

AFGHANISTAN: THE RESULTS OF AMERICAN INTERVENTION AND PROSPECTS OF TALIBAN RULE

A certain 'conventionality' of the Taliban regime, which provided an asylum for international terrorists, made it possible for the US to gain tangible successes by using the American military force. The achieved victory was used to calm the American public and to send a signal to allies and geopolitical opponents that terrorist attacks have not shaken the US' status as the leader of the unipolar world.

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Current events in Afghanistan open a new era in the history of both this state and the whole Central Asia. The end of the Afghan campaign of the US army and the withdrawal of the American military contingent indicates the weakening of the West's position in the region. A certain power and security vacuum opens up opportunities for other geopolitical players – while at the same time creating new challenges for them. The collapse of the central government in Kabul and the rise of the Taliban threaten to rollback even the minimal gains in modernizing Afghan society that have been made with the support of the United States and its allies over the past twenty years.

This article offers an analysis of the events that led to the current situation, as well as the prospects for the development of Afghanistan in the near future. The paper characterizes the goals and objectives that the US military carried out in the region; assesses their successes and failures; determines the factors that provoked the end of the operation. The article examines the reasons for the rapid defeat of the Afghan National Army under the conditions of the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan; assesses the efforts of the United States and its allies to re-

spond quickly to the defeat of the central government; analyzes the prospects that open up for China and Russia in the post-American Afghanistan. Also, the article proposes considerations on the internal situation in this state after the Taliban victory, which is characterized by the end of all modernization processes and a return to a tough Islamist fundamentalist regime.

Objectives of the US Mission in Afghanistan: Successful Counter-Terror Operation and Impossible 'Mentorship'

The war in Afghanistan is the longest military campaign in the history of America. The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was carried out as a part of the American 'War on Terrorism.' It was a swift response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Washington viewed Afghanistan as a priority target for the first counterstrike in retaliation for the al-Qaeda actions. American society desperately needed a quick, convincing, and, most importantly, visible victory in the war against the 'enemy'. A certain 'conventionality' of the Taliban regime, which provided an



asylum for international terrorists, made it possible for the US to gain tangible successes by using the American military force. The achieved victory was used to calm the American public and to send a signal to allies and geopolitical opponents that terrorist attacks have not shaken the US' status as the leader of the unipolar world.

In general, the main objectives of the US operation in Afghanistan were as follows:

- achieving rapid military success to calm down American society shocked by the 9/11 attacks;
- proving the resilience of US global leadership to the world;
- destroying an international terror base created under the patronage of the Taliban regime;
- improving the security climate in the region through the creation of a loyal (controlled) government in Kabul;
- restraining the spread of Islamic terrorism in Central Asia.¹

From a military point of view, the US has achieved its goals in Afghanistan. With a quick operation in October-December 2001, the Taliban regime was overthrown.

Over the next few years, Americans and their allies cleared out terrorist bases set up in hard-to-reach regions of the country. As a result, Afghanistan lost its status of a 'safe haven' for international terrorism. In the information context, Washington also achieved some success – at least, for the first years. It demonstrated its strength to the world, as well as its readiness and ability to punish enemies who threaten the security of the United States.

From a political point of view, however, the success of the Americans was much more modest. There are different opinions on the reasons behind US attempts to modernize Afghanistan. Some think that Washington was guided by the rational idea to stabilize a dangerous source of regional confrontation in order to create better conditions for American global hegemony. Others believe that its policy was based on the morally oriented messianic idea of bringing democratic values to the Afghan people. In any case, Washington failed to ensure the transformation of Afghanistan from a 'failed' into an effective state. Despite the billions of dollars invested in this project,² changes were only cosmetic. Several reasons of this failure are the following:

- erroneous goal-setting that determined an unattainable task of a radical transformation of the tribal-feudal state via foreign intervention;

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- lack of attention to the local specifics of Afghanistan such as the total lag of development of the Afghan society, fragmentation of the state based on the ethnic cleavages, and the dominance of traditional conservative views;
- ineffectiveness and weakness of the new system of public administration that was created with the support of the United States and its allies, corruption of the leaders, isolation of technocratic specialists with Western education from local realities;
- some important regional actors' - such as Pakistan and the Russian Federation - interests and the cross-border criminal groups in slowing down the modernization of Afghanistan.³

Thus, the active efforts of the United States and its NATO partners did not lead to forecasted qualitative improvements. At the same time, the inefficiency of the system of public administration created with their support undermined the potential of Afghan state in fighting against security threats. While state resources and international financial assistance were wasted due to corruption, Afghanistan remained decentralized, and most of the population continued to live according to tribal laws. The Taliban managed to reorganize in the late 2000s and started a full-scale guerrilla-sabotage war.

The End of the American Operation: A Painful but Necessary Retreat

The fight against the resurgent Taliban has become a new challenge for the United States. During the first years of operation US and allied troops took full responsibility for the security of Afghanistan. But it was a temporary measure – in order to buy time and to train effective Afghan national security forces. It is logical to assume that security of the sovereign state should be protected by local army, not foreign interventionists – otherwise there would be doubts about its vitality. Americans came to Afghanistan and created preconditions for its development by means of overthrowing Taliban. But they could not protect it endlessly – especially when threat came not from foreign forces, but from the internal opposition. This was not the task that brought Americans to the re-



gion. After all, the elimination of international terrorists (the key victory in this area was the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011 in Pakistan) and countering the Taliban's attempts to regain power in Afghanistan are two different challenges.

The idea of punishing people who were responsible for 9/11 attacks found support in American society. But the need to take full responsibility for the protection of a foreign state from internal threat was not very popular. This contributed to the growing negative perception of the operation in Afghanistan among Americans. The increase in spending, as well as the combat losses of the American troops (its peak was in 2010⁴), reinforced this trend. The situation could be corrected by a clear understanding of the goals of the operation and the deadlines for its implementation. However, it was difficult to do this because of the controversial situation at hand in view of the low degree of effectiveness of the Afghan state and



its security sector. On the one hand, the quantitative indicators of the Afghan army, as well as the number of resources spent on its training, suggested that it could cope with its duties. On the other hand, a rational assessment of the combat effectiveness of the Afghan army showed that its potential to counter the militants without American assistance remained extremely doubtful. The real solution to the problem could have been the transformation of the United States operation in Afghanistan into a permanent one. But this was completely out of question from the point of view of the interests and obligations of the United States.

As a result, during the presidency of Barack Obama, the US began to actively consider the issue of reducing and reformatting its presence in Central Asia. The crucial period in this process was the period of 2013-2014. It was at that time when control and responsibility over the security of the Afghanistan was transferred to the Afghan

forces and foreign presence was significantly reduced.⁵ In fact, the real withdrawal of the foreign contingents was carried out at this time. Only a symbolic force remained in Afghanistan, demonstrating their presence and support for the government in Kabul. Also, in 2012 Afghanistan received a diplomatic 'compensation' – the status of the major non-NATO ally of the US.

However, the limited US military presence could not change the situation in Afghanistan for the better. It only preserved an unstable balance of power, continuing to squander American resources. The goals of the presence of the US troops in Afghanistan following the force reduction have not been clearly formulated. Rather, more questions appeared as to why the American soldiers remained in Afghanistan. As a result, Obama's successors – Donald Trump and Joe Biden – continued the course towards the completion of the operation. First, in February 2020, Trump signed up an agreement with the Taliban

on the withdrawal of troops by May 2021. Then Biden confirmed this decision, only slightly adjusting the terms. In this case, American politicians followed the wishes of their own electorate after a rational assessment of the situation. According to Biden, “an endless American presence in the middle of another country’s civil conflict was not acceptable.”⁶

The reasons for ending the American operation in Afghanistan now are as follows:

- Washington’s reassessment of existing security threats, as well as its own resources in the face of the escalation of global confrontation with China;
- the unpopularity of the Afghanistan operation in American society;
- the lack of clear goals to justify the presence of US troops in Afghanistan (victory criteria).⁷

The official argument for ending the longest war in US history can be found in an interview by the Secretary of State Antony Blinken. He stressed that the United States “went to Afghanistan 20 years ago with one mission in mind, and that was to deal with the people who attacked us on 9/11. And that mission has been successful”.⁸ At the same time, President Biden announced that the United States “did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build. And it’s the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country.”⁹ He stressed that for the last twenty years “America... invested nearly \$1 trillion dollars, trained over 300,000 Afghan soldiers and police, equipped them with state-of-the-art military equipment, and maintained their air force.”¹⁰ This should have been enough to protect the government in Kabul after the withdrawal of American troops.

The Collapse of the Afghan National Army and the Reasons for the Success of the Taliban

The numerical indicators of the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan gave every reason to believe in their strength in the fighting against Taliban. On paper, the Afghan army looked solid. Officially, the Afghan security forces in 2020 numbered more than 275 thousand people (171,500 in the army; 7,300 in aviation; 99,000 in police units). They were trained and armed by Western actors. Among other things, they had more than 1,000 armored personnel carriers, 775 artillery systems and mortars, 34 combat - capable aircraft at their disposal.¹¹

However, in practice, the situation was completely different. The Taliban launched its offensive in May 2021.

By early August, it controlled the majority of the territory of Afghanistan, including strategically important check-points on the border. Large cities remained under the control of the government and there was hope that Kabul would be able to concentrate forces around these strongholds. However, starting on August 6th, when the Taliban first captured the center of an Afghan province, the city of Zaranj, the events unfolded like an avalanche. Over the next week, all key cities in Afghanistan came under the control of the militants. Moreover, in most cases they were captured practically without a fight due to agreements with local elites and promises of amnesty to soldiers of government troops. Such events create an impression that the Afghan army trained by Western specialists was simply not ready and did not want to fight.

Analysts are trying to understand why such a catastrophe occurred. Some experts believe that the reason for the defeat of the Afghan army should be found in the fundamentals of its training. The United States created it in its own image. However, the strategy and tactics which bring success to the US troops didn’t work for the Afghan allies. Without adequate provision of air support, intelligence and assistance in maintaining modern weapons, the armed forces of Afghanistan turned out to be incapable of combat.¹²

But it is not correct to put the responsibility for the defeats solely on military reasons. They are caused by wider problems of Afghan statehood. The major part of the army was subjected to all the destructive tendencies which became characteristic of the Afghan society and the system of governance. Inefficiency and corruption remained a problem for the Afghan government. The government paved way to criminal practices, when commanders were forced to pay bribes in order to receive supplies and artillery support. At the same time, soldiers often did not receive their salaries. Clannishness and nepotism led to the promotion of incompetent officers with political connections to command posts.¹³

Even the official quantitative indicators of the Afghan army are doubtful. BBC sources report that in reality, the Afghan army personnel numbered only 50,000 while the American funds allocated for the maintenance of the remaining “ghost soldiers” were simply plundered¹⁴. It is not surprising that in such conditions people were not loyal to high-ranking officials and also were not ready to sacrifice their lives for their superiors. Only special force units were well trained, equipped and motivated to fight the Taliban. However, they were not enough to counter the militants in all directions.

It is worth mentioning the weakness of the system of governance in Afghanistan. The government in Kabul had little control over the situation in the provinces. There

the power belonged to the local elites and its balance was based on the centuries-old tribal relations. When Washington announced its decision to withdraw the American troops completely, local leaders quickly assessed the risks and redefined their positions. They rationally assumed that in the long term, cooperation with the Taliban in exchange for guarantees is a more profitable strategy than fighting the militants without American support.

It is also worth noting that a significant part of the Afghan population supports the Taliban and adheres to its fundamentalist ideas. This is especially noticeable in rural areas, in which even the cosmetic modernization was not implemented. Besides, according to some sections of the population, Taliban is a national force fighting against foreign invaders. These complex set of reasons led to the defeat of the government and the flight of President Ashraf Ghani. The Taliban offensive finally ended with success on August 15, when their units took Kabul.

Evacuation from Kabul: Practical and Image Aspects

The rapid fall of Kabul came as an unpleasant surprise for the West. Of course, Western authorities assumed that the government in Kabul would have a hard time after the withdrawal of the foreign contingents. That is why the United States tried to initiate a peace dialogue between the parties to the conflict. However, the speed with which the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan came as a surprise.

American intelligence made huge mistakes in forecasting the situation in Afghanistan. Apparently, it was initially assumed that the forces of the Afghan National Army would be sufficient to hold back the Taliban even after the withdrawal of the American contingent. At the end of June, when Taliban's offensive was in progress, the forecasts were adjusted. The intelligence analysts expressed fears that the central government of Afghanistan could fall within six months after the withdrawal of the Western military forces.¹⁵ In early August, amid the Taliban seizure of provincial centers, there were fears that Kabul could fall in the next 1-3 months.¹⁶ However, this forecast turned out to be overly optimistic – the capital of Afghanistan came under the control of the Taliban in a few days.

The key problem in these conditions was the threat to the security of foreign citizens and Afghans who collaborated with the coalition forces. Despite the relatively pacifying rhetoric of the Taliban, reports from Afghanistan indicated that these people were in grave danger. Also, many Afghan citizens did not want to stay in a country that is returning to the Emirate and sharia

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laws. Thus, for tens of thousands of people, emigration was the only way out. Organizing their evacuation has become a task for the West.

In fact, the US and its allies have done a tremendous amount of work in this area. Having recovered from the first shock, Washington launched a large-scale evacuation operation. Additional US and British military forces were deployed to Kabul airport to provide security. They joined the foreign units that were already stationed there such as the Turkish contingent, which included Azerbaijani servicemen. American evacuation operation "Allies Refuge" involved about 200 planes, including mobilized aircraft that are part of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet. According to commander of the United States Transportation Command General Stephen R. Lyons, "the idea is to keep those planes moving all the time – either by extending the working hours of the crew or preferably by swapping crews and keeping the iron in motion."¹⁷ Also, Lyons noted that the military "never want to leave Kabul airport on an empty plane or even a partially full plane... We're filling the aircraft to about 400-450 passengers in the floor load configuration... We are pushing the limits to do everything we can to get every single evacuee out of Kabul."¹⁸ This approach brought positive results. As of August 26, the Americans have evacuated more than 100 thousand people from Afghanistan.¹⁹ Amid the overcrowding of the refugee detention center in Qatar after a week of operation, new locations for destination established such as Germany. Planes were also redirected to the UAE and Bahrain.²⁰ The US partners also contributed to the evacuation process. For example, Germany evacuated more than 5 thousand people (including 3.6 thousand Afghans).²¹ Not only NATO members, but also partners of the Alliance participated in the joint efforts. Ukraine evacuated several hundred people including a group of Afghan citizens who worked for the Canadian press and armed forces. The process of their rescue deserves a special mention. Ukrainian Special Forces servicemen went outside the guarded perimeter of the airport, found buses full with people and escorted them to a safe place. They have done the work that representatives of other states could not do before - Americans and Canadians expected that the Afghans would get to the airport gates on their own but that turned out to be impossible.²²

President Biden stated “we’re going to do everything we can to provide safe evacuation for our Afghan allies, partners and Afghans who might be targeted because of their association with the United States.”²³ However, time remained a big problem in organizing the operation. The Taliban did not interfere with the process and even in some way provided an outer protective perimeter around the airport. However, they stressed that they would tolerate foreign military presence in Afghan territory only until August 31, the deadline for the withdrawal of contingents. The growing security threats to the operation due to the activation of ISIS is also worth noting. Terrorists took advantage of the existing vacuum of security in Afghanistan for their own purposes. The terrorist attacks on August 26 at the entrance to the airport, which took the lives of dozens of Afghans and 13 American servicemen²⁴, once again clearly demonstrated the difficult conditions in which the evacuation took place.

At the same time, all the efforts of the United States and its allies could not change the general perception of the events in Afghanistan. Miscalculations in forecasting the pace of the Taliban offensive led to a certain disorganization in the early days of the evacuation, which had significant negative consequences for the image of the West. The whole world saw the video footage from the Kabul airport, in which local residents tried by any means to hang on to the departing American plane. All of this was very reminiscent of the fall of Saigon in 1975 and became a very striking symbol of American mistakes in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, Washington’s geopolitical opponents are actively using this case to undermine the image of the United States.

The Position of China and the Russian Federation on the Situation in Afghanistan

China and the Russian Federation are actively using the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan for their own purposes. In the information space, they are

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promoting a narrative about the defeat of the United States. The footage from the Kabul airport in the early days of the evacuation is employed to confirm the thesis of the failure of American policy in the region. The situation in Afghanistan is called evidence of the collapse of American claims to global leadership.

The attempts are also being made to project it onto other regions. The fall of the central government in Kabul is used to put additional pressure on other US allies as an illustration of Washington’s inability to protect them. China’s efforts are directed towards Taiwan;²⁵ Russia will try to influence Ukraine, convincing Kyiv of the failure of hopes for American aid.

At the same time, Beijing and Moscow are forced to face a new reality in their areas of interest. Central Asia is extremely important for both states. Russia views it as a natural element of the post-Soviet space, in which it seeks to maintain its dominant position. It is linked by allied relations with many states of the region including Tajikistan that traditionally had a very hostile approach to the Taliban.²⁶ For China, the region is important in the context of its transit potential, which is necessary for the successful implementation of the New Silk Road project. For Beijing, the territory of Afghanistan remains an important element of the route to the Middle East and Africa. According to various sources, China is ready to invest \$ 62 billion in this state.²⁷

The departure of the Americans leaves a certain geopolitical vacuum in Central Asia. At the same time, the successes of the Taliban create conditions for the destabilization of the region. Some experts believe that in this case the situation is not in favor of China and Russia.²⁸ In fact, for many years the West protected them from Islamists practically free of charge. Now they will have to make efforts to ensure the security of the region and protect their interests by themselves. In theory, this will require a distraction of attention and diversion of resources from aggressive policies in other directions. However, such assumptions are not exactly true. In the end, both Moscow and Beijing do not have a moral, value-based barrier against cooperation with the Taliban. They take quite a rational approach on the issue.

The Taliban remain a banned organization in Russia. However, judging from the rhetoric in the Russian press, the Kremlin is ready to interact with the militants. The speeches of the Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitriy Zhirnov only confirm these assumptions.²⁹ Russia is now seeking to position itself as the main guarantor of regional stability in Central Asia. According to Ukrainian expert Yuriy Poita, Moscow does not consider the Taliban threat to be critical for its interests.³⁰

China also holds talks with the Taliban. High-level contacts with the Taliban took place at the end of July, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with a Taliban delegation. Clearly, Beijing is not interested in the democratic transformation of Afghanistan. Rather, it is quite ready to cooperate with the militants if they guarantee stability near Chinese borders and support for Chinese projects in the development of a transport corridor and mining.³¹

The key moment determining the Taliban's relations with China and the Russian Federation is the militants' policy towards neighbor states. Expansionism and attempts to export Islamic fundamentalism are unacceptable for Beijing and Moscow. However, today Taliban denies the existence of such plans. They promise not to threaten neighboring Central Asian states and not to support Uyghur groups in China. From a rational point of view, expansionism is not really beneficial for the Taliban. At least for the near future, it would be more logical for them to concentrate efforts on building an Islamic Emirate within the borders of Afghanistan.

Taliban 2.0: What will Life be Like in Afghanistan under the New Regime?

Working for their image, the Taliban is concerned not only with foreign policy problems. It is trying to pacify the world community by convincing it that they have become more tolerant and moderate. Thus, the Taliban is trying to present itself as a constructive partner for dia-

logue, the only force in Afghanistan that can bring stability to the country, and at the same time, a negotiable actor in the international domain. By doing so, the Taliban seeks international legitimization.

The public rhetoric of the Taliban is aimed at supporting this position. In their statements, representatives of the Taliban not only declare the need to normalize relations with other states. They try to convince the public that Taliban is ready for certain compromises concerning internal policy that will not be built on an excessively tough management regime. So, after the seizure of Kabul, an official spokesman of the Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid held a press conference. He promised amnesty to citizens who collaborated with foreign military personnel, as well as to Afghan army personnel and civil servants. He urged technical experts not to leave Afghanistan, to stay in the country and to work under the new regime. The Taliban also verbally guaranteed certain rights for work and education of women, as well as freedom of the press – of course only if this will be consistent with Islamic laws and regulations.³²

Some experts are convinced by this rhetoric. According to Columbia University professor Hamid Dabashi, the Taliban has indeed changed under the influence of circumstances in recent decades. The expert points out that today “its leaders want to be part of regional and global politics. It seems, during the Doha conferences, they realized that their assumption of power in Afghanistan now requires international recognition – they realised that to survive, they must rule, not terrorise.”³³



In practice, the situation remains uncertain. On the one hand, in public, in the presence of foreign journalists, the Taliban militants try not to show excessive cruelty. They also call on the United States to stop encouraging Afghan experts to leave the country, which is allegedly taking place under the guise of evacuation. So, they are trying to prevent the loss of valuable personnel necessary for governance and social welfare of the state's population.

However, according to the information from Afghanistan, the situation is escalating. Even during the period of the militants' offensive, there were reports about the return of the old violent order. After the fall of Kabul, Afghan women have already faced job restrictions. According to representatives of the Taliban, the ban is temporary, that is, until the proper security system in the state would be established.³⁴ However, there is every reason to believe that this prohibition may last for a long time and eventually become permanent. Militants also banned public performance of music in Afghanistan as they consider it as contradictory to Islamic principles.³⁵ There are signals of executions of government soldiers like the former chief of police forces in Badghis province general, Haji Mullah Achakzai.³⁶

In many cases situation depends on the position of specific militant leaders. According to reports from provinces controlled by the Taliban, local Taliban commanders' interpretations of the new context may differ. Some of them are ready to negotiations and compromises. Others take a tough approach and are ready to build a governance system on the model, which was already tested in the late 1990s.

In general, no matter what the Taliban promises, one should expect a rollback of even those few positive changes in human rights and freedoms that were initiated with the help of the West in Afghanistan. According to executive director of the Ukrainian Center for Middle Eastern Studies Igor Semyvolos, the Taliban has not really changed. What we see is only a cunning diplomatic move, which may be welcomed by some in the West solely to justify negotiations and agreements with the militants.³⁷

Of course, the current situation poses an exceptional threat to Afghanistan, pushing its development efforts back for many years, if not centuries. Active Afghan women such as mayor of the Maidan Shahr Zarifa Ghafari or filmmaker and director Sahraa Karimi suffer the most. They are forced to flee Afghanistan, having no future under the new regime. Commenting on the situation, Ms. Karimi speaks on behalf of many Afghan women: "We are not a generation of burqa, we do not want to hide our faces, no. We do not want to be invisible. We want to be part of society... We just started build-

ing our country... We had cafes, libraries, fashion houses, we had a film festival, a music festival, we had everything, we began to feel like a part of the world. And now it all... just closed."³⁸ Unfortunately, nothing can be done about it at the moment and Afghan citizens who have truly accepted Western values remain the main victims in this situation.

For now, they neither can rely neither on the foreign help nor on the anti-Taliban movement in Afghanistan. Of course, not all Afghans have come to terms with the situation. Since the fall of Kabul, forces who were not ready to accept Taliban rule concentrated in the Panjshir province – a natural fortress famous for its mountainous relief and warlike population. The symbol of the newly created National Resistance Front became the son of the famous field commander, national hero of Afghanistan Ahmad Shah Massoud (the famous "Lion of Panjshir" who was killed by al-Qaeda in 2001) – Ahmad Massoud Jr. The resistance was given legitimacy by the Amrullah Saleh, a former first vice president who proclaimed himself acting head of state after Ashraf Ghani fled the country. Together they promised to fight against Taliban.

But their efforts were not quite successful when Taliban launched an attack on the rebel province at the beginning of September. After some days of heavy fighting its representatives claimed they have full control of the valley. Such statements are somewhat overoptimistic – after all, some Resistance troops retreated to the mountains, from where they can continue fighting. But this guerilla warfare can only be a minor complication for Taliban – it cannot threaten their rule over Afghanistan. And it is obvious that without assistance from abroad National Resistance Front could not achieve victories.

Supporting it logistically is challenging as Panjshir has no access to the borders of Afghanistan, and was cut off from potential supply routes during Taliban offensive in summer. Moreover, foreign actors are not willing to be involved in a new round of conflict in this state. Only India has real geopolitical reasons to help the Resistance in order to restrain regional ambitions of Pakistan. But its capabilities are also limited. So, it seems that the World must adapt to the new balance of power in Central Asia – with Taliban in full control over Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The withdrawal of American troops opens a new page in the history of Afghanistan. However, it looks suspiciously similar to a return to the situation which was formed twenty years ago. This gives ground to put forward the thesis about the defeat of the United States in the Afghan campaign. However, an assessment of the ob-

jectives of the operation shows that it was successful militarily. It undermined the potential of international terrorism in Afghanistan. At the same time, political modernization of Afghanistan did not succeed, once again proving the indisputable thesis that it is impossible to overcome the laws of history and to radically transform society through artificial efforts from the outside, especially if the implementation of such a policy lacks understanding of local traditions and particularities.

The Taliban victory in the face of the withdrawal of American troops did not come as a surprise – only the speed with which it was achieved was surprising. US efforts to organize evacuation of Afghan citizens deserve positive assessment. However, in terms of image, Washington suffered a clear defeat. Its geopolitical opponents, i.e., Russia and China, which have their own interests in Central Asia, are actively trying to take advantage of this.

In this context, Turkey could play a positive role in the region. Due to the religious factor, Ankara is better suited to solve the Afghan problems than other members of the Euro-Atlantic community. The deepening partner-

ship with Islamabad that has ties with the Taliban also speaks in favor of Turkey. However, despite its interest in the Afghan problem, the status of Turkey's relations with the new regime in Kabul remains controversial and preliminary negotiations with the Taliban (on the practical issue of servicing the Kabul airport) have not yielded results.

The future of Afghanistan is uncertain. Despite the Taliban's claims that the movement has changed, in practice there is every reason to believe that the country will face a total rollback to a violent system of governance based on sharia laws and local traditions. The concept of the rights and freedoms of citizens is becoming ephemeral. The anti-Taliban forces remaining in the country are limited in capacity and support. In these conditions, the most probable vector of Afghanistan's development in the coming years is the return of the Islamic Emirate that will suppress all modernization tendencies. The main losers in this case are Afghan citizens who are forced to live in the Middle Ages and do not have the prospect of a dignified and prosperous future in their home country.

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