With the onset of the final phase for the US military to withdraw from Afghanistan, the 200-year problem associated with this country is going back to its traditional state of uncertainty, which has always served as a source of headaches for the leading (at this historical moment) players. Today, it is turning out to be a consequence of the current world leader realizing the senselessness of the reckless schemes that began at the end of 2001: “I’ve had enough of these Afghanistan games. Let someone else play them.”

It was clear to Barack Obama, who took the post of US President back in 2009, that the country was using up its financial, economic, and military potential in Afghanistan (under the pretext of fighting the proverbial “terrorism”) in the interests of forces that avoid publicity, and whose business is fundamentally tied to drug trafficking. He also withdrew most of American forces from Afghanistan. The need for a complete withdrawal from this country was confirmed by Obama’s successor (and seemingly his antagonist), Donald Trump, and current President Joe Biden.

As far as the above-mentioned “someone else” goes, that means Afghanistan’s closest neighbors above all others: China, India, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, and “post-Soviet” Central Asian countries. All of them, although without apparently relishing the prospect, immediately joined in the process of helping finally address the Afghanistan challenge, while not using it for some “practical” (for example, that same drug trafficking) purpose. Since leaving it
to the whims of chance would cost them more.

At the same time, it is worth underscoring that the main participant, and the most interested party, in the process of addressing the Afghanistan challenge is the Afghan people themselves. The only thing outside actors can do is contribute to a more or less painless course for this process, and accept the choice of state structure that the Afghans consider most suitable for themselves.

If that is associated with the Taliban (a group that is banned in the Russian Federation), then so be it. Let us not lose sight of the fact that under a religious cover for this movement there is the completely “secular” desire on the part of Afghanistan’s principal peoples (primarily the Pashtuns) for national unification in the fight against external aggression. This has been quite common throughout world history. It is worth pointing out that at least the “religious” wars that occurred in Europe in the 17th century - or the national liberation struggle of the Iranian people at the end of the 1970s.

The set of values offered by the Taliban are addressed to a purely internal audience. Judging by recent contacts at various international platforms (this is especially true of the talks that just took place in Moscow), the current Taliban seems to be a fairly responsible partner with whom it is possible to do business. Public statements about the need to respect minorities, prevent terrorist groups from stationing themselves in Afghanistan, and the high priority given to the economic development of a country that will not give preference to any outside players have caused some experts to talk about the appearance of the second generation of this movement (the “Taliban-2”).

The problem of how to prevent the intra-Afghan troubles from spreading into their territories is acquiring a special significance for Afghanistan’s neighbors. This issue in particular is becoming relevant for China by virtue of the persistent - to a certain extent - well-known problems in the XUAR.

Another extremely important concern for the new Afghan government (be it a coalition or just completely Taliban) will be getting rid of the growing and processing of poppy from the country’s farming business, which boomed during the previous 20-year period of “fighting terrorism”. It is worth reiterating that in the 90s the “first generation” of the Taliban achieved notable successes in this area by taking tough measures. And it paid for that at the end of 2001.

And, incidentally, isn’t it the case that cultivating cannabis is allowed in Ukraine - and the process of selling humus has been started - to compensate for the now inevitable losses incurred by the Afghan drug trafficking business?

As far as the problem of combating drug trafficking in their own country is concerned, something which the Taliban is facing again, nowadays the set of appropriate tools will apparently be predominantly economic ones, whose efficiency can be boosted by outside players.

The area of economics in general should be at the center the latter participating in resolving the Afghanistan issue. There is hardly any noticeable role allotted for military instruments. Various outside “brigades” should remain in the locations where they are permanently deployed, relentlessly involved in combat (and political) training in accordance with established regulations.

Incidentally, this should also help delineate the fundamental difference between the current period for resolving the Afghanistan issue from the previous one of “counterterrorism”. This long-suffering country has completely deserved a peaceful, successful life. All of the outside players mentioned can participate in forming that. It is worth repeating that the fact that any stable and long-term solution to the Afghanistan issue is hardly possible at all without overcoming the troubles (often very serious ones) in the relations between these “external” players themselves works to its own benefit.

First of all, this means the state of affairs in the “PRC-India-Pakistan” triangle, which are constantly discussed in NEO, including in the “aspect applied to Afghanistan”.

Everything connected with resolving the problems in Afghanistan may develop into a much broader and extremely pressing process of “assembling the Indo-Pacific region” - and one in which Russia could assume the role of moderator. A serious advantage that the Russian Federation has is that today it maintains good relations with all the participants involved in this issue. The factor involving the positive memory of the Soviet Union’s time in Afghanistan also seems to be one that is no less significant. And this, yet again, testifies to the distinguished place the Soviet period has in Russian history.

It was the Russian Federation (visiting Tehran along the way) where Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyan
Jaishankar went to coordinate the stances taken on the problems in Afghanistan. In Moscow, he held talks with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on all the main aspects of current bilateral relations. That included those stemming from the challenges in Afghanistan.

The Indian Foreign Minister left Moscow for Dushanbe for the next ministerial meeting between the SCO member countries. Here the situation in Afghanistan also wound up as one of the main ones in talks that took on various formats. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar pinned particular hope on the work done by a special “Contact Group” created in 2005 within the SCO.

But its first interlocutor was the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Kabul government, Mohammad Hanif Atmar. The meeting was quite successful, but it should not be forgotten that Jaishankar talked with the minister of the de facto interim government. What will happen when that is (with a high level of probability) formed by the Taliban is not clear yet. It should be noted that the Indian Foreign Ministry recently removed all the employees of the consulate in Kandahar that were located there when Taliban armed formations began to approach the city. It is possible, however, that this was an unnecessary precaution.

A meeting took place between the same Mohammad Hanif Atmar and his Pakistani colleague Shah Mahmood Qureshi, during which the former made a remarkable statement about the unacceptability of the presence of various kinds of terrorist groups (but not the Taliban) in the region. Similar accusations against Pakistan from Afghanistan’s official government have been heard before.

It is unlikely that Islamabad should expect fundamental changes in its relations with the official government Kabul when the Taliban, which Pakistani intelligence services were directly involved in creating, begins to speak on its behalf. But that was a long time ago. Nowadays, when the Taliban will be responsible for the fate of its own country, the host of issues involved in the “Durand Line”, which over a hundred years ago divided the Pashtuns and is still a (quasi) border that separates Afghanistan from Pakistan, will inevitably become more pressing.

However, this problem may last for some more years (a dozen or one or three), and the reason for constructive relations to develop with Pakistan could well be Afghanistan becoming connected to the region’s largest infrastructure project: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. This possibility was discussed back in September 2019 during the trilateral ministerial meeting held in Islamabad (Afghanistan was represented by Salahuddin Rabbani then).

It is worth noting, however, that the CPEC is one of the stumbling blocks on the path toward the positive development of the situation in the above-mentioned PRC-India-Pakistan triangle. And here we come to what is practically the key component of the issue involved in resolving the Afghanistan issue as a whole, due to the continuing complexity in the relations between the two Asian giants, India and the PRC. They both have a significant interest in everything that has to do with Afghanistan.

What is good is that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who had arrived in the region in advance, met with his Indian counterpart. This was the first direct contact between them since September last year in Moscow, where similar events were held then within the framework of, once again, the SCO. The main subject of negotiations held in Dushanbe yet again turned out to be the difficult situation in the high mountain area that runs along the bidirectional border in Ladakh.

The next landmark event that can be used to judge the actual state of Sino-Indian relations will be the milestone SCO summit (due to the 20th anniversary of forming the SCO), which is scheduled for September this year. It is supposed to be held in the format of a face-to-face meeting, and the author would like to pay particular attention to this. Naturally, unless these plans are negatively impacted by something “unexpected”. For example, something linked to COVID-19.

As far as the Afghanistan problem goes, the document adopted in Dushanbe about that lays out, among other things, the road toward that objective, which is placed in the title of this article.

At present, this goal almost seems surreal. But all the participants in the process of addressing the challenges in Afghanistan simply have no other choice but to move towards it.

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