Failure in Afghanistan Causes US Policy Crisis in Central Asia

In the wake of the unfortunate end of the era of US military intervention in Central Asia, closing the chapter with the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, countries in the region have already begun the process of reassessing their ties with the former leading players of the region, and have started to build new schemes of common interaction in the interests of strengthening overall security and political and economic stability.

The shocking victory of the Taliban (banned in Russia), achieved even before the US and NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed, sparked a wave of harsh criticism of President Joe Biden and US policy in the region as a whole. Critics accuse the White House not only of mismanaging the withdrawal and undermining Washington’s standing in the world, but also of leaving the world with a power vacuum in Central Asia.

In analyzing the reasons for such a deplorable development of the situation, numerous experts and regional media point out that Washington publicly sheltered itself behind pretentious public statements about the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking in Afghanistan. In fact, however, it has developed its policy in that country and in the region as a whole, primarily based not on the real problems and threats of the region, but on its own selfish goals, with a tinge of its own commitment to criminal actions. Hence the inconceivable increase in opiate production by a factor of more than 40 during the two decades of United States political and military rule of Afghanistan. Washington failed to train that country’s army, police, and intelligence services, neglecting also the moral and psychological degradation that was building up in the country’s armed forces, which led to them surrendering without a fight. Spending vast sums to maintain their troops, the political-military elite of the United States was primarily engaged in corrupting these fabulous funds without creating any social infrastructure or civilian enterprises. As a result of this criminal “American aid,” ordinary Afghans are left with nothing but ruin, and the development of the country has
been set back decades.

All of this, along with the vacuum of power and authority in Afghanistan left after 20 years of US “aid,” makes other states, especially those in the region, think twice about the advisability of repeating the Afghan path and further cooperation with the United States. After all, in this day there is no guarantee for them that the “help” offered by the US will not lead to a similar chaos and blatant looting, and that the US military will not flee at the most critical moment.

However, it must be recognized that the US invasion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 caused a profound change in the political dynamics in that part of the world. Central Asia is no longer as anarchic as it was twenty years ago, when the Taliban ruled in international isolation. Today there is a certain regional order there that can successfully adjust to the absence of Washington. Afghanistan’s neighbors have learned to navigate the often contradictory demands of the US and its vision of the international order by strengthening ties and cooperation with Russia and China. As a result, Central Asia of today, while it is a multipolar space where different countries operate through new organizations, norms and systems of relations, is far from forming a political vacuum. The countries of the region are actively building relationships with other states, refusing to support a unipolar world that benefits only the US, and forcing outside players to listen to their own opinions. The “color revolutions” in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005), as well as attempts to cause discontent with the acting authorities in some Central Asian states, have long since defined their very reserved attitude to Washington’s actions and “initiatives” in the region.

The twenty-year US military presence in Afghanistan and Washington’s active desire to extend its exclusive influence throughout Central Asia have spurred China and Russia to develop their own competing institutions, norms and practices, including security organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The SCO, founded in 2001 by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, has become increasingly critical of US policies and actions. The organization has developed several regional initiatives, including biannual field training exercises and its own counter-terrorism center in Tashkent.

US efforts to stimulate regional economic development by integrating Afghanistan into the Central and South Asian community have also provoked negative reactions. Such ambitions have only accelerated Chinese and Russian counter-projects, which have become more tangible and better financed over time. And a striking example of this was the announcement in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping of the Belt and Road Initiative, which will see China invest billions of dollars in new pipelines, roads and railroads to connect Central Asia with China’s western provinces. Russia, for its part, has accelerated the implementation of its own regional economic initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union. Moscow has also used the immigration status of millions of Central Asian migrant workers in Russia to further strengthen ties with the countries of the region, which are becoming more profitable for them every day.

After the United States withdrew from Afghanistan, the regional situation shifted vigorously. The Central Asian countries, which are stronger than they were two decades ago, are now more pragmatic in their relations with the Taliban (banned in Russia) and are even showing their sincere interest in jointly addressing the security and economic problems of Afghanistan. Since July, Russian troops have conducted joint exercises with Tajik and Uzbek troops near the Tajik-Afghan border, and Chinese units have conducted anti-terrorist exercises in Tajikistan. Beijing and Moscow are now coordinating their policies in Afghanistan, negotiating with the Taliban in an effort to influence that country’s future policies and the actions of the Taliban. The Taliban themselves, while welcoming the still limited external ties, have announced an interest in Chinese investment and reconstruction efforts, offering Moscow and Beijing an arena for expanding strategic partnerships and implementing a joint program for bridging together economic and security initiatives.

India, while concerned about the US failure in Afghanistan, recognizes that recent developments have also opened up greater opportunities and perspectives for it. There is growing confidence in New Delhi that it can achieve success in Central Asia, develop its own strategic relationships, and continue to improve its economic position. However, it cannot be ruled out that recent developments in Afghanistan may bring India not only new opportunities but also new challenges. In particular, the possible aggravation of relations with Pakistan over the intentions to “cut” the Chinese land bridge over Pakistani-controlled Kashmir and to obtain its own land bridge to Central Asia.

In general, however, the Central Asian countries have already come to terms with the loss of the US as an active player in the region, arguing that the decline of US strategic influence in the region after 20 years of opportunities has been an undeniable consequence of Washington’s flawed policies in Afghanistan. It is also stressed that this
deplorable situation stems from the utter lack of strategic goals of the United States since the end of the Cold War and, in particular, the invasion of Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Therefore, the future attitude towards White House policy in the Central Asian countries will largely depend on what conclusions Washington draws from the Afghan collapse, whether or not it will abandon its former tactic of "divide and conquer in the name of American interests". And whether it will participate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan or other countries that have suffered from US military interventions in recent decades.

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