US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: a Predictable Effect

The news of the beginning of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was enthusiastically received by many media outlets worldwide. There have been many positive articles about the benefits of this decision by Washington. American soldiers will stop dying on foreign soil. The US economy will be relieved of the monstrous burden of combat operations. The Afghan people will have a chance to build a brighter future on their own. The supporters of the withdrawal were not much embarrassed that American soldiers were leaving, but the Taliban terrorist organization (banned in the Russian Federation) was staying. Various experts worldwide have stated quite seriously that after the departure of the Americans, this army of terrorists would put down their weapons and enter into peaceful dialogue with the legitimate Afghan government, with whom they have been fiercely fighting for years. At last, they will be able to participate in democratic elections and, based on their results, take some seats in the government structures.

The fact that the Afghan government has been kept on American bayonets for many years has been forgotten. They also prefer to forget that the Taliban is the most powerful armed force in those lands. Since its inception, it has forcefully taken everything it has demanded. The Taliban would certainly not be satisfied with some seats in a democratic government in Afghanistan.

The Taliban was born in the early 1990s when Soviet troops supporting the then pro-Soviet government left
Afghanistan, ravaged by a long civil war. Left without Soviet support, that government was quickly overthrown (we can draw an analogy with the current situation), and power in Afghanistan was taken over by radical Islamists - the Mujahideen, who began to mercilessly destroy anyone who, in their opinion, violated Sharia law.

However, the Mujahedin had no unified leadership capable of running the country, and the mujahedin factions began to fight each other.

Afghanistan was in chaos and poverty, factories stood idle, and drug production became one of the primary sources of income for the population. That’s when the Taliban showed up. The organization's core consisted of radicalized students from religious schools, Afghanistan’s leading ethnic group, the Pashtuns, which gave the Taliban a significant and widespread popular following. Pashtuns also make up a large part of Pakistan’s population, making it easy for the Taliban to cross the Afghan-Pakistani border and operate and find refuge in both countries.

Young, radicalized, and numerous Taliban fighters, generously sponsored by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, quickly subdued or destroyed the fragmented Mujahideen groups. In 1996, the Taliban took over the Afghan capital Kabul. Three-quarters of Afghanistan’s territory was under the Taliban’s rule. Only the north of the country, inhabited by national minorities, remained under the control of the Northern Alliance, into which the remaining Mujahideen groups were united.

In Taliban-occupied territory, all laws, orders, or cultural phenomena contrary to the radical ideology of the Taliban have been abolished. Numerous executions of various "transgressors" were carried out. The executions of women accused of adultery, stoned to death, or buried alive by Taliban court verdicts, became a phenomenon that the international community couldn't ignore.

However, most Afghan population accepted the new order because it was in no small measure in keeping with the old Afghan way of life.

In 1996 the Taliban gave asylum in Afghanistan to Osama bin Laden, the leader of the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda (banned in Russia). On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda carried out terrorist attacks in the United States that killed about 3,000 people. In response, on October 7, 2001, the US, its NATO partners, and the Northern Alliance allied with them began combat operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al-Qaeda (both banned in the Russian Federation). The Taliban regime was overthrown, after which the current Afghan government was formed.

However, the Taliban and al-Qaeda continued, and their war against international forces led by the United States and Afghan government troops was carried on. Thousands of people died at the hands of Taliban fighters. In addition to military and government officials, the Taliban continued to terrorize Afghan civilians, sparing neither women nor children. Over the past number of decades, the world has been particularly shaken by Taliban acts, such as the execution of a schoolboy for learning English in 2007, the execution of a 7-year-old boy for spying for the government in 2010, and the 2014 attack on a school in Peshawar, Pakistan, in which terrorists killed 145 people, of whom 96 were under 14. Many other similar acts the Taliban has conducted as part of its so-called fight. In 2018 alone, 6,100 people were killed by the Taliban.

It was all the more surprising for many people when, in 2018, the US sat down with the Taliban at the negotiating table, suggesting to the world that the organization should be considered almost a legal, political force. In February 2020, an even more surprising event occurred: a peace treaty was signed between the Americans and the Taliban. Under the document, the US pledged to begin withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan. The Taliban responded by promising to reduce their terrorist activity. While the Americans soon started holding up their end of the bargain, the Taliban continued their terrorist activities, attacking the Afghan military and civilians. In just three months after the signing of the peace treaty, by early summer 2020, hundreds of people had been killed by Taliban fighters. Throughout 2020 there was fighting and killing in Afghanistan. In 2021 the violence continued.

However, this did not have much effect on US plans: they were already withdrawing troops. On July 8, US President Joe Biden announced that the US military would finally leave Afghanistan on August 31, 2021. According to Biden,
the US has achieved everything in the country that it wanted by eliminating al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden. And the future of the Afghan people, according to the head of the White House, can only be decided by the Afghan people themselves.

This is a rather strange statement. If the goal of the US was to eliminate Osama bin Laden, what has the US military been doing in Afghanistan for the last ten years? After all, Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011. If the goal was to destroy al-Qaeda, it seems that Joe Biden was misled: the organization still exists. On July 21, 2021, three weeks after Biden's speech, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reported that the Taliban had strong ties to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups and that the Taliban intended to turn Afghanistan into a safe haven for insurgents from around the world. In addition, the Afghan media report that experienced al-Qaida militants are training young Taliban fighters and command some of their operations. Al-Qaeda has a new leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to replace the late Osama bin Laden. So Biden's words that it's time for the Americans to leave because Bin Laden and al-Qaeda have been destroyed and have no other business in Afghanistan are a little perplexing.

Finally, what about the words of one of Biden's predecessors, Barack Obama? Who said on December 1, 2009, when sending an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, "We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future." Have these goals been achieved now? Judging by how actively the Taliban are pushing the Afghan government troops, no.

There is no point in counting on the Taliban to stop at some point to peacefully engage in democratic processes. Few people stop fighting when they start winning.

As if in response to Biden's words, on July 27, 2021, the Taliban blew up a power line which resulted in the Afghan capital of Kabul facing a black out. On July 29, they attacked a checkpoint in Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province and killed at least eight soldiers. Around the same time, photos of Taliban fighters in their "new image" appeared on the Internet. Previously, all the photos showed people in traditional Afghan clothes, armed with old Soviet submachine guns and machine guns. We now see harmonious ranks of soldiers equipped with the latest technology: body armor, helmets with video cameras, lightweight machine guns with telescopic sights, and even the typical NATO kneepads and elbow pads. These people look like modern special forces units. Of course, these photos do not suggest any thoughts of "peaceful coexistence" and "democratic elections."

So why is America leaving? The first and most straightforward answer is that it is tired and has given up. In 20 years of war in Afghanistan, thousands of Americans died, with Washington spending nearly a trillion dollars. Of course, there's no comparing the loss of life with financial losses. Still, the massive unrest that swept the US in 2020 shows that the domestic situation in the country is strained to the limit. If Washington continues to spend money on foreign wars instead of social and economic development at home, it could collapse the American state. Therefore, the US is forced to wind up the Afghan campaign without having achieved any actual results.

The second option is even more unpleasant. Perhaps the US is deliberately leaving unstable Afghanistan behind to hand over this critical problem to its competitors, Russia and China. Afghanistan, overrun by the Taliban and transformed from a refuge of international terrorism into an actual citadel of terrorism, and spreading the terrorist threat throughout Central Asia, could become a severe problem to these nearby states. Russia and China will have to devote significant resources to solve it. And when these countries are distracted by Afghanistan, the US will redirect its forces to strengthen its position in the Asia-Pacific region. In recent years they have had intense competition with China.

Even if Afghanistan is lost to the world community, Russia and China have enough power to prevent the threat from spreading across Central Asia, especially if they continue to develop cooperation with each other and with other countries through organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, CSTO. As for the US, even if it succeeds in achieving its goals in the Asia-Pacific region, the Afghan terrorists left unchecked could multiply its activity in other countries, including the US itself. Let's hope that this does not happen, but we should not completely rule out the possibility of such developments.

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