the first month of 2020 alone, 2,873 civilians have died as a result of combat operations in Afghanistan and about 14,375 have been injured.

The scale of bombings carried out by the US Air Force in Afghanistan is also constantly increasing. The US Air Forces Central Command reports that in 2019 alone, 7,423 bombs were dropped and about 8,800 combat missions were conducted by US aircraft. And according to the UN, 579 civilians were killed as a result of aerial bombardments in Afghanistan, mostly carried out by the US Air Force, in the first nine months of 2019.

Journalists note that the number of military operations in Afghanistan is also on the rise amidst negotiations with the Taliban. Despite this, neither the US nor the Taliban have reduced their combat operations, choosing to use them as a means of influence. As noted by the US media, the increase in the number of armed clashes involving the Taliban (banned in Russia) and other Islamist groups at the end of 2019 coincided with Donald Trump’s declarations that the US has been ‘hitting our enemy harder than at any time in the last ten years.’ In reality, though, there are glaring contradictions between Washington’s rhetoric of suppressing the Taliban and the situation within the region: despite the bombings and US-Afghan ground operations, the Taliban still have the capacity to strike back as harshly as before. In addition, this information is one of the few remaining publicly available means of measuring the USA’s ‘success’ in Afghanistan, given that the US military has stopped publishing or has classified the data on Afghan casualties and the percentage of areas remaining under government control.

So it isn’t surprising to see the growing demands both in Afghanistan and the USA itself for the US military to leave the region, which would, among other things, curb the massive illicit drug production carried out in Afghanistan. Thus, in a recent interview with Fox News, retired US Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor admitted that the US-made government of Afghanistan is likely to collapse almost immediately after the withdrawal of American troops. In his opinion, there is no point in supporting a corrupt Afghanistan that has evolved into an ‘international heroin machine’ over the past decades, and President Trump should take more decisive actions to end the Afghan tragedy.

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