Many hopes and plans in Afghanistan were tied to the arrival of a new administration in the White House. All of them, however, have so far stalled, as has the prospect of a peaceful resolution of the conflict in that country. The Doha peace talks came to a halt because a US congressional committee did not recommend that Joe Biden rush the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. NATO, too, is still indecisive. As a result, fighting continued in more than 20 provinces, politicians talk of a possible civil war and an anti-Taliban general popular front, and the Taliban looked for allied countries.

The principles of Afghan policy have not yet been voiced by the new US President Joe Biden, although a research group of experts appointed by the US Congress back in April 2020 — a few weeks after the signing of the agreement between the United States and the Taliban — presented the new White House administration with the 88-page final report “The Road to Peace in Afghanistan”. The group urges Biden not to rush the withdrawal of troops by canceling May 1 as the final date for their withdrawal from the IRA, to reduce the number of troops only once the security situation in Afghanistan improves.

Regarding the development of the situation in the country, experts of the research group criticized the Taliban, who do not fulfill the conditions of the Doha agreement to reduce violence and stop contacts with terrorist organizations. They also condemned the Afghan government, which they saw as too often ineffective and short-sighted, as well as too corrupt and divisive within the ranks of the Afghan cabinet. The report acknowledges that if the peace process fails, the collapse of the government will create serious problems in the region and beyond.

This report generated a lot of interest in Afghanistan, both in Kabul and in the Taliban (banned in the Russian
According to Afghan observers, today the majority of the population does not share the values of Taliban and does not accept their mentality, which creates the possibility of a "general popular anti-Taliban front". This idea was voiced as early as last November, when it was pointed out that a unified anti-Taliban movement could be created in the north of Afghanistan. It was about the possible mobilization of the population and its arming.

The US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, whom the new administration left in office, met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken the other day to formulate further policy on Afghanistan. As follows from the rather sparse information on this meeting, the general strategic objectives so far remain the same: "protection of the US from the threat of terrorism, achieving a just and lasting political settlement, securing a permanent and comprehensive cease-fire". However, the way in which they can be achieved remains unspecified.

As for NATO, on the eve of negotiations of defense ministers of the alliance countries on February 17-18, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in an interview to Die Welt that the war in Afghanistan cannot last forever, and no NATO country wants to stay there longer than necessary. Now, there is a lot that depends on Washington, but NATO points out that the Taliban does not fulfill its obligations under the treaty with the United States, so an extension of the alliance mission in the region is very likely, as Jens noted. At the same time, Stoltenberg realizes that if the NATO contingent decides to stay, it will have to continue a heavy military operation in Afghanistan, and there is a risk of increased violence against NATO troops.

The Taliban themselves have already declared their threats to NATO forces:

"Anyone who seeks to continue wars and occupation will be held responsible, just as they were in the previous two decades."

In connection with a possible extension of the international military mission in Afghanistan, the German magazine Focus draws attention to Germany’s concerns about the safety of its troops in that country. According to official data, 10,000 NATO troops are now present in the country. Germany’s position on this issue is very important for NATO, because Germany has the second largest contingent in Afghanistan after the US - 1,100 soldiers, after the US military mission under Donald Trump was reduced to 2,500. The Bundeswehr is responsible for one of the five areas in northern Afghanistan controlled by NATO, but according to German security circles, an extended Alliance presence could result in the German camp in Mazar-e-Sharif needing substantial reinforcements. Nevertheless, the German government wants to extend the Bundeswehr’s mandate, which expires at the end of March, for a new one until the end of this year. A Defense Department spokesman has even already confirmed to the AFP news agency that negotiations with the Foreign Ministry over an extension of the mandate expiring on March 31 have already begun, and that an extension is possible and likely.

At the same time the representative of the German Left, Heike Hansel, on the contrary, demanded the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, regardless of the US position:

"The mission in Afghanistan has failed after almost 20 years — the German government must finally recognize this and draw conclusions."

In these circumstances, the possibility of NATO remaining in Afghanistan after May 1, 2021 becomes increasingly real. In a February policy brief, the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) notes that Biden has several options with regard to the Afghan crisis, ranging from a complete breakup with the militants to agreeing to withdraw troops by May. Among the most realistic options, experts point to an attempt to get the militants to postpone the deadline.

The decision as to whether the US agreement made with the Taliban a year ago will be respected and whether the withdrawal will take place is now solely up to Washington. This is a policy decision that new US President Joe Biden wants to make in close consultation with allies, including during a video call. However, it is already known that no decision will be made at the NATO defense ministers’ meeting on February 17-18; it is only expected in the coming weeks. In diplomatic circles, it is almost certain that NATO will want to stay in the Hindu Kush longer than until the end of April.
Vladimir Danilov, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 