

Regional background of the American departure from Afghanistan ¹

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Abstract. *Military engagement of USA in Afghanistan lasts since 2001 and has gone through several stages since then. Its character has partially changed since the Trump administration came to power and it has become more of a regional character causing numerous reactions of stakeholders. These were Pakistan and India in particular, but also the Chinese, Russian, Iranian and some post-Soviet republics involvement. The article points at the genesis of the Trump strategy for south Asia and Afghanistan since 2017, influencing the allied commitments of the USA. It highlights the Trump administration approach to the Afghan campaign, which declares the departure from the country, yet without leaving as the defeated party. It points at the complexity of Afghan reality after the truce signing between the USA and Taliban in February 2020.*

Keywords: Trump Strategy, Pakistan, Regional Background, Taliban, Afghan Reality

INTRODUCTION

In August 2017, the United States presented its foreign policy priorities regarding South Asia. This new political strategy encompassed also Afghanistan.[13] Experts immediately started to analyse one interesting aspect, which involved some changes in the U.S. relations to its regional partners – Pakistan and India. In his new political strategy, the U.S. President calls on Pakistan to strengthen the fight against terrorism. At the same time, he praised India and designated it as the U.S. closest ally, indicating that it would play a more significant role in Afghanistan, particularly in terms of economic support and development assistance.[17]

Pakistan reacted quite angrily. Until then, it had been pleased to present itself as the U.S. important regional ally. Its interests and involvement in Afghanistan were deeper in comparison to other countries in the region also due to the fact that Pakistan and India competed for influence in this country. Novák, the Czech expert, called Afghanistan the battlefield of the contest between Pakistan and India.[11] In its comments, Pakistan did not hide its disappointment and claimed that it was and it is still an equal partner of the coalition partners in the fight against militants in the region. The Pakistani are convinced that human losses, consequences of the immigrant influx and related costs that placed a burden on the national economy all prove this.² In this regard, the U.S. attitude is in striking contrast to Pakistani interests in Afghanistan. These issues have broader historical background.[2]

AMERICAN INTERESTS AND REAPPRAISAL OF ALLIES

One of the characteristic features of the U.S. strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia is more attention being paid to the Afghan issue in broader regional context. In his speech delivered in August 2017, Donald Trump criticised Pakistan for providing support to forces that target Americans. The genesis of the conflict between the USA and Pakistan over Afghanistan has socio-political, security and economic aspects. Trump commented on

US-Pakistan tensions as a tough negotiator who tries to bolster his position by imposing higher requirements on his partner [10]. He threatened to cut off aid to Islamabad and claimed that “if Pakistan continues harbouring criminals, it has much to lose”[15]. Washington has been trying unsuccessfully for a long time to make Islamabad stop harbouring the Afghan faction of Taliban³ and the insurgent organisation known as the Haqqani Network.

President Donald Trump outlined the development of partnership with India, which should be another key aspect of the U.S. policy in this region. Pointing out that this country “will make billions of dollars in trade with the USA”, he said: “We want them to help us more in Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development.”[15] His statement addressed to India was aimed at emphasising how relevant his criticism of Pakistan, India’s greatest rival, was. Islamabad worries that India’s aid to Afghanistan will be eventually used to confront Pakistan.[7] Trump openly supported bolstering of India’s position with regard to save havens Pakistan offers to Taliban. In this way, he engages in the long-running conflict between India and Pakistan as well complicated India-China relations, in which China has played a role of Pakistan’s strategic partner for many years.

Since the U.S. political pressure on Pakistan in the second half of 2017 did not produce any results, Donald Trump announced on January 1, 2018 that he had cut one billion dollars in military aid for Pakistan. In February 2018, under US pressure, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a global money-laundering watchdog, placed Pakistan on its terrorist financing watch list.[1]

The Pakistani government responded by strengthening cooperation with Russia, particularly within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Islamabad vigorously demonstrates its efforts to participate in further development of Afghanistan. Until now, the USA has avoided designating Pakistan as a country that sponsors terrorism. What is more, no personal sanctions have been imposed against any Pakistani leaders. In formal

¹ This paper is a part of the project **KEGA 015EU – 4/2018 Negative Effects of Armed Conflicts and Their Possible Solutions.**

² Even though more than 3.5 million Afghan refugees have already returned home, there is still a large number of those who live outside their homeland. It is estimated that approximately one million Afghan children live in refugee camps outside their country (author’s note).

³ The Quetta Shura is based in the city of Quetta in the Balochistan Province and it is composed of 15 Taliban leaders (authors’ note).

terms, such measures would be logical considering Pakistan's long history of support for various Islamic insurgent groups. The main limiting factor so far has been the fact that Pakistan served as the main supply route for the U.S. armed forces in Afghanistan. As a result, the U.S. pressure on the Pakistani government and special services was limited.[8] The fact that the White House uses sanctions as one of the major foreign-policy instruments complicates tackling of the Afghan issue. This regards particularly India's involvement in reconstruction and further development of Afghanistan. Until 2018, India had committed 3 billion dollars in economic aid to Afghanistan, which made it the largest donor in the region. What is more, India took an active part in building the so-called Ring Road, the major Afghan highway. Massive investment agreements were signed concerning iron ore mining in the Bamiyan Province, one of the largest iron ore deposits in Asia. However, its development is directly related to the security situation and construction of appropriate transport infrastructure.

Owing to tensions between India and Pakistan, the shortest and the most advantageous route from India to Afghanistan leads through Iran. The past few years have seen the development of Chabahar Port on Iranian coastline of the Arabian Sea. India has invested more than 250 million dollars in this project.[3, 4]

The situation got complicated when the United States withdrew from the "Iran nuclear deal" and announced its intention to impose sanctions on any economic cooperation between third countries and Iran. These decisions pose challenges for the Indian economy as Iran is the third largest oil importer for this country. At the end of May 2018, Sushma Swaraj, India's former external affairs minister, announced that her country would continue trading with Iran despite the U.S. sanctions.[5]

If Washington insists on termination of India-Iran common projects and imposes sanctions on Indian companies, India's active participation in Afghanistan's economic reconstruction will decline. Such a scenario would be in contrast to the U.S. high-level goals. What is more, it might lead to deterioration of relations between India and the United States while Washington is trying to strengthen them owing to China's growing influence. Taking these factors into consideration, it is likely that the United States will close its eyes to continuing cooperation between India and Iran.

Interaction between the USA and the countries in the region bordering Afghanistan involves their participation in peace talks with the Taliban. In spring 2018, when Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited the United States, this was one of the issues discussed during the talks between the United States and the Afghan representatives. The talks led to establishment of the quadrilateral working group, which included the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia maintains close ties with Pakistan. Moreover, it is historically related to Taliban.[16] Saudi Arabian diplomatic circles maintain contact with the Taliban factions that are in favour of talks with Kabul. Muhammad bin Salman held negotiations with James Mattis, the former U.S. Secretary of Defense, on establishment of "safe havens", where the representatives of these groups could meet and negotiate.[14]

Riyadh got involved not only due to U.S. pressure but also on its own initiative. American and Afghan experts claim that the ties between the Taliban and Iran, the major regional rival of Saudi Arabia, have recently become closer. The only Taliban official office abroad is in the capital of Qatar, which does not have close relations with Saudi Arabia. As a result, Riyadh's involvement in Afghanistan is based on confrontation with its major regional rivals and the efforts to strengthen its influence on the Taliban.

The U.S. involvement in Afghanistan also had an impact on former Soviet states of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, which is the most populated country in the region. It does not hide its ambitions to become a regional leader.[6] The United States intend to influence Pakistan through India and monitor Russia's interests in the post-Soviet Central Asia through Uzbekistan, which is for Russians a sensitive region of so-called close foreign nations.[9]

In 2018, Tashkent hosted a conference on Afghanistan, which was later attended by the Taliban delegation. On March 3, 2019, Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan Abdulaziz Kamilov and Uzbekistan's special representative for Afghanistan Ismatilla Irgashev went to Qatar to attend a bilateral meeting with Mullah Abdul Gani Baradar, who headed the Taliban's Doha office at the end of February. According to the report published by the Taliban, they discussed the peace process in Afghanistan and economic cooperation between these two countries.

This report took the observers by surprise. In the interview for the Kazakh Internet website zona.kz, Alexander Knyazev pointed out an unusual reaction of Kabul to the talks between the Uzbek diplomat and one of the leaders of the Afghan armed opposition. Instead of a protest by the Afghan government, Afghanistan's national security advisor Hamdullah Mohib came to Tashkent on March 5, 2019, in order to hold talks with his Uzbek counterparts Viktor Machmudov and Abdulaziz Kamilov.[12] Thus Ashraf Ghani seeks to compete for the influence in the country in a different way: he actively uses his own contacts with official structures of the countries which have their regional ambitions (such as Uzbekistan).

Tashkent's interests are understandable. First and foremost, Afghanistan is a huge market, which is attractive with regard to implementation of a new Uzbek economic model[12] as Uzbekistan has failed to introduce its reforms in the neighbouring countries. Secondly, Tashkent's attractive infrastructure projects could be carried out through the Afghan territory – towards Iran and Pakistan. The problem lies in the fact that Uzbekistan has no potential to become a political moderator and a leader of Afghanistan's peace process. However, it has demonstrated its competence in implementation of top-level decisions, rather in achieving U.S. goals.

THE AFGHAN STRATEGY REVISIONS – TRUMP'S PLAN HOW NOT TO LOSE FACE

Several U.S. generals, who personally encountered the reality in Afghanistan (they presented their views mostly after their retirement), noted that troop surges could not help to tackle the complex situation in Afghanistan. In January 2009, Stephen Walt, the professor at Harvard University, published an article in Foreign Policy magazine. Referring to calculations made by the

RAND Corporation, he wrote that military success in Germany required 100 U.S. troops per 1,000 locals. In Kosovo and Bosnia this proportion was 20 NATO troops per 1,000 citizens. The American operation in Somalia, which was a failure, required 5 troops per one inhabitant. Stephen Walt highlighted that even Obama's troop surge in Afghanistan, which has approximately 32 million inhabitants, would not be sufficient. The real proportion was 3 soldiers per 1,000 citizens. With this regard, Professor Stephen claimed that "to get to the force levels achieved in tiny Kosovo – which is only 11,000 square kilometres as opposed to Afghanistan's total land area of 650,000 square kilometres – the United States and NATO would need to deploy 650,000 troops".[19]

The strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia announced in August 2017 counted on massive support for building a stable military and political apparatus in Afghanistan that would be able to contend with the Taliban and other insurgent groups. According to Slavomír Horák, a renowned Czech expert on Afghanistan, "the United States wanted to leave Afghanistan but not as being defeated".[18] According to American sources, we should not consider the U.S. efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table as its acknowledgement of defeat. However, experts on these issues can clearly see the military and political "déjà vu" in terms of the U.S. policy in South Vietnam in the first half of the 1970s and compare it to "Afghanisation" of the current American military campaign in the country.

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha, which commits the USA to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. The agreement lays out a timetable for complete withdrawal of the U.S. and allied forces. Furthermore, the Taliban agreed not to allow any international terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, to use Afghanistan for targeting Americans and their allies.

In the first phase, the US will reduce its forces in Afghanistan to 8,600 within 135 days of signing the deal. The withdrawal of the U.S. and allied forces (39,000 troops) should be completed within 14 months provided that the Taliban meets its commitments. What is more, this agreement commits the Taliban to start intra-Afghan peace talks and negotiations on power sharing and release about 1,000 captives in exchange for 5,000 Taliban prisoners jailed by the Afghan government.

The question then arises what the agreement between the United States and the Taliban really means. It would be certainly easier to say what it does not involve. It is surely not a peace treaty. However, the agreement opened a path for its conclusion. It is important to note that the deal was signed in Qatar without participation of the Afghan government officials, which strengthens the Taliban position in intra-Afghan negotiations stipulated by the agreement. These negotiations and peace talks will be decisive for further development and peace in the country. It is highly likely that they will be accompanied by ongoing violence. The intra-Afghan peace talks that will be held in Norway's capital Oslo may not end for months.

The Afghan peace process will face lots of deadlocks and stalemates. Only one day after the United States and the Taliban had signed the agreement, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani raised an objection to the prisoner release

clause. He demands that the release of 5,000 Taliban militants be the issue in his own negotiations with the Taliban. However, the Taliban refuses to initiate peace talks with the government unless it releases the jailed insurgents.

Even if the Taliban lays down its arms, there are still threats lurking and posed by al-Qaeda and ISIS, which have their fighters in Afghanistan. There is a well-founded worry that these groups may operate effectively amid expected changes in allied and government structures. In addition, it cannot be excluded that the released Taliban fighters will join these Jihadist groups.

Nobody knows exactly how the Taliban could be integrated into the Afghan security apparatus and what effects its share of power will have on human rights and other numerous areas and aspects of life in the country. The inter-political situation is not favourable either. Let us mention the antipathy the opposition leader Abdullah Abdullah shows towards President Ghani. He refused to recognise Ghani's re-election victory and for some time he threatened to form a parallel government.

The government itself is divided in ethnopolitical terms. With a little sarcasm, Americans claim that they are in the country not to fight against the Taliban but to prevent the Afghan government officials from fighting between each other. Afghanistan has already experienced clashes between Tajiks and Pashtuns or between Uzbeks and Hazaras. After the collapse of the communist regime in 1992, the country found itself in a situation it had never experienced before and it was not about to deal with either. That is why everybody is anxious about further Taliban's fragmentation.

Afghanistan has never been a country where the government is present in every corner of the nation like it is in developed countries. There is not a uniform national identity or national political parties. In fact, the history of Afghanistan is a recurring story of unsuccessful efforts to build a central state.[20]

However, there is not a frontline between the territories controlled either by the Taliban or the Afghan government. There are buses, the same mobile network as well as teachers and doctors in the Taliban territories who are still paid by the Afghan government. This situation is similar to the Najibullah's rule after the Soviet withdrawal. His government controlled the cities while rural areas were under the control of the mujahideen, which did not prevent them from sending their children to schools in urban areas. Afghanistan is likely to face a similar situation. It is possible that different regions of the country will have their own regimes. If not accompanied by fighting, this co-existence could be a breakthrough anyway.[20]

CONCLUSION

Practical implementation of Trump's strategy for Afghanistan has been in contrast with several controversial factors:

1. The United States failed to persuade Pakistan to stop supporting Taliban;
2. The U.S. pressure on Pakistan resulted in stronger ties between Pakistan and Russia, which Washington was not pleased with;
3. The U.S. pressure led to cementing of the strategic partnership between Pakistan and China;

4. The U.S. continued pressure campaign may lead to formation of a regional alliance, which could play a significant role in the Afghan crisis.

The current tensions between the United States and the influential regional players such as Russia, Iran and Pakistan hinder development of a favourable diplomatic environment for the US. In addition to withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and the pressure on Iran's trading partners regarding new sanctions, the United States might also prevent India from participating in Afghanistan's normalisation.

These are all impediments to reconciliation in the country. At present, the "Afghan Project" harms the U.S.

interests more than it contributes to its implementation. In geopolitical terms, the United States cannot use Afghanistan's strategic location in order to bolster its influence in the surrounding countries. The current tensions between the US and Pakistan, which is becoming more dependent on China and strengthening ties with Russia, cause the decline of the U.S. influence. The campaign against the Taliban has been extremely costly and does not allow to achieve the real goal of the invasion of Afghanistan: to use the country as a bridgehead in the "rear area" of several Eurasian powers in order to influence policies of these countries.

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