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## **THE TASHKENT CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN: TOO MUCH DIPLOMACY, TOO LITTLE SOLUTION**

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Achieving peace in Afghanistan requires the resolve and joint efforts of many players inside the war-torn country, in the Central Asia region and beyond □ but the interests of those players still differ. We are republishing this article on the issue, written by Farkhod Tolipov\*, originally published by the CACI Analyst:

On March 26-27, 2018, the unprecedented international conference on Afghanistan, Peace process, security cooperation and regional interactions, took place in Uzbekistans capital Tashkent. Diplomatic representatives of 21 states, the UN and the EU participated in the conference and signed its final Tashkent Declaration. The event signaled a transformation of Tashkents previous positions on Afghanistan, from past initiatives in the form of narrow formula-like approaches to a system-oriented strategy. However, the Tashkent Declaration and speeches given at the conference reveal that the approach contains too much diplomacy and too little solution, especially given the growing terrorism threat in the country.

**BACKGROUND:** The war in Afghanistan has deep historical roots and the country has never seen a fully-fledged statehood and nationhood. The backdrop of a constant deficit of state control and national consolidation has constantly reproduced the conflict environment. Internecine conflicts between Afghans inside the country and geopolitical interference of world and regional powers around it have prevented steps towards independence and sovereignty. Therefore, the primary precondition for a successful resolution of the Afghan problem is the creation and strengthening of a centralized state. The second precondition is active participation of the international community in the reconstruction of this country.

Uzbekistan has been an active supporter of the peace process and proposed a number of international initiatives directed at the peaceful resolution of the Afghan crisis.

At the 48th Session of the UNGA in 1993, Uzbekistans then President Islam Karimov highlighted the dangerous situation in Afghanistan and proposed to establish a permanent conference on regional security in Central Asia under the UN umbrella. In 1998, Tashkent proposed to establish the so-called 6+2 format of diplomatic negotiations, involving six countries neighboring Afghanistan and two great powers □ the U.S. and Russia. This forum existed until 2001, however, the 9/11 events unfortunately thwarted all efforts.

In 2008, President Karimov proposed a new 6+3 format, adding NATO to the previous concept. The proposal gained no support, however, supposedly because its initiation came at the peak of

the NATO operation in Afghanistan. It also suffered from the conceptual deficiency of ignoring key countries, such as India, as indispensable participants. In sum, the current situation in Afghanistan demonstrates that all previous diplomatic peace-making efforts in this country have been almost in vain.

Nevertheless, despite all vicissitudes of history, Uzbekistan has not ceased its search for new approaches and initiatives concerning the situation in war torn Afghanistan and its reconstruction. Among other things, the recent Tashkent conference on Afghanistan reflected the evolution of Uzbekistans position on the problems reflected in the conference topic.

IMPLICATIONS: Uzbekistans President Shavkat Mirziyoyevs speech was the key address of the conference. He emphasized that it was a joint initiative of two states – the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which belong to one cultural and civilizational space. Pointing to the principle of indivisible security, Mirziyoyev underscored the need for a resolute address by all interested external forces to Afghanistans armed opposition, calling on them to begin negotiations with the Afghan government and to stop confrontation and violence. Mirziyoyev expressed Uzbekistans position that the peace process should be promoted on three interrelated levels: the domestic intra-Afghan level, the regional level, and the global level.

On the domestic level, it is necessary to launch a direct dialogue between the government and the armed opposition, including the Taliban. On the regional level, regional states including Pakistan, India, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and the Central Asian countries must reach a firm consensus on conflict resolution. On the global level, leading world powers and donor organizations need to offer principal political support for the peace process and financial assistance for Afghanistans socio-economic reconstruction. The overall endeavors must correlate with the continuous global struggle against terrorism and religious extremism. Thereby, Tashkent has significantly modified its position from a formula-like approach to a systemic vision.

At the same time, the international conference and the Tashkent Declaration displayed what can be described as too much diplomacy and too little solution. Regarding the peace-process and settlement, the declaration repeats phrases like Afghan-led and Afghan-owned three times; the idea of direct talks with the Taliban three times, and contains two clauses addressed to Taliban by urging them to move towards peaceful settlement. The document also uses the dubious term moderate Taliban and treats this movement as a legitimate political force in Afghanistan.

Such diplomatic wishful thinking has manifested itself throughout the period that has passed since the Talibans advent to power in Afghanistan. However, to date the Taliban have displayed no willingness to compromise. Over 20 years, the UN, the U.S., the EU, the Afghan government and other states have regularly addressed the Taliban leadership with calls for peace and reconciliation, yet all efforts have been fruitless. One major reason is that the Taliban enjoys comprehensive support on the territory of neighboring Pakistan and curbing this support is a major precondition for peace enforcement in Afghanistan.

To the extent that diplomacy permits, it was visible in the speeches of the conference participants that the positions and interests of the states involved differ on some principal matters. For instance, the Russian delegation expressed a rather alarming view of the situation in Afghanistan, pointing to the resurgence of the Taliban and their control of half the countrys territory; and that a solution based on political negotiations is the only option. Tajikistans representatives stated that they never recognized the Taliban and that it is a terrorist organization. The speech of the U.S.

representative highlighted that while the idea of talking to the Taliban should be welcomed, the fight will continue if talks fail. Representatives of Saudi Arabia and Iran, in turn, engaged in a verbal skirmish blaming each other for their proxy wars in the Middle East, which had nothing to do with the topic of the conference.

Just like a number of other international forums on Afghanistan, the Tashkent conference revealed once again explicit and implicit controversies, complexities, antagonisms, anxieties, hopes, good will, idealism and realism regarding peacemaking in Afghanistan. Yet the Tashkent conference took at least one significant step: it sent a strong and clear signal to the Taliban that the international community will not tolerate terrorism and religious extremism and expects a prudent response. Whether this represents a silver lining remains to be seen.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Diplomacy is important but not enough. Diplomacy per se cannot be the ultimate means of conflict resolution, especially taking into account that the international community has so far repeatedly resorted to standard means and numerous multilateral forums related to Afghanistan. As put by Clausewitz, to achieve success in war one has to comprehend the nature of the war waged. Diplomacy is likely to succeed in conditions of either a convincing advantage of the stronger party or a relative parity of fighting forces, bringing about a situation of strategic stalemate, and neither is the case in Afghanistan.

After two decades of international and domestic efforts to promote peace in Afghanistan, including the Tashkent conference, another question arises: if the same conceptual approach to a certain problem has not produced results in all this time, is this not a strong reason for modifying the approach? Ongoing events in Afghanistan demonstrate persuasively that despite multi-year diplomatic efforts to bring peace in Afghanistan, terrorism should be addressed not only by means of diplomacy and conciliation, but primarily through strategic supremacy.

Mirziyoyev emphasized in his speech that the Afghan problem has a global dimension alongside domestic and regional dimensions and that it should be managed in parallel with the global fight against terrorism. This will perhaps require that all peacekeeping and peace-building efforts are supplemented with peace enforcement actions. The president also promoted a view of Afghanistan not as the origin of security threats originate but as a friendly country with which we should cooperate. This is indeed a great proposal that signifies a shift from alienating and isolating Afghanistan towards engaging it. Yet it also demands dealing with both sides of the dilemma of fighting terrorism and pursuing economic cooperation in one strategic agenda.

<https://www.timesca.com/index.php/news/26-opinion-head/19815-the-tashkent-conference-on-afghanistan-too-much-diplomacy-too-little-solution>

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