How Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan View the Change of Power in Afghanistan

It is well known than the majority of the population in Afghanistan are Pashtuns: according to rough estimates, about 45% of the country’s 40 million people are Pashtuns. Pashtuns play a leading role in the social and political life of the state, and this ethnic group is predominantly a member of the Islamist terrorist movement Taliban (banned in the Russian Federation) that recently seized power in Afghanistan.

According to some reports, over 30% of all Afghans are Tajiks: reportedly, there are more ethnic Tajiks in the state than in Tajikistan itself.

Uzbeks account for an estimated 8% of all Afghans, and about 2% of the population are Turkmen.

All three states: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, where the aforementioned nations are considered titular, share a border with Afghanistan and have different views on the Taliban’s actions.

For example, in August 2021, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon said that the Taliban do not plan to create an inclusive government in Afghanistan, including representatives of all ethnicities of the country. The head of state is convinced the Taliban want to build an Islamic emirate in which Pashtuns have a privileged position. President Emomali Rahmon is unhappy that his Tajik compatriots may find themselves restricted in their rights. Discrimination against Tajiks by the Taliban is one of the main reasons the Tajik leadership flatly refuses to recognize Taliban rule in Afghanistan and does not accept their delegations. According to President Emomali Rahmon, Taliban policies are likely to lead Afghanistan into a protracted civil war.

Afghanistan’s predominantly Tajik Panjshir province has become a center of resistance to the Taliban. An air bridge
has been established between Tajikistan and Panjshir. According to media reports, since late August 2021, resistance helicopters have been delivering ammunition, weapons, and medical supplies from Tajikistan to Panjshir. The resistance groups need help because Islamist fighters surround them.

Tajikistan is seriously concerned about the collapse of the previous Afghan government, as the relatively long Afghan-Tajik border on the Afghan side is now entirely under the control of the Taliban. According to some reports, criminal elements under the guise of Afghan refugees are currently trying to smuggle narcotic substances and other illicit goods into Tajikistan. Tajik authorities fear terrorists could infiltrate their land. Most of Tajikistan’s territory consists of mountains, where guerrilla warfare against government troops is relatively easy. In July 2021, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon ordered the mobilization of 20,000 additional soldiers into the 8,000-strong Tajik army.

In the 1990s, Tajikistan experienced a brutal civil war in which supporters of a secular state fought Islamists. Radical sentiments are still strong in the country. President Emomali Rahmon understands this and is doing everything possible to avoid a repeat of the bloodshed. His government was committed to peace and order in Afghanistan, calling, among other things, for an inclusive Government.

As for Tajikistan's neighboring Republic of Uzbekistan, there has been a dialogue between representatives of that country and the Taliban since 2019. This is mainly because Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed that the US would not be able to maintain a permanent military presence in Afghanistan and that the Taliban would seize control of the country after the US troops departed. According to the Uzbek leadership, even negotiations with the Taliban are possible for national security.

In August 2021, the President of Uzbekistan expressed support for the idea of forming an inclusive government in Afghanistan, emphasizing the importance of Uzbeks in the public life of that state. Shavkat Mirziyoyev urged the new Afghan authorities to respect the principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs and noted that any illegal attempts to violate the border by Afghanistan would be harshly suppressed. For its part, the Taliban have pledged not to attack Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan has taken a relatively neutral stance toward the Taliban. In addition, the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan is relatively short and runs along the Amu Darya River, so Uzbek border guards can easily control the situation. The low probability of conflict is also because the country’s armed forces are among the most combat-ready in the Central Asian region (Uzbekistan has 48,000 soldiers). The standard of living in Uzbekistan is higher than in Tajikistan, so there are significantly fewer supporters of radical Islamism among Uzbek citizens.

Despite differing views on the new Afghan government, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan conducted joint military exercises with the Russian Federation in August 2021. The two governments understand that Afghanistan could become a significant trouble spot in the region in the foreseeable future and should therefore maintain a high level of combat readiness of their armies.

The most tolerant attitude towards the Taliban has been in Uzbekistan’s neighbor, Turkmenistan. When the Taliban seized power, diplomats in Turkmenistan immediately recognized the new Afghan leadership. The country continued to ship goods to Afghanistan, and the Taliban responded by reducing customs duties. Apparently, the reason for Turkmenistan’s loyalty to the Taliban lies in, among other things, the current construction of the TAPI gas pipeline, which will run through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. Had Turkmenistan not recognized the Taliban, the implementation of the ambitious project would likely have been complicated. However, the country’s government remains vigilant and, since July 2021, has continued to reinforce its troops on the border with Afghanistan (which, by the way, is quite long, and the military forces of Turkmenistan total 36,500 soldiers).

Turkmenistan positions itself as a neutral state, i.e., in principle, it does not join any military blocs. The country’s leadership does not want to see the military facilities of any foreign power on its soil. Therefore, it is willing to have a dialogue with the Taliban, as long as it does not call in outside forces to help. Turkmenistan is a closed state, so there are no media reports on whether representatives of Turkmenistan have said anything in support of their compatriots in Afghanistan.

The three states - Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan - are in different circumstances and therefore have different attitudes toward what is happening in Afghanistan. However, they have one thing in common: they have all increased the number of their troops on the border with Afghanistan and are preparing for any unexpected turns in that turbulent country.
Petr Konovalov, a political observer, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook",