



THE FACTOR OF AFGHANISTAN IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF UZBEKISTAN

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article examines the significance of Afghanistan in shaping the foreign policy of Uzbekistan. The geopolitical proximity of Uzbekistan to Afghanistan has had a profound impact on its foreign policy decisions, particularly in the realms of security, trade, and regional cooperation. Since the emergence of an independent Uzbekistan in 1991, the country has recognized the strategic importance of fostering stable and cooperative relations with its southern neighbor, Afghanistan. This article delves into the historical context of Uzbekistan-Afghanistan relations and analyzes the evolving dynamics in the wake of changing geopolitical landscapes, such as the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan and the subsequent power shift in Kabul. Furthermore, it explores the implications of Afghanistan's internal developments on Uzbekistan's security concerns, economic interests, and regional integration efforts. The study also sheds light on Uzbekistan's role in facilitating peace and stability in Afghanistan, as well as its engagement in regional initiatives aimed at fostering economic connectivity and security cooperation. By analyzing the multifaceted interplay between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Afghanistan factors into the foreign policy

INTRODUCTION

1. The socio-economic and political situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power.

Now the events in Ukraine have relegated the problems of other regions of the world, including Afghanistan, to the second level in world politics.

However, at the moment, the severe economic crisis and the complex humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remain acute, threats to regional security and stability remain. The country has been the playground of hegemonic powers for many years, but for many more years it has been mired in internal conflicts. Millions of people lost their lives due to unrest.

As a reference, Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country. Its inhabitants belong to different language families and different ethnic groups - Iranian, Turkic and others. The largest ethnic group is the Pashtuns - their number, according to various sources, is from 39.4% to 42% of the population. The second largest group is the Persians - from 27% to 38%. The third group - Hazaras - from 8% to 10%. The fourth largest ethnic group - Uzbeks - from 6 to 9.2%. Minor ethnic groups - Ayaks, Turkmens, Baluchs make up 4.3-01%, 1-3% and 0.5-2%, respectively. Other ethnic groups, including Kazakh-Syrgels, are 1% to 4%.

As of August 15, 2021, with the transition of the government in Afghanistan to the control of the Taliban, the political crisis has turned into an economic crisis. Non-recognition of the Taliban government led to a further decrease in foreign aid to the country. According to the World Health Organization, the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021 decreased by 20.7% compared to 2020 and amounted to 14.3 billion dollars. This indicates that almost 85% of Afghanistan, which has a population of almost 40 million, lives below the poverty line. 3.5 million of them are children under the age of five. 167 babies die every day in Afghanistan. From November 2022 to March 2023, about 20 million people were found to be food insecure, including more than 6 million people at stage 4 of the IPC integrated classification of food security stages, i.e. at the "Emergency" level (a total of 5 on the IPC scale phase exists). In September 2022, the World Food Program stated that the country faces the most serious risk of famine in the next 20 years.

As a result of a partial resumption of aid to Afghanistan (about US\$3.5 billion off-budget and on a smaller scale compared to US\$9 billion in 2020), Afghanistan's economy showed signs of weak rebalancing in mid-2022. Still, these signs of stabilization have not alleviated the severe pressures Afghan families face to maintain their livelihoods, as cuts in the aid-based service and security sectors have spilled over into other sectors of the economy, affecting the entire welfare distribution.

Although the country's inflation rate has decreased from 18.3 percent in July 2022 to 3.5 percent in February 2023, the price level remains high. This slowdown in inflation is due to the continuation of the downward trend of fuel and food prices in the international market; secondly, a stable exchange rate; and thirdly, it indicates that economic activity has picked up a bit after the winter. The severe winter caused a decline in agriculture, construction and related activities. As a result, employment of both skilled and unskilled workers fell during the winter, pointing to the continuing pressures on Afghan families to survive as they lose jobs and business opportunities.

Afghanistan's national currency, Afghanis (AFN), has held its value against major world currencies. Currently, 100 US dollars is exchanged for approximately 8,600 Afghanis. United Nations (UN) cash remittances for humanitarian and basic services remain important to Afghanistan's economy. They

continue to form the basis of currency stability: 240 million US dollars were sent to Afghanistan in February 2023 alone, and a total of 440 million US dollars in January-February (compared to a total of 1.85 billion US dollars in 2022, about 154 million US dollars per month) .

International experts note that children face more challenges after the Taliban took over, including 9 percent of minors between the ages of 5 and 17 (1.06 million) involved in child labor, and that boys are more at risk of being trafficked than girls, especially in Bacha-bazi activities. High levels of debt are forcing some families to sell their children to work as servants or to marry their underage daughters in exchange for dowry. Some families force their children into physical labor or knowingly sell their children for sexual exploitation, including for Bacha bazi .

On March 14, 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees announced at a press briefing in Geneva that the humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan in 2023 will be \$4.62 billion, as well as the regional plan to support refugees in neighboring countries - \$613 million.

Revenue collection for the first eleven months of the 2022–2023 fiscal year was AFN 173.9 billion (US\$1.95 billion), representing 87 percent of the fiscal year's revised budget target of AFN 198.7 billion. However, revenue collection continues to rely on regressive indirect taxes collected at borders: border taxes accounted for 57 percent of total revenue due to hard imports . According to Afghanistan Customs, merchandise imports in 2022 (\$6.3 billion) were in line with 2019–21 trends. This number does not include humanitarian imports in kind.

In the first two months of 2023, imports totalled \$1.16 billion, representing a 40 percent increase over 2022. Similarly, exports are significant in 2022, reaching \$1.9 billion in 2022, close to the average of \$0.8 billion during 2019-21. Export figures were higher in the first two months of 2023 at US\$0.3 billion, up 16% from the same period in 2022. Export products are mainly fruits and nuts. In particular, saffron, the most expensive spice, is grown in Afghanistan .

Antonio Guterres, the head of the UN, at the meeting on Afghanistan on May 1-2, 2023 in Doha, the capital of Qatar, reminded that the country is currently experiencing the largest humanitarian crisis in the world - two-thirds of the country's population, 28 million people, are in need of emergency assistance this year. 97% of Afghans live below the poverty line, and six million people are "one step away from starvation," the UN Secretary General said. At the same time, according to Guterres, the UN received only 6.4% of the requested 4.6 billion dollars to help the Afghans this year. "However, funding is not the only problem," the UN leader said. He said, "Most of our personnel providing life support in the country are Afghan citizens, most of them are women. The ban on the activities of Afghan women in the UN and international non-governmental organizations is unacceptable and puts people's lives at risk. Under no circumstances will the United Nations stand idly by in the face of unprecedented, systematic attacks on the rights of girls and women."

Special representatives of several countries in the region, who participated in the meeting, expressed their concern about the possibility of destabilization of the situation. "The priorities of the parties are different, but the mentioned problems are related to each other and should be solved together," said the UN chief at a press conference in Doha. Terrorism, human rights, especially the rights of girls and women, drug trafficking - according to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, prioritizing one of these problems does not mean that others are less important. He recalled that last week the Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution condemning the de facto Afghan authorities' decision to ban women from the country from working at the UN. In a statement to the press after the consultations in Doha, Guterres said: "The atmosphere of solidarity that prevailed during the adoption of the resolution also affected our meeting" .

Recently, Roza Otunbaeva, the special representative of the UN Secretary General for Afghanistan, announced that a new agreement was signed to provide humanitarian aid in the form of 68 tons of food to the people of Afghanistan. "This help is for those suffering from drug addiction. Unfortunately, this is one of the worst consequences of the 40-year war. Today, more than 6 million people in the country suffer from drug addiction. One million of them are women and children. No one is paying enough attention to it, and it remains an urgent problem. I would like to thank the Islamic Food Security Organization once again for its support and help in providing quality food to people undergoing treatment in rehabilitation centers," said Otunbaeva.

According to reports, members of the UN Security Council called for the "full, equal, meaningful and safe participation" of women and girls in society in Afghanistan. They also called on all countries and organizations that have influence over the country's current authorities to "immediately review" policies that violate women's rights.

2. The influence of external forces on the situation in Afghanistan as a threat to the countries of Central Asia.

It should be noted that after the withdrawal of NATO troops, in addition to "ISIS" and "Al-Qaeda", there is still a possibility of activation of activities of a number of other religious-extremist and terrorist groups located in Afghanistan. There are also organizations that aim to overthrow the constitutional system in the republics of Central Asia, to eliminate the secular features of their development, and to create a rule in the form of a medieval caliphate in the territory of this region. Organizations with such goals include Turkestan Islamic Movement (TIH), Hizb-ut-Tahrir-al-Islami, Tablighi Jamaat, Muslim Brothers, "East Turkestan Islamic Party", "Jamaat Ansarullah", "Mujahideen of Central Asia" and include others.

At the same time, one of the main problems facing the countries of Central Asia is the intensification of the confrontation between the great powers for the sphere of influence in the region. After the withdrawal of NATO troops, the possibility of purposeful development of the above threats by global players in order to obtain certain political and economic dividends cannot be denied, which will lead to inevitable changes in the configuration of forces in the Central Asian region. One of the important aspects of strengthening the US influence in the Central Asian region will continue to be the activation of Washington's participation in regional security, which will certainly lead to a response from Moscow and Beijing.

Strengthening the US military-political presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan fits well with the US strategy to contain China in the context of the growing competition between Washington and Beijing for global dominance and influence over world political and economic processes. From this point of view, along with the eastern (Japan, Republic of Korea, a number of South-East Asian countries) and southern (India, Pakistan) regions of US military and military-technical cooperation, Central Asia is the western region of the US strategy to encircle China.

Kazakhstan expert, doctor of political sciences, professor Karligash Nugmanova: in the opinion of Beijing's strategy in Central Asia is as follows:

- Preventing the domination of any major state or political and ideological power in Central Asia, including Russia, the United States, the rest of the West and Islamic countries;
- Exclusion of negative ethnic influence of the Central Asian countries on the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region;
- Turning Central Asia into the main supplier of energy and its most important economic counterparty in general;

— To achieve China's leading positions in the entire region in the future;
- Limiting separatist nationalism in China and getting help from Central Asian countries in Taiwan and Tibet .

As for Russia, Moscow does not miss the opportunity to strengthen its influence in Central Asia, because against the background of increasing external threats from Afghanistan, Moscow seeks to strengthen the "security belt" along the southern borders of Russian territory as much as possible, and is forced to take appropriate measures to eliminate them. Russia's activity in the direction of Central Asia can be caused by China's recent growing economic influence in Central Asia, as well as Washington's steps to expand military infrastructure in this region. Another important aspect is the ambitions of the majority of the Russian political elite, who see Central Asia as Moscow's traditional sphere of influence.

In our opinion, Moscow uses economic and military-political means of pressure in the context of accelerating the implementation of information campaigns and promotion of relevant integration projects to achieve its goals. The first is based on the idea of creating the Eurasian Union. According to analysts, the Kremlin's move to create the Eurasian Union and its further expansion in the direction of Central Asia is intended to strengthen Moscow's economic position in the Central Asian countries, while at the same time, it will make it possible to prevent Beijing's economic expansion in the region when a favorable combination of circumstances arises for the Kremlin in the future.

In this regard, one of them is influencing the solution of sensitive issues such as integration processes in the Central Asian space in which Russia does not participate, as well as hydropower for the region. Practice shows that it was Russia's entry into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in 2004 that actually devalued the idea of creating a large-scale integration union in Central Asia. At the same time, there is a high possibility that Russia will increasingly use the "migration factor" in order to protect and promote its national interests in the Central Asian region.

Within the framework of the SCO, the Sino-Russian tandem can be strengthened in order to limit the influence of the USA in the region, as well as to prevent the possible spread of religious extremist currents in the countries of Central Asia. The withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops from Afghanistan may significantly increase the risk of separatist sentiments in the North Caucasus and South Ural Autonomous Republics of Russia and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. The interests of Russia and China, although different, coincide in the issues of preventing the implementation of the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas project promoted by Washington, because the diversification of Central Asian energy resources, according to experts, the Kremlin significantly weakens his control over them. Beijing seeks to shift the region's hydrocarbons east rather than south, thereby increasing its strategic rival India's vulnerability to fuel and energy security .

Last winter, in an interview with the son of Ahmad Shah Masood, the leader of the Afghan National Resistance Front, Ahmad Masood disclosed information obtained by Masood's intelligence about plans by the Afghan branch of ISIS to move the jihad to neighboring Tajikistan. According to these reports, ISIS fighters and other jihadist groups have begun to prepare for terrorist expansion in the region. "This is about the opening of the Southern Front against Moscow, the second after Ukraine," said the head of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan at that time. The main purpose of this is to destabilize the military-political situation in Tajikistan and Central Asia in general, distract the attention of the Russian government from the operation in Donbas, and force the Kremlin to disperse and crush its forces between the east of Ukraine and the Tajik-Afghan border. As part of the implementation of the second front project, jihadists, according to the interlocutor of Independent newspaper, not only activated the

process of training militants (including suicide terrorists) in training camps located in the northern regions of Afghanistan, but also organized the entry of future "martyrs" into Tajikistan .

Later, according to information received from the same "Independent newspaper" interlocutor, at least five suicide terrorists entered Tajikistan from Afghanistan. The same sources reported that in April of this year, at least 14 Uyghur militants, who were previously in the training camps of the Afghan branch of ISIS, entered the territory of China. At the same time, sources close to the intelligence service of the front reported that the jihadists planned to prepare five to seven suicide terrorists to enter the territory of Russia .

Representatives of the Afghan National Resistance Front have argued that the Afghan Taliban government is unable or unwilling to block the jihadists' plans to open a second front in Tajikistan. In addition, some high-ranking officials of the "Taliban" have reported that there is reason to emphasize that they are helping some terrorist groups involved in the project of "moving the jihad out of Afghanistan". "Undoubtedly, the hopes of Moscow and the countries of the region that the Taliban regime would guarantee the neutralization of the jihadist community in Afghanistan and prevent its expansion to other countries have not been fulfilled," said the interlocutor of "Independent newspaper", the national resistance front of Afghanistan at that time. At the end of April - beginning of May, the events that took place on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border (the attempt of armed individuals from Afghanistan to enter the mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan, due to which the Tajik security forces had to use armored vehicles and helicopters, the head of the State Security Committee of Tajikistan for the city of Khorog on the border being killed in a collision) point to the accuracy of this assessment .

One of the leaders of the Freedom Front (leader, General Zia Yasin), another anti-Taliban movement of Afghanistan, announced that "the opening of the second, southern front against Russia on the Afghan-Tajik border is only a matter of time, and a matter of the nearest time." According to the representative of the Freedom Front, "currently, in the North-Eastern regions of Afghanistan, the militants of the Afghan branch of ISIS and other jihadist groups are actively preparing to open a second front against Moscow." "Soon, Russia will feel the reality of this threat that will appear in Tajikistan and other southern directions," said the representative of the Liberation Front, referring to sources in the intelligence service of the Liberation Front of Afghanistan.

The warning of one of the leaders of the Liberation Front is worth noting. And this is not only because it corresponds to the information previously provided by the sources of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (both of these fronts are engaged in an armed struggle against the Taliban, coordinate their actions, but at the same time maintain organizational independence). According to the Independent newspaper, the intelligence of the Liberation Front has a wide network of sources throughout Afghanistan, its agents have penetrated the main structures of the Taliban's management system, as well as almost all major jihadist groups located on the territory of Afghanistan. This allows the leaders of the Freedom Front to receive the most accurate information in real time. If there is a warning about the danger of a second, jihadist front opening against Russia, it is not just information that can be ignored .

Also, another serious and global problem is that the struggle for food resources in Central Asia is becoming more and more intense, and this cannot be without serious concern, because it will cause a certain tension in the future. An example of this is the armed clashes between the Taliban and Iran in May of this year. Tehran has accused the Taliban government in Afghanistan of violating a 1973

agreement by restricting the flow of water from the Helmand River to Iran's parched eastern regions, a charge the Taliban denies.

Clashes between the Taliban and Iran took place on May 27-28, 2023. Armed forces of the ruling Islamic movement "Taliban" in Afghanistan participated in a border conflict with Iranian border guards on the Afghanistan-Iran border between Afghanistan's Nimroz province and Iran's Sistan and Balochistan provinces. In response, the Iranian army fired artillery at Taliban positions, resulting in the official death toll of three people, not including the wounded, and fourteen deaths according to unofficial reports .

The Koshtepa canal, which is guarded by the Taliban in order to receive water from the Amadurya river, may cause serious problems for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in the future. On March 31, 2022, the "Taliban" government presented a project for the construction of a large canal in the north of the country. According to him, the Koshtepa canal, which starts from the Amudarya, is being built in the territory of Balkh region. According to the plan, the length of the Koshtepa canal is 285 kilometers, the width is 100 meters, and the depth is almost 8.5 meters .

When this canal is completed, almost 10 cubic kilometers of Amudarya water, which is reduced to 34 cubic kilometers in low years, will flow into the interior of Afghanistan. This can create serious consequences for Khorezm, Bukhara, Surkhandarya and Navoi regions and the Republic of Karakalpakstan.

3. Some aspects of China's investment policy in Afghanistan

At the moment, China is also interested in financing the Trans-Afghan railway project, which is being promoted by Uzbekistan. Moreover, Chinese companies are already operating in Afghanistan. They have enough information about the mineral resources located in the territory of this country, and there are no plans to participate in their development in the future.

According to the Ministry of Mines and Oil of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, officials and representatives of the Chinese company "Gochin" have been informed that they are interested in investing 10 billion dollars in lithium reserves in Afghanistan. 120,000 direct and 1 million indirect jobs will be created in the country at the expense of the investment, reported the correspondent of "Darya" on Afghanistan.

In seven months, the company will repair the Salang Pass, one of the largest transport routes in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, and dig another tunnel.

The Taliban government's Minister of Mines and Petroleum, Shahabuddin Delaware, supported Gochin's interest in investing in lithium mines in Afghanistan, saying lithium is one of the rarest deposits in the world. According to him, the Ministry of Mining and Oil has decided to conclude a contract with all mines of the country in accordance with the mining legislation.

In January, the Taliban Ministry of Mines and Oil signed an agreement with the China Oil Economic and Information Research Center to develop the Amu oil field, in which Afghanistan's share is 20 percent and will increase to 75 percent in the future. Since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, China has increased its influence through economic ties with the current regime. According to multiple media reports, Chinese companies have long desired access to Afghanistan's vast and rich lithium reserves, estimated at more than \$1 trillion.

4. Initiatives of Uzbekistan to ensure stability in Afghanistan.

The establishment of stability and peace in Afghanistan and its economic and social recovery are important for us. It is no secret that today's serious threats to global security, especially in the context of intensifying confrontations between the world's leading countries, the interested parties in their geopolitical houses can use the "Afghanistan card" as an option to create serious problems for "rival" countries by destabilizing Central Asia.

In order to prevent such actions, the proposal is important which made by the head of our country Sh. Mirziyoyev in the Asian region, first of all, it is important to strengthen interdependence by creating production and logistics chains and transport corridors that effectively connect Central Asia with South and East Asia, as well as with the Middle East.

On March 27, 2018, at the international conference on Afghanistan on the topic of "Peace process, security cooperation and regional partnership", Shavkat Mirziyoyev said, "Worst of all, an entire generation grew up in the midst of armed conflict and violence in Afghanistan. But this is not a "lost generation" as some experts point out. They are just people who are tired of war, want and hardship. They want to put an end to mutual conflicts and return to a peaceful life, to constructive work that will lead their country to development and prosperity. I am firmly convinced that the Afghan people have enough energy, wisdom, courage and tenacity to start and build a new, peaceful life for the happiness of their children and future generations which is more important than ever that we support them" , it is safe to say that his statement defined Uzbekistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan.

In his speech, Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasized the need to develop common, agreed approaches to cooperation with the interim government of Afghanistan. The head of Uzbekistan offered to consider the possibility of a joint appeal of Asian countries to the UN General Assembly with the initiative of forming a high-level international negotiating group to prepare and agree on an algorithm for the step-by-step implementation of the obligations of the Afghan government.

After the immediate withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the role and importance of the SCO in normalizing the situation in this country increased significantly.

Therefore, the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to regularly hold high-level meetings in the "SCO-Afghanistan" format with the participation of the observer states of the organization: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Cambodia, Nepal, Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as international organizations, is gaining urgent importance.

Also, in his speech at the 6th summit of the Council on Cooperation and Confidence Building Measures in Asia held in Astana in October 2022, the head of Uzbekistan drew attention to the importance of resolving the situation in Afghanistan and restoring peaceful life there. "This is necessary so that the country does not become an international terrorist center," Sh. Mirziyoyev said .

In order to prevent such actions, the head of our country Sh. Mirziyoyev participated in the 6th summit of the Council on Cooperation and Trust Measures in Asia, which was held in Astana in October 2022. In his speech, he suggested strengthening interdependence in the Asian region, primarily by creating production and logistics chains and transport corridors that effectively connect Central Asia with South and East Asia, as well as the Middle East.

On March 30 and 31, 2022, the Ministerial Conference of Afghanistan's neighboring countries was held in Huangshan, China. It was attended by members of the governments of Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and foreign ministers .

On behalf of Uzbekistan, Sardor Umurzakov, the head of the Presidential Administration (at that time, the deputy prime minister - the minister of investments and foreign trade), participated in these events and proposed to develop the mechanism and criteria for international recognition of the interim

government of Afghanistan. This, in turn, will allow to accelerate the country's integration into the regional space and the international community, Uzbekistan will continue to cooperate with regional countries, partner countries and Afghanistan in all priority directions, including the implementation of large infrastructural projects aimed at accelerating economic recovery and improving the living standards of the Afghan people. expressed his commitment to continue. At the end of the conference, a joint statement of the parties and the "Tunsi Initiative" to support the economic recovery of Afghanistan were adopted .

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev said during the 4th summit of the Central Asian countries on July 21, 2022: "to ensure long-term peace in Afghanistan and to continue close cooperation to support its social and economic recovery should remain our priority. We are the closest neighbor, we should be more interested in stability in this country than anyone else. How the international community perceives this problem largely depends on us" .

In December 2022, Ismatulla Ergashev, the special representative of the President of Uzbekistan on Afghanistan, announced that in 2022 alone, seven batches of humanitarian aid were delivered to the southern neighbor. In particular, from the first moment of coming to the top of the state, the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been paying special attention to the problem of neighboring Afghanistan. Since 2017, Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan has gradually changed, and Afghanistan is seen not only as a source of threats, but also as a country with great potential for joint cooperation.

But until then, Afghanistan's frozen funds abroad, totaling about \$9.5 billion, must be returned as soon as possible. Otherwise, the number of people dying of hunger in neighboring Afghanistan may increase dramatically.

On March 7, 2023, the first meeting of special representatives of countries neighboring Afghanistan was held in Tashkent. The meeting, which was attended by representatives of Uzbekistan, Iran, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, Russia, was opened by Ismatilla Irgashev, the special representative of the President of Uzbekistan in Afghanistan, and after that the main part of the meeting continued behind closed doors, without media monitoring. The representatives of the 7 countries that participated in the meeting demanded that the current government of Afghanistan fulfill the demands of the international community and at the same time fulfill the promises made by the Afghan government to the international community .

"We have placed special emphasis on providing support and humanitarian aid to the Afghan people to support the ordinary Afghan people in this difficult humanitarian situation. During this meeting, they expressed the opinion that releasing the funds of the Central Bank of Afghanistan abroad and returning them to the Afghan people would be a great help in the current difficult economic, social and humanitarian conditions. It was discussed that by returning the money of the Afghan Central Bank, that is, the money of the Afghan people, it should be used to pay the salaries of teachers working in schools, government workers, and should be directed to support the population in a difficult situation.", said the representative of the President of Uzbekistan.

Also, on April 13, 2023, the fourth ministerial meeting of neighboring countries of Afghanistan was held in Samarkand with the participation of the heads of foreign affairs of Uzbekistan, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and China. The meeting was attended by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the interim government of Afghanistan, Amir Khan Muttaqi, and other representatives of the Taliban. The event was held under the chairmanship of the Uzbek side. "We, as close neighbors of Afghanistan, are more interested in the rapid stabilization of the situation in the country than others. Besides, whether

we like it or not, today the main responsibility for restoring the economy of Afghanistan and providing humanitarian aid to the Afghan people has fallen on our shoulders," said the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, Bakhtiyor Saidov, at the opening of the conference. According to him, the international community should not be limited only to providing humanitarian aid to the Afghan people — it is necessary to promote economic and infrastructure projects in the country, which will be the basis for its peaceful future. "The situation in Afghanistan remains difficult. We are sure that in the near future, the issue of Afghanistan will remain one of the important factors of regional and global security, which will affect the interests of many countries, first of all, neighboring countries," said Bakhtiyor Saidov.

He noted that the international community expects the new government in Kabul to live up to its responsibilities, primarily to create an inclusive government, respect the rights of women and national minorities, and sever ties with terrorist groups.

In his speech, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Amir Khan Muttaqi, emphasized that the meeting in Samarkand "demonstrates our joint commitment to the stability, security and economic development of our region." According to him, although almost two years have passed since the establishment of the current government, "no serious incident has occurred in the field of security, which has its roots in Afghanistan" and "on the contrary, Afghanistan follows the path of looking from the prism of regional security, stability and economic relations. "Positive and firm regional cooperation in political, security and economic fields can be useful in securing the interests of Afghanistan and the entire region," he said. .

At the meeting, the parties noted the importance of establishing an inclusive and broad governance system in Afghanistan that reflects the interests of all sections of the Afghan society. Also, the participants of the meeting emphasized that the situation related to terrorism and security in Afghanistan remains serious, and confirmed that they are in favor of strengthening cooperation in the field of fighting terrorism and ensuring security between neighboring countries and developing a united front against terrorism.

The parties are all terrorist groups, namely the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), Al-Qaeda, East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), Jundallah, " Jaish al-Adl, Jamaat Ansarullah, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (UIM) and other terrorist organizations based in Afghanistan have stated that they continue to pose a serious threat to regional and global security.

The Foreign Ministers stressed the importance of combating the drug threat and called for support for the development of drug substitution programs and the fight against drug production and trafficking.

The most important thing for Uzbekistan today is the cessation of war in Afghanistan and the creation of a peaceful and stable environment. Only such a situation will create a favorable ground for the implementation of many geostrategic economic projects in the southern direction of Uzbekistan, including this neighboring country. If peace is established in Afghanistan, first of all, the way to the south will be opened for Uzbekistan and other neighboring countries of Central Asia, that is, they will have the opportunity to directly enter the markets of Pakistan, India and the Middle East through new trade routes. Also, Uzbekistan will have the opportunity to develop its transit and export potential on a large scale. As a result, the countries of South Asia, home to more than 2 billion people, with a gross domestic product of 3.5 trillion dollars, can serve as a large economic market for us.

South Asian countries can also enter the markets of other Central Asian countries in the North, as well as Russia and China, through the territories of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. This positive opportunity

will turn Afghanistan into a major transit country and create prospects for the rapid development of the country's economy. Moreover, the flow of foreign investments to this country will increase, and the mineral resources located in its territory will begin to serve the prosperity of the Afghan people.

With the full implementation of the "Mazari Sharif - Kabul - Peshawar" railway project, it is expected that instead of 35 days, 3-5 days will be spent on transporting goods from Pakistan to Uzbekistan. According to estimates, the cost of shipping a container from Tashkent to Karachi will be approximately \$1,400-\$1,600, while the current "Tashkent-Bandar Abbas" route costs \$2,600-\$3,000.

The construction of 600 km railway from Mazar-i-Sharif to Peshawar will include 264 bridges, 7 tunnels and 641 culverts, which will contribute to the development of the crossing areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Uzbekistan has allowed the international community and states to use humanitarian aid and UN agencies and humanitarian aid organizations to use the country's airports, railways, and most importantly, the Friendship Bridge between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan across the Amudarya. A third of the products imported by Afghanistan are imported through the territory of Uzbekistan.

The information given above, in the next short period of time, a new geopolitical and geoeconomic environment was created in our region thanks to the efforts of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Nowadays, the term "New Uzbekistan" means that a special geopolitical factor - the "Shavkat Mirziyoyev phenomenon" has appeared in the region. The external image of the region has also changed positively. Shavkat Mirziyoyev expressed Uzbekistan's approach to the Afghan issue in the following simple but clear words: "The security of Afghanistan means the security of Uzbekistan."

5. Drug problem

Another big problem for the world community, including Uzbekistan, is the increase in the amount of narcotics grown in Afghanistan. Opium cultivation in Afghanistan will increase by 32 percent in 2022, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. The price of opium rose after the Taliban announced a ban on planting the crop in April. Farmers' income from poppy sales increased from \$425 million in 2021 to \$1.4 billion in 2022, a new figure of 29 percent of the agricultural sector, compared to 9 percent last year.

However, the increase in incomes did not always translate into purchasing power, as inflation increased during the same period, with food prices increasing by an average of 35 percent.

After drought in early 2022, opium yields dropped from an average of 38.5 kg/ha in 2021 to around 26.7 kg/ha this year, resulting in a yield of 6,200 tons, down 10 percent from 2021. The harvest can be converted into 350-380 tons of export-quality heroin of 50-70 percent purity.

Seizure incidents collected by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's Narcotics Monitoring Platform show that opiate trafficking from Afghanistan has continued unabated since August 2021. Afghanistan's opiates supply nearly 80 percent of all opiate users in the world.

Opiate cultivation is concentrated in the southern provinces of Nimroz, Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul, and accounts for almost three-quarters of the total cultivated area. In 2022, 12,300 hectares of poppy were grown in Kandahar, which is 72% more than last year.

Analysts closely monitoring the situation say they have seen no signs of stockpiling, but the domestic "market" of illegal drugs has not been affected even though prices have risen in anticipation of future shortages. Wanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said that some Taliban commanders may use the increase in prices for heroin and methamphetamine to increase

their portfolios, which may lead to their desire to keep production areas under their control and increase their income.

The special representative of the President of Uzbekistan on Afghanistan Ismatulla Irgashev said in an interview to "AlterEgo" that "Taliban" is fighting against the production of narcotics more strictly than the previous regime. According to him, the increase in drug trade from this country is not due to an increase in the production volume, but to the use of reserves .

"Deputy Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Abdul Salam Hanafi, said that there are more than 5 million drug addicts in the country, about one million of whom are women and children. Under the previous regime, I did not see any program to combat this", — Ismatulla Irgashev informed .

"Currently, many cultivated fields have been destroyed by the Taliban, but if we talk about the illegal circulation of ready-made drugs, we can also conclude that they were prepared in advance. This is stock, this is not current production. These are stocks that are processed in small laboratories into expensive drugs in factories and distributed. Yes, this is being observed, because the country is in a very difficult economic situation", - said the special representative for Afghanistan. "That is why our president (Shavkat Mirziyoyev) is paying attention to the fact that Afghanistan cannot be left alone with these problems. Otherwise, it will affect not only us, but the entire region globally", the special representative of the president reminded .

In June 2023, the BBC traveled to Afghanistan and used satellite analysis to study the direct impact on poppy cultivation. "Taliban leaders seem more successful than ever in their fight against poppy cultivation. We found that the poppy growth in the major poppy-growing regions has declined sharply, with one expert saying that the annual poppy production may be 80 percent less than last year. The low-margin wheat crop has replaced poppy fields and many farmers say they are struggling financially" they said.

David Mansfield, a leading expert on the drug trade in Afghanistan, who works with the British firm Alsis, which specializes in satellite analysis, said, "Poppy cultivation may be less than 20 percent of what it was in 2022. The scale of the cuts will be unprecedented", - informed that. Helmand province in the southwest was once Afghanistan's opium hub, producing more than half of the country's opium. "Alsis" analysis shows that poppy cultivation in Helmand region has decreased by more than 99 percent, and high-resolution images of Helmand region show that the area under poppy cultivation has decreased from 129 thousand hectares last year to 1000 hectares, David Mansfield said .

The representative of the Taliban in this matter is Zabihullah Mujahid. "The international community should not connect humanitarian issues with political issues. Opium is harming not only Afghanistan, but the entire world. If the world gets rid of this great evil, it will be fair for the Afghan people to receive help in return" .

6. On the Koshtepa channel

At a time when water shortages are increasing in all the republics of Central Asia, the increasing influence of the "Taliban" Koshtepa canal can control the situation even more acutely. When the canal is completed, 20 to 30 percent of Amudarya water will be diverted to the northern regions of Afghanistan.

The "Taliban" government began to build the huge Koshtepa canal in Balkh province from March 2022. The length of the new channel is 285 km, the width is 100 meters, and the depth is 8.5 meters. The project cost is about 684 million dollars. It is said that the canal is being built at the expense of state funds, but according to the information, the project was financed by USAID - international development agency. The full completion of the project is scheduled for 2028. About 6,000 workers were involved in

the construction work. Koshtepa canal starts from Kaldar district of Balkh province of Afghanistan, passes through Jauzjan province and reaches Andkhoy district of Faryab province. When the canal is put into operation, it will allow to irrigate up to 550 thousand hectares of land in Balkh, Jouzjan, and Faryab regions in the north of Afghanistan, but as a result of the reduction of Amudarya water, it will have a negative effect on the agriculture of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The first 108-kilometer section of the canal was built for 1.5 years and was ceremonially commissioned on October 11. Despite the proposals of Uzbekistan, the canal was not concreted. Najibullah Sadid, an Afghan engineer living in Germany, expressed his doubts about the ability of the Taliban to manage the complex engineering works, especially the construction of aqueducts and bridges, and expressed concern that the canal is filled with soil. "In this case, most of its water is lost in the dry, sandy soil of the region. Also, ditching is the easiest part of canal construction. They are in a hurry," he said.

According to international law, all the countries located in its riverbed have the right to use transboundary rivers, but the countries must mutually agree on who, when and how much water will be used through quotas and other mechanisms. Unfortunately, Afghanistan has not signed either the UN Water Convention or the documents on water use in Central Asia. In 1946, negotiations on the Amudarya were held in Kabul between the former Soviet Union and the then Afghan government and an agreement was reached, but the issue of the distribution of Amudarya water was not directly addressed, and subsequent negotiations did not focus on this aspect.

Today, water relations in Central Asia are regulated by the Almaty Agreement signed in 1992 by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In the management of water resources, the Interstate Coordinating Commission plays the main role, the commission develops and approves the long-term program of water supply .

Water use in the region is also controlled by the 1992 UN Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have ratified this convention. Afghanistan has not joined any of the above-mentioned agreements on the use of water resources in Central Asia. The most sensitive point here is that nobody can deny Afghanistan's right to use the Amudarya, but its non-participation in global and regional agreements does not impose any rights and obligations on the use of water for Afghans. This can cause tension in bilateral relations. TOLONews news agency reports that Abdul Latif Mansour, acting as the Minister of Energy and Water of the Taliban, stated that Afghanistan is ready to discuss the issue of Amudarya water use with neighboring countries. "Those who express their concern should act according to the agreement, but Afghanistan does not have a water agreement with anyone. Nor have we entered into any agreement or contract in this regard. "If the agreement was violated, we would have taken measures," said the representative of "Taliban" . Earlier, on September 15, 2023, Shavkat Mirziyoev expressed his concerns about the construction of the "Koshtepa" canal at the next meeting of the Council of Heads of the Founding States of the International Fund for Saving the Island, which was held in Dushanbe, and said that the canal's launch could fundamentally change the water balance in Central Asia. "Dear heads of delegations, I also want to share my views on the Koshtepa channel. In essence, a new participant has appeared in the process of water use in our region, which is not bound by any obligation to our countries. In this regard, we propose to consider the issue of involving Afghanistan's representatives in the regional dialogue on the joint use of water resources," said the President of Uzbekistan . On October 12 of this year, the construction of the 177-kilometr 2nd stage of the construction of the Koshtepa canal was started. Speaking at the opening ceremony, Taliban officials asked regional countries, especially

Uzbekistan, not to worry about the construction of the Koshtepa canal. They expressed that Afghanistan is ready to solve regional problems through diplomatic relations.

Analysis of data on the construction of the Koshtepa canal shows that the following negative consequences may occur:

First, in the north of Afghanistan, the salt in the land that is going to be used for planting must be constantly washed away. Amu Darya is the only place where saline washed drainage water goes. This will further complicate the ecological situation in the middle reaches of the Amudarya, and especially in its lower reaches, which is already difficult, and in some places has become disastrous. Water scarcity and increased salinity make farming downstream of the canal even more difficult. That is, the level of salinity may increase due to the Koshtepa channel.

Secondly, Northern Afghanistan, where the Koshtepa canal is being built, is an unstable region where the Taliban has not established full power. In particular, in the last few months, ISIS-Khorasan terrorist organization has carried out several attacks on Balkh province, and even the governor of the province was killed. In addition, the emergence of a conflict between the government of Iran and the Taliban over the use of the Helmand River and turning into an armed conflict may send a bad signal to other countries neighboring Afghanistan.

Third, after the water volume changes, it may be necessary to change or rebuild the water structures in the areas, which requires additional costs.

Therefore, if there is no mutual dialogue between Afghanistan and other countries in the Amudarya basin, the situation may further isolate the Taliban and increase the regional security problem. From this point of view, the Uzbek side should try to reach a compromise with the Taliban government.

In general, as the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev stated in his speech at the 16th summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization held in Tashkent on November 9-10, 2023, we should increase the provision of humanitarian aid to the Afghan people and solve acute socio-economic problems in this country on the basis of collective responsibility and acceptable mechanisms. Active involvement of this country in regional integration processes is an indispensable and necessary condition for our sustainable development.

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