Why is Turkey so Eager to Run Five Afghan Airports?

-for Qatar and then travel to Afghanistan to discuss in detail the operation of Kabul airport, which is considered to be the main hub for receiving humanitarian aid meant for Afghan citizens and providing international flights. Taliban is interested in Ankara’s proposal for an apparent reason: after the US withdrawal and the flight of many American-trained specialists a severe lack of equipment and workforce in airport maintenance has ensued. That is why Taliban now could really use Turkish or Qatari helping hand. It is also essential for ordinary people since Afghanistan is a landlocked nation and all deliveries are carried out by air. Hence, the humanitarian aid hinges on the airport operations.

As of recently, a number of nations interested in solidifying their presence in Afghanistan, especially China and Pakistan, have been filling space in this country, with the airport operations and provision of security in them remaining one of the few vacant spheres. This is why Turkey and Qatar have scrambled to fill both these voids.

In November, amidst grave concerns regarding disastrous humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, Taliban started talks with the EU representatives to receive Europe’s assistance in getting Afghan airport operations back on track. Member of Taliban leadership and acting Foreign Minister of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (since 2021), Amir Khan Mutaqi, as well as Ministers of Education, Health, Finance, Internal Affairs and Taliban intelligence chief took part in these talks. The European delegation was headed by the EU Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas Nicholson. These talks did not lead to much progress, however, since Europe made providing funds for maintaining
airport operations contingent on Taliban’s creating an inclusive government, pushing democratic reforms and ensuring an equal access to schooling for girls. Moreover, Taliban was asked to guarantee that under no circumstances would Afghanistan become a haven for any organizations or groups that would threaten the security of other nationalities, ethnic groups and countries.

Against such a backdrop, Ankara believes that Taliban, now suffering from political and economic isolation, will welcome the Turkish proposal since it may prove handy in overcoming those difficulties. That is why Turkey, having gained the backing of Qatar, its long-time ally, intends to bolster its influence in Afghanistan through taking part in running Afghan airports thus pressing its claim to become not only the center of gravity for Turkic peoples, but also a leading Muslim country in the region. Moreover, as Ankara believes, Turkey acted exactly like such an entity when Ottoman Empire still existed, with Afghanistan being a part of its sphere of influence while Islam was primarily associated with Istanbul and Turkey.

Turkey is counting on the West to support these plans to run Afghan airports since 2,000 Turkish soldiers were a part of a multinational military force within the ISAF mission in Afghanistan from the very beginning. Between June 2002 and February 2003, and then between February and August 2005 Turkish commanders were in charge of this mission incorporating 43 countries. The main task that Turkey performed in Afghanistan was to secure Kabul airport. This June on the margins of NATO summit in Brussels, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan brought up the possibility of Turkish military taking up the task of ensuring the security of Kabul airport in the wake of the US military withdrawal while speaking with his US counterpart Joe Biden, and obtained the latter’s support in this matter. Ultimately, it is no wonder that Washington supported Turkish ambitions in Afghanistan since Turkey is a NATO member while Americans would not be Americans if they did not leave someone to keep an eye on the chaos in the region that they had left — at least for now. It is quite possible that Erdoğan, well-versed in political matters, by wringing this consent from the US also snatched a whole package of preferences, from military-technical cooperation on his terms to a package of political benefits.

But Turkey’s ambitions extend well beyond securing the airport. Even before Taliban took over Kabul, Ankara had believed that it might play a huge role in Afghanistan with the latter becoming some sort of Klondike for Turkey. The matter in question is not only establishing control over Afghan drug trafficking, but also numerous rich mineral deposits, including iron ore, copper, gold, rare earth metals and, possibly, oil. Moreover, Erdoğan has vested interests in the Afghan uranium deposits that have not been fully explored. Given nuclear aspirations that the Turkish president announced at the Economic Forum in 2019 and the process of building a nuclear power plant, these deposits will soon be in high demand. At the same time, lithium reserves in Afghanistan are thought to be comparable in size to Bolivian deposits. Incomplete estimates by Western experts indicate that the total value of minerals that can supposedly be explored in Afghanistan amount to $1–3 trillion, and these estimates account only for 30% of the Afghan territory that had been investigated by the United States Geological Survey (USGS).

In its “rapprochement policy” with Afghanistan Ankara relies on the successful use of “religious advantages” including and taking into account the repeated statements by the Taliban spokesperson (which he made, in particular, during the late-August interview with BBC and Turkish channel A Haber), according to whom Taliban wants to establish good relations with Turkey since Afghanistan and Turkey are “brothers in faith”. It did not take long for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to embrace this argument as he plays this religious card. “Turkey has nothing that contradicts Taliban’s beliefs”, he said.

Besides, imposing control over Afghan airports is also instrumental for Ankara due to its objective concerns regarding the flow of Afghan refugees to the EU through Turkey. Fearing a refugee wave coming out of Afghanistan, the Turkish government even started to build a wall on the Iran border. On the other hand, Turkey is clearly trying to become a mediator between the West and Taliban in order to improve its reputation in the eyes of Washington and Brussels.

To consolidate his position in Afghanistan, Erdoğan is undoubtedly pursuing ambitious plans believing that if fortune smiles upon him, he will be able to “put US and UK imperial ambitions to shame” as the latter never succeeded in “keeping Afghan demons at bay.”

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