
VLADIMIR NOROV: 'ENTIRE REGION IS INTERESTED IN STABILITY OF AFGHANISTAN'

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A large conference on Afghanistan was held in Tashkent at the initiative of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Attending the event were Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, EU Higher Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, representatives of UN and the regions governments, political analysts and experts. Afghanistan was represented by President Ashraf Ghanī and Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani.

The key outcome of the conference: Afghanistan itself should establish peace in the region by launching large-scale domestic talks, whereas other countries will help ensuring sustainable economic development, first. Uzbekistan undertook the functions of a guarantor-state in the negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. Nezavisimaya Gazeta newspaper correspondent Victoria Panfilova, who was invited to the conference, has interviewed Vladimir Norov, Director of the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of Uzbekistan, former foreign minister of Uzbekistan, specially for EADaily.

Uzbekistan has undertaken quite uneasy commitments in settlement in Afghanistan. Dont you think that Uzbekistan may find itself between the devil and the deep blue sea □ U.S. and Russia, the permanent actors in the region, especially now when U.S. blames Russia for selling arms to the Taliban?

Well, Uzbekistan undertook the responsibility for organizing the high-level conference in Tashkent. It has become continuation for the second round of Kabul conference held in late February. Before Shavkat Mirziyoyevs coming to power, Uzbekistan did not participate in such multilateral events. We used to cooperate with Afghanistan on the bilateral basis. In this format, we built Hairatan to Mazar-e-Sharif Railway, arranged electricity supplies. Since 2002, we have increased electricity export 30-fold □ to 1.8bln kWt/k. In 2018, electricity supplies will be increased to 2 bln kWt/h due to construction of additional power line Surhan-Puli-Humri.

The conference became possible due to the common willingness of the regions countries to ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan. Id like to recall that the action plan adopted after Shavkat Mirziyoyevs inauguration prioritizes Central Asian states in foreign policy and establishment of a stability, security and prosperity belt around Uzbekistan. This strategy has already brought results thanks to the presidents attitude to settlement of all the issues accumulated □ the president said there are no issues in the region that are impossible to resolve on the basis of reasonable concessions and taking into account the interests of all the sides involved. Uzbekistans new policy has encouraged all the countries in the region to settle common issues. Besides, stability in

Afghanistan is important for our economic welfare, since access to southern seas is via that country. Without that access, we under receive 20% of GDP annually, according to BostonConsulting Group.

Could you provide more details about it?

For instance, expansion of supply of our textile – it is high-quality – to EU. China receives 40bln EUR annually from export of textile. Bangladesh is the second largest textile exporter – 20bln EUR. Then goes India – 9bln EUR, Pakistan – 5bln EUR, whereas Uzbekistan received just 50mln EUR. The key problem is transportation costs. Delivery of a 20-tonne container to Brussels and back costs us 9,000 EUR, whereas it costs India, Bangladesh, China (Shanghai) just 500, 700, and 1,300 EUR, respectively, as they use maritime transportation. This is quite serious. This shows why we need access via Afghanistan to Chabahar and Bandar Abbas Ports in Iran or Gwadar Port in Pakistan. We need to finish construction of the railway from Mazari-Sharif to Herat. The agreement on construction of that 800km-long railways was signed in December 2017, during Afghan President Ashraf Ghanis visit. A task force was set up, the World Bank, Asian Bank, Asian Bank of Investments and Infrastructures were involved. The issue of construction was discussed with Ghani also at the meeting on sidelines of SCO in Astana.

Then he suggested applying to global financial organizations and creating a consortium. We need to extend the first section to Mazari-Sharif for 800km to Herat. There is a railway from Herat to Irans Khaf. Iran, India, and Afghanistan signed a trilateral agreement. India invested \$500 million in Chabahar. Tehran provided 50,000km² territory for Afghan companies to create their trade points. Irans trading with Afghanistan is \$3bln. It is 40% of total foreign trade. We just need stability.

But there is no such. The power line from Uzbekistan to Kabul was blown up lately. Who will restore it?

Do you know why it was blown up? Taliban did it after the organizations maintaining these power lines rejected its request to connect the territories under its control to the power lines. Having no details, one can think that Taliban blew up the power line to harm Uzbekistan for not inviting them to the conference. The problem with the Taliban is that they lack leader, they are scattered. The Taliban mostly consists of Mullah Omars followers.

His successor is Hibatullah Akhundzada, but he fails to unite the Taliban. There is a group of Mullah Rasuls Taliban. All them fight for influence. The problem is who will pay more. Therefore, when Uzbekistan initiated that conference, everything was done taking into account the Afghan leaderships readiness to support and hold it.

One can recall the construction of Trans-Afghan Pipeline (today it is TAPI – Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India). Then, in 1999, a meeting was held between the contact group of 6+2 (six neighbor states plus U.S. and Russia) and representatives of Northern Alliance that was recognized by the world community, and government of Rabbani and Taliban that were in Kabul. Taliban (banned in Russia) could not expand into the north of the country where leader of Northern Alliance Shah Massoud held Panjsher Gorge. Turkmenistan managed to agree with the Taliban on construction. Without guarantee of the Taliban, it would be impossible to launch the project. At the conference, Deputy Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan Vepa Hajiyev suggested using Ashgabat's experience during talks with the Taliban. Such factors determine the new political atmosphere –

unity of the countries in the region. Another important factor leading to talks with the Taliban – they have twice appealed to U.S. for launching direct talks - is IS (Islamic State – a terrorist organization banned in Russia and other countries) that poses threat to not only neighbor-state but also the Taliban.

How effective will be the conference in Tashkent?

I think a special emphasis should be made on Ashraf Ghanis stance – the government is ready to recognize the Taliban as a political force and may even give them an opportunity to have their office in Kabul, as well as to provide security guarantees to their families, set all the imprisoned Taliban free, and start talks without preconditions, which is the most important. This statement by the Afghan leader inspires with hope. In this light, I'd like to say that recent visits of Uzbek president to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, positive changes in the inter-state relations were connected mostly with the decision to talk without preconditions – it is very important, as it removes the necessity of figuring out who is right and who is not. The current conference on Afghanistan is the first. Later, we will be trying to feel the pulse of all the sides.

Don't you see any analogues with intra-Tajik talks of 1990s?

Then first president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov met with Khodja Akbar, one of the leaders of the irreconcilable Islamic opposition and talks were held with the Tajik government. At the conference, Foreign Minister of Tajikistan Sirodjiddin Aslov said Dushanbe has reconciliation experience. It is important to start talks and then discuss the issues accumulated. For instance, the Taliban has already taken the issue of women's rights off the table. As regards the constitution, discussions will be heated, because the constitution was passed by the parliament where the Taliban is not represented. What makes the Tashkent conference different? It is its high level and single stance of the participants on the need of talks without preconditions.

It is widely believed that Afghanistan's energy project including construction of HPPs may result in water problems for the region. Isn't Rogun HPP in Tajikistan enough for Uzbekistan?

The Rogun HPP construction risks have not been assessed finally, and specialists of our two countries will continue studying the risks. President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon said Dushanbe has never infringed interests of the region's countries and has never and will never leave them without water. It is a very strong political state. In this light, Uzbekistan expressed its readiness to weigh participation in the construction of HPP and using Sarez Lake in Tajikistan as a source of fresh water. A task force was set up to assess the situation. I suggested our Tajik colleagues to conduct surveys to reveal real risks and liquidate them jointly in order to remove any threats to the countries' interests.

The situation with Afghanistan is as follows. Total hydropower capacity of the country is 23bn kWt/h. They generate 600MWt at present and plan to build 152 dams. The largest Dashti Jum HPP will be built on Panj River. Besides, they plan to increase irrigated lands from 100,000 to 200,000km by 2025. It is natural, as most of the population are villagers. So far Afghanistan does not receive its share of water fully. Uzbekistan uses that water now. On the one hand, we strive to support peace and stability in Afghanistan. On the other hand, more water consumption by Afghanistan will infringe our interests. If we approach the issue egoistically to protect our interests, we will lose even more. Therefore, Uzbekistan has already started working for the future: we have established a ministry of water resources and drip irrigation system is being introduced throughout

the agricultural lands. Besides, cotton fields have been reduced. Neighbors should not create problems to each other.

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