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## COMPASS Policy Paper

### Afghanistan's Relations with Neighbouring Central Asian Countries: A View from Dushanbe

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31 January 2022

**GCRF COMPASS:** Comprehensive Capacity-Building in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia: research integration, impact governance & sustainable communities (ES/P010849/1)



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*The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) COMPASS project has been awarded **High Commendation for the International Collaboration** of the Year by the Times Higher Education (THE) Awards 2021, widely known as ‘the Oscars of Higher Education’.*



# AFGHANISTAN'S RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBOURING CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES: A VIEW FROM DUSHANBE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This paper offers an analysis of the situation in Afghanistan, following the Taliban's takeover in 2021. It also provides an assessment of the changing relationship with the neighbouring Central Asian states and evaluates possible risks and threats for the region. It starts with an overview of the political and military situation in the country prior to the fall of the Afghan government and proceeds with the exploration of current and possible changes of Afghanistan's relations with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The authors argue that the latter's approach to Afghanistan and its current regime differs considerably from that of other states in the region. They envisage turbulent future for Afghanistan under the Taliban and maintain that to withstand these risks, Central Asian neighbours need to continue strengthening their statehood and security.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Central Asia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, the Taliban, security

**Abbreviations:** IS, Islamic state, IMU, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan; IDVT, Islamic Movement of East Turkestan; TAPI, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India.

## BACKGROUND

To analyze and assess the current situation in Afghanistan, outgoing challenges and threats to Central Asia, it is necessary to take into account the long-term nature of the conflict, examine the internal situation and understand the priorities and interests of the external states involved. The political culture in Afghanistan, considering the long-term internal conflict, was formed in such a way that key forces and influential individuals often change their positions, and this convention is both the result of external intervention and the ability to stay afloat in conditions of uncertainty (this was a key factor during Taliban offensive in May-August 2021, when the provinces and major cities such as Herat, Mazori Sharif, Kandahar, Jalalabad and the capital Kabul were surrendered). The surface side of the issue requires a clear understanding of the interests and priorities of the United States (in close coordination and constant partnership with Britain), which have played a crucial role over the past 40 years, especially since 2001. Next, we need to understand the strategy of regional powers, mainly Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China and India.

A long and more than forty-year internal conflict testifies to the fact that, on the one hand, there is a struggle of internal forces between various political parties, movements, political, military, and criminal groups, individuals for power; and, on the other hand, competition between external powers and neighbors. Both of these factors act as conditions for the preservation of the crisis situation, since they have the tools to influence the internal situation and international structures. Therefore, every year the crisis in this long-suffering land has been aggravating and complicating the process of achieving

sustainable peace and stability. As the experience of conflict resolution in unstable states shows, it is impossible to achieve peace and stability without the coincidence of interests of internal elite groups and key international actors. In the long term, without such a "unity" of internal and external factors, stability in Afghanistan is unlikely to come. The psychological side of the issue is that several generations of Afghans have grown up in conditions of conflict and instability, and some of them are "used to" live in such an environment. Their return to a peaceful and normal life requires a lot of effort. Together, these conventions have contributed to the fact that Afghanistan has become an arena of confrontation between major powers and regional players.

Despite the unstable situation in the country and the uncertainty of its future, key powers, regional players and neighboring countries began to develop their own strategy of their relations towards the Afghan government, taking into account all aspects of the issue and potential areas of interaction. The current government of Afghanistan (as noted by representatives of the Taliban: an inclusive government in the form of an Islamic Emirate) will have to form its own foreign policy and establish relationships with global and regional powers, as well as neighboring countries in order to gain legitimacy and necessary political image in international arena.

It is obvious that after the events of 15 August 2021, and due to the flight of A. Ghani, the Taliban leadership faced the following issues: gaining recognition of their legitimacy by the internal forces (1) and the international community (2). As the eastern wisdom says: you can seize power by force, but in order to keep it, you need other skills. In order to show themselves as a civilized force, the Taliban need to show that they have changed (1), they can fulfill all previously signed interstate treaties and agreements (2), they can ensure the responsibility of the government before international structures (3), respect and observe fundamental rights and human freedoms, especially the observance of women's rights and the right of girls to education (4), will not be a source of threats and challenges for key states and neighboring countries (5): the Taliban must resolve the issue of finding Al-Qaeda (threaten the United States and its allies), IS (can compete with them), the IMU, ETIM, Ansorulloh and others (threaten China and the countries of Central Asia) on the territory of Afghanistan.

Today, there are three scenarios regarding the fate of the foreign fighters:

- 1) they may be incorporated into the special forces of the Taliban, and will work with the regime which could create an ideological group like IRGC of Iran, to protect their new achievements;
- 2) they are provided with a corridor for redeployment to other countries (this possible scenario needs special consideration);
- 3) they are disarmed (might be by force) and provided with the opportunity to live in Afghanistan as civilians (over the years of their stay in this country, some of them have their families).

According to the above points, and taking into account the historical experience of Afghanistan and the policy of the countries involved, the paper will carry out an analysis of the prospects for the development of these events on the background of the Taliban's coming to power, as well as the policy of neighboring Central Asian states in relation to Afghanistan and the real and potential challenges and threats arising from this country.



## ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

### 1. Retrospective analysis of developments in Afghanistan

Analysis of the situation in Afghanistan and forecasting future processes in this country, due to the duration and severity of the conflict, do not allow us to accurately determine the prospects for the development of events. Except for the United States and Britain, the events that unfolded on August 15 related to the capture of Kabul by the Taliban came as a surprise both for the citizens and part of the elite of Afghanistan, and for the international community. It is obvious that the top political leadership of the country, headed by A. Ghani and his inner circle, knew what would happen and did everything to prepare the ground for the transfer of power to the Taliban. This conclusion is confirmed by their action / inaction over the control of the situation and the attempt to build a necessary policy in the last three months before the capture of Kabul. Taking into account the existing historical experience (many of the events taking place with some changes are a repetition of the fate of the communist government of Afghanistan) and the precedents of other similar conflicts, it is possible to roughly predict the potential processes that may occur in Afghanistan. We briefly consider the prospects for the development of the situation from a political and military point of view, as well as from a security standpoint.

#### *Evaluation of the political situation in Afghanistan*

The political situation in Afghanistan is sufficiently vulnerable and unpredictable and depends on several factors:

#### ***First, the weakness of the central government and rejection of its legitimacy by a large part of society.***

The past 2019 presidential elections, with a voter turnout of almost 10 percent, demonstrated the political illegitimacy of the government in the eyes of citizens. The Taliban's victory confirms the thesis that none of the citizens, military and political leaders wanted to give their lives for a corrupt government.

***Secondly, the biased ethnic and monopoly policy of the Presidential Administration.*** On this occasion, experts and political parties of Afghanistan have written dozens of analytical articles, materials, interviews, etc. The government's weakness stems from the unprofessional and monopolistic policies of the presidential administration, especially three key senior members, ex-President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani, Hamdullo Muhib and Fazl Mahmoud Fazli. This group, despite of considering the realities of Afghanistan, contributed to the aggravation of the crisis situation in the country, causing a feeling of mistrust among politicians and leaders of other ethnic groups, or purposefully pursued such a policy.

***Third, the high level of corruption and its transposition into popular culture.*** Afghanistan is considered to be a global "leader" in this area and this situation is a consequence of 40 years of conflict and other historical factors in this country.

***Fourth, ministries and departments "without a minister" and their management by curators.*** In this vein, it is important to note that in just five years of the existence of the Government of National Unity, more than 110 ministers were appointed and removed from their posts, and some ministries and departments were headed by curators for a long time. Until the last moment A. Ghani was in power, this

situation persisted. Example: A. Ghani appointed his brother-in-law as chairman of the National Bank of Afghanistan. Having not received parliamentary approval, he continued his activities as a curator.

***Fifth, a lack of trust between influential political leaders and parties.*** Due to historical reasons and the unique political culture of the Afghan elite, mistrust exists between the political elite and influencers. Traditionally, influential political leaders and groups, during the election period or when the situation escalates, change their political positions based on the current situation. For example, many of the former government officials and supporters of anti-Taliban parties and movements have now changed their position and joined the Taliban.

An example is the former Senator Muhammad Asif Azimi, a representative of Samangan, who defected to the Taliban and played a key role in the surrender of the city of Oybek, the center of Samangan province, on August 9, 2021. The surrender or annexation of Baburi Eshchi, chairman of the Juzjan provincial council with his army, to the Taliban also played an important role in the capture of the provincial capital, Shebergan. It is also necessary to emphasize the surrender of large cities such as Herat, Kandahar, Mazori Sharif, Jalalabad and even the capital Kabul to the Taliban forces, which took place without a fight, on the basis of collusion or agreements reached. Or for example, the political compromise reached between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah after the 2019 elections, when most of the provisions of the agreement reached, including on the formation of a comprehensive government, were not implemented in practice.

The political problems of the Afghan government came from the personality of Ashraf Ghani and his inner circle. According to the analysis of the Afghan media and foreign experts, this trinity (Muhammad Ashraf Ghani, Hamdullo Muhiba and Fazl Mahmoud Fazli) and their entourage had a pronounced ethnic (Pashtun) point of view and spread a similar vision to all government institutions. This especially concerned the personality of Ashraf Ghani: the monopoly of power, arrogance and intolerance of the opinion of others, positioning himself as a scientist and the most knowledgeable among politicians - these and other factors alienated influential political figures, especially non-Pashtuns, as well as representatives of some Pashtun tribes (not Gilzai) from the central government, which deserves separate consideration.

A) Создание условий для запуска межафганских переговоров. To achieve the desired result in the negotiations, it is necessary to have strong positions - namely, the possession of strong positions in the military, political, economic spheres, and, of course, in the sphere of ensuring security. Proceeding from this, the parties to the conflict in Afghanistan, both the central government and the main opposition group, the Taliban, tried to defend their position in the military and security sectors, the financial and economic sector, and their status in front of influential internal and external factors. Based on the results of the events of August 15, the Taliban have shown their preparedness and determination, as well as the potential for a volitional solution to the problem. For more than forty years of conflict between the warring parties and their foreign patrons, negotiations for a sustainable peace have continued. This process continues today in a different form and with the participation of new players. The administration of ex-President Ashraf Ghani made a lot of efforts to exclude the participation of Abdullo Abdullo, chairman of the Supreme Council for National Reconciliation, from the peace process and to conduct inter-Afghan negotiations themselves. We are confident that this factor is one of the most important reasons for the failure of the Doha peace process. The trajectory of future events in Afghanistan in the context of the Taliban's presence in Kabul, their control of the country's territory (except for most of the Panjshir province and the Andarob region in Baghlan province) will significantly change the result of the consensus. Since the Taliban will dictate their terms and will try to attract representatives of other

ethnic groups to power, giving them secondary positions in ministries and government bodies. This is due to the fact that in this short period of time it is impossible to train your managers and middle-level staff.

The efforts of Ashraf Ghani's government to attract the attention and trust of political and influential figures in order to strengthen their position. The absence of consensus between the central government and influential political parties and figures has been a major problem in post-Bonn Afghanistan, especially under Ashraf Ghani. The post-Bonn government from 2001 to the present day was very weak and vulnerable due to various factors of a political-ethnic and personal-group nature. During the administration of Hamid Karzai, the ethnic and political balance to some extent was maintained, and existing problems were solved in a closed manner. However, this problem under the government of Ashraf Ghani, due to his personal qualities, as well as the lack of a strong and legitimate central government that would emerge as a result of fair and recognized elections, was especially exacerbated. The weakness of the Afghan government as a whole, and the fact that the central government is not on the same side with influential figures and political parties and groups, in particular, have weakened his position both politically in the course of peace negotiations and in the military sphere and in the field of ensuring security. For example, the actions of the Afghan government under US pressure to release more than 5,000 prisoners of war, and the different positions of the members of the negotiating group in Doha, demonstrated their weakness and lack of unity in the confrontation with the Taliban.

As a result, Ashraf Ghani and his entourage, having no interest in reaching a quick compromise with the Taliban and trying to extend their power in every possible way, lost their power in almost 70 days. This factor is directly related to the military-political situation after the withdrawal of a significant part of the armed contingent of the United States and its allies, as well as due to the lack of unity in the positions of political figures and elite groups in Afghanistan, each of which, pursuing its own personal interests, especially economic ones, first of all tried keep the capital accumulated during this time.

## **2. Analysis of the military-political situation in Afghanistan**

An assessment of the military-political situation in Afghanistan after the peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban in 2020 shows that the Taliban achieved significant political and military successes thanks to this, namely: a) the release of more than 5 thousand prisoners from prisons who joined the Movement and continued the struggle with the central government; b) increasing international authority; c) recognition of the Taliban as the main opposition force to the Afghan government by influential foreign countries; d) heightened sense of pride, since the Taliban believe that they have defeated the United States and its allies, etc. These and other factors had a direct impact on the success of their spring-summer offensive campaign.

Due to the above reasons, the military-political situation in Afghanistan became more difficult every day, and the Taliban's positions on the battlefield were strengthened. As of May 25, 2020, about 40% of the territories were under the control of the central government, about 20% under the control of the Taliban, and the remaining 40% were under the control of the parties. In particular, 133 of the 403 regions of the country were under the control of the central government; 75 districts - under the control of the Taliban; and fighting continued in 189 districts; and in 5 districts of Kunar province - IS had an impact. On July

31, 2021, 68 of the 407 counties in the country (mainly large districts and provincial centers) were under the control of the central government; 223 districts were already under the control of the Taliban, and in 116 districts, clashes between the forces of both sides continued. The situation changed radically on August 15, and the Taliban, in addition to the Panjshir province, control the entire territory of the country.

The Taliban initially succeeded in seizing a significant part of the border with neighboring countries, especially with the states of Central Asia, without resistance, and taking control of important from an economic point of view border points and centers of the five northern provinces. For reasons unknown, government forces left many heavy weapons, small arms and other equipment at the disposal of the Taliban in these provinces and other parts of Afghanistan. This scenario is reminiscent of the successes of IS in Iraq and Syria, and in this regard, it is worth considering the role of various internal and external factors in shaping this situation. As a result, they almost completely captured the territory of the country.

There are specific reasons for the Taliban's success and increase in military power, some of which we can summarize as follows:

1. *The lack of unity between the military and security forces of the central government.* For political reasons, after the formation of the Government of National Unity in 2014, as well as during the formation of the new government, the troops of the Ministries of Defense and Internal Affairs, National Security and the Air Force of Afghanistan were distributed between the parties according to quotas allocated to them. Это способствовала потере единого и стратегического командования, где были назначены слабые и не имеющие авторитета руководители. The lack of a unified command and the lack of a prompt response to emerging threats from the heads of provinces, districts and local commanders influenced the course of the war, especially against the actions of rebel and guerrilla groups. For example, in 2020, Ashraf Ghani appointed more than 100 military leaders in 29 provinces of Afghanistan. The course of the war in Afghanistan has been widely covered in the media for several years, and according to published materials, the Afghan military was forced to surrender to the Taliban due to lack of resources, lack of timely assistance, lack of fuel and food, or resisted to the last and were killed. The role of the three Ark: Ghani-Muhib-Fazli, which did not allow the armed forces to resist, should also be emphasized. These factors had a significant impact on the morale of soldiers on the battlefield against the Taliban, which deserves a separate detailed analysis.
2. *The use of influential local forces dissatisfied with the central government.* The Taliban, under the auspices of the Pakistani Intelligence Service (ISI), amid war with the central government during Karzai's second term and Ghani's first term, were able to gradually export the fighting and destabilize the country's northern provinces. Against this background, the Taliban began to attract militants from among the local residents and to attract influential figures in these provinces to their side. The Taliban, by recognizing local influencers and respecting their financial interests in the gem, drugs and weapons trade, as well as exploiting the inexperience and need of local youth, have been able to gain significant influence in the north and northeast of Afghanistan in a short period of time. This factor is primarily due to the professional definition of the mores and characteristics of the culture, customs and language of these provinces; those. in areas inhabited by Tajiks and Uzbeks, Tajiks and Uzbeks were used, respectively.
3. Despite this, *politicians*, resistance fighters and ordinary people of the north, taking into account the deplorable experience of the Taliban rule (1996-2001), *have a negative attitude towards them*



*and do not believe their promises.* The Taliban, having learned the lesson from their previous rule, promised to the people throughout the country, and especially in Kabul, a civilized and inclusive attitude towards all citizens and political forces. If the Taliban repeat their actions in 1996-2001, the Ogs will not be able to come to terms with key influential figures and the parties and movements behind them (earlier, at the invitation of Pakistan, some of them in the person of Rahmani, Konuni, the Masud brothers, S. Rabboni, Pidrom, Muhakkik, Khalili and others held talks in Islamabad with representatives of this country) in the near future, one can safely assume that, taking into account the historical experience and the specifics of the political culture of Afghanistan, there will be clashes between them. Moreover, because of the linguistic and ethnic differences, it is difficult for the Taliban government to strengthen their position in the north, north-east and the west of Afghanistan. Even in the south of this country, which is the place of their origin, there are serious disagreements due to tribal differences.

4. *The ethnic view of the political leadership of Afghanistan on the war with the Taliban.* With the defeat of the Taliban and the formation of a central government in Kabul under the leadership of Hamid Karzai, resistance and jihad forces, especially non-Pashtuns, were gradually squeezed out. During the Karzai and Ghani administrations, there was no goal of physically destroying the Taliban forces, due to the fact that the entire leadership and many of the fighters are ethnic Pashtuns. Karzai and Ghani opposed this decision and delayed the process in different ways. They freed thousands of their militants from government prisons under various slogans of peace and in order to show "goodwill", calling the Taliban "dissenting brothers" and "an armed opposition group". These fighters have made a significant contribution to the success of the Taliban's offensive campaign. Summarizing the above, we can conclude that Ghani and his inner circle removed the leaders from the political board and (by exerting economic pressure, threats to life, appointment to secondary positions, and so on) assisted in weakening the strength of other ethnic groups, and, as a result, transferred power to the representatives of the Pashtuns. ...
5. *An appointment of non-professional and non-influential people to the posts of governors, commanders of the army, security services and internal troops of the provinces.* Ashraf Ghani, with the direct assistance of Hamdullo Muhib, Chairman of the National Security Council of Afghanistan, has replaced more than 100 commanders of the military and security forces in the provinces over the past year, without reason and without taking into account their experience and seniority. Some of the appointed governors were not from these provinces and had no idea about the situation in these regions, and because of their corrupt actions, social protest grew. Earlier, for various and incomprehensible reasons, more than 3,000 generals and experienced military specialists were retired. Thus, the appointment and activities of such governors, commanders of the armed forces and security services have become a factor of public distrust of the authorities, weakened the potential of local authorities and laid the foundation for the growth of the Taliban's influence, as well as the success of their offensive campaign.
6. *The lack of a specific strategy to combat the Taliban.* During the rule of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, there was no clear strategy to combat Taliban forces. Not long ago, before his downfall, Ghani announced a security plan in which he promised to change the military situation and the level of security in Afghanistan in the next six months. However, in practice, serious work was not carried out and no appropriate decisions were made, and as a result, no success was achieved on the battlefield. On the contrary, the situation worsened from day to day, and this factor caused

the distrust of the inhabitants and the military forces on the battlefields. The result was the complete defeat of the Ghani government and the resounding success of the Taliban.

7. *An announcement of the withdrawal of US troops and their allies from Afghanistan.* This factor played a key role in the morale of the Taliban, and contributed to disillusionment and demoralization in the ranks of the government's armed forces. The Taliban seized this opportunity and, in the absence of military support from foreign forces, were able to advance on the battlefield (amid euphoria and consider themselves victors over Western forces). The central government of Afghanistan knew in advance about the withdrawal of Western troops, since their gradual withdrawal began back in 2014. The Ghani administration did not prepare a program or strategy for controlling the situation after the withdrawal of troops, and did not expect such a development of events (a quick withdrawal of US troops), and was convinced that the Americans would remain in Afghanistan. Ghani and his inner circle were aware of the ongoing processes, and hoped that they would be included in the future government or they would become part of the transitional government. Along with the above, we can note such factors as: corruption of the entire administrative system of Afghanistan and its transformation into a common culture; corruption consumed the armed forces and security services, which, as a result, abandoned and handed over entire areas to the Taliban without resistance or battle (1); a significant part of the representatives of the ruling political elite of Afghanistan, who came to power after 2001, have citizenship of Western countries, and as a result, they do not associate their fate with this country and are not interested in its future (2); artificial restraint of the flow of investments and uneven development of the regions: great attention was paid to the economic development of the southern and eastern regions. Despite the relative stability of the northern and western regions of Afghanistan in the 2000s, no significant investments were made in these regions. As a result, due to the backwardness and high unemployment rate in these regions, young people began to enlist in the armed forces to financially support their families, and then easily joined the ranks of the Taliban (3); a split in society and an increase in political discord due to the results of the past presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, which caused alienation and distrust of each other (4), etc.

Given the relatively unstable and unpredictable situation in Afghanistan, as well as the lack of clarity on the positions of key actors and the international community towards the victory of the Taliban and their forming government, one can expect that **the crisis situation in this country will persist**. Obviously, during the division of portfolios and the conditions for forming a government dominated by the Taliban, there will be disaffected both among their supporters and among influential persons (former officials and mujahideen) who were left behind or for various reasons will not accept this position. It is unlikely that a full-fledged government will be formed, that the Taliban's authority will gradually be recognized, or that some countries will be able to restore relations with them without official recognition. It is possible that a weak religious government will form in a country focused on its internal problems. The situation in Afghanistan can be described as explosive, as a civil war could break out, which will exacerbate the humanitarian situation in general. Against this background, it is difficult to predict the stabilization of the situation and the resolution of the Afghan crisis.

### 3. Policies of neighboring Central Asian countries towards Afghanistan

Under current conditions, the challenges and threats emanating from Afghanistan in relation to the Central Asian states bordering on it cannot be underestimated. Especially against the background of the diametrically opposed policy of the direct neighbors of this country in the person of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan on the one, and Tajikistan on the other.

The experience of the Taliban in power today has shown that they have not only doubled the existing problems of Afghanistan, but in some places have created a regime that, at a basic level, generates potential and real threats and challenges to the secular governments of Central Asia. In this vein, the lack of stability and security makes the implementation of important economic and communication projects unpromising, which is more hopeful in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The “revitalization” of IS is transforming the situation and requires cardinal changes in the field of security in the countries of Central Asia.

### *1. Turkmenistan's policy towards Afghanistan in the new conditions*

Turkmenistan, by virtue of the declaration of "permanent neutrality" in its foreign policy, maintains relations in Afghanistan, regardless of their views and positions. Turkmenistan was the only northern neighbor with close ties to the Taliban during their first rule. This policy of Ashgabat was dictated by the fact that, possessing significant reserves of oil and gas, in the 90s the Turkmen authorities wanted to diversify sales markets. Therefore, since that period, Turkmenistan had a neutral and positive policy towards the Taliban. The key interests of Turkmenistan in the Afghan direction can be identified as the achievement of economic priorities; security guarantees from a key and influential force in Afghanistan; and implementation of projects for the transportation of energy carriers to the Pakistani and Indian markets. Below, we will briefly consider the key goals of Turkmenistan in the system of relations with Afghanistan:

***First, the implementation of the TAPI project.*** Turkmenistan possesses large reserves of natural gas, and is located in the vicinity of countries and regions that experience an acute shortage of this resource. According to existing data, Turkmenistan ranks fourth in terms of gas reserves in the world. Therefore, in the foreign policy of this country, one of the key directions is the TAPI project and gas supplies through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. Proceeding from this, Turkmenistan, regardless of the form of government in Afghanistan, intends to implement this project, but it feels the restrictions on the part of Iran and Russia. Iran views the countries of South Asia as a potential market for its products. It is undesirable for Russia to lose control over the transit of Turkmen gas, which they buy at a reduced price and sell in European countries. Turkmenistan took unprecedented measures to implement this project (for example, in 1999, peace talks were held in Ashgabat between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, the results of which suggested far-reaching prospects, but due to objective reasons were not implemented) with the attraction of foreign investment, but in for more than 20 years has not been able to implement the plan. In this regard, the Turkmen authorities give priority attention to bilateral relations with the new Afghan government, given the role and influence of Pakistan in this project, they can launch the construction of a gas pipeline. Over the years of its independence, Turkmenistan has established gas supplies through the countries of Central Asia to China, but due to low prices and some economic

interests of China, this campaign does not bring the required income. Turkmenistan for the implementation of the project TAPI needs the consent or neutrality of Iran and Russia and even China. But due to natural reasons, which were indicated above, the implementation of this project may harm the interests of Tehran, Moscow and Beijing, which deserves a separate analysis.

***Second, countering the penetration of extremist forces.*** The IS experience in Syria and Iraq shows that Turkmenistan with significant gas reserves is attractive to international terrorist organizations, which, gaining control over these reserves, can change the specifics of the international gas market. The advantage of Turkmenistan is that there is no developed transit network for gas supplies to the west and south of the country. If it were, that the extremists, with the consent of the key players in the global energy market, must have organized an outburst of extremist ideas in Turkmenistan. Despite this, having more than 700 km. common border with Afghanistan across the desert area, the threat of penetration of extremist militants remains in Turkmenistan. Therefore, according to unconfirmed reports, the Turkmen authorities paid tribute to extremists on the other side of the border so that they would not threaten Ashgabat.

***Third, obtaining a security guarantee.*** The activation of the Taliban in the northeastern provinces of Afghanistan after 2009 led to the fact that some of the Afghan citizens of Turkmen nationality became members of this movement and today part of the border provinces with Turkmenistan are controlled by them. The membership of ethnic Turkmen of Afghanistan in the ranks of extremist forces, including the Taliban, is to some extent concerned about Turkmenistan. The Iraqi experience shows that extremist groups have focused their attacks on regions with abundant oil and gas reserves. If key players want to implement this scenario in Central Asia, then Turkmenistan will be the first target of terrorists thanks to its huge gas reserves. Therefore, Turkmenistan is doing everything to protect itself from such a development of events by inviting the Taliban to political consultations in Ashgabat in July 2021, and repeated meetings at various levels after August 15, aimed primarily at obtaining security guarantees. Turkmenistan has constant contacts with representatives of the movement in Afghanistan, and Ashgabat diplomats hold intensive meetings on the territory of this country. According to media reports, the customs points on the border of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are operating in the same mode, which shows the favor of the Ashgabat authorities to the Taliban.

In addition to the above-mentioned critical issues, one can also mention the fight against drug trafficking and the export of these products from Afghanistan to Turkmenistan; cultural, scientific, humanitarian ties, especially with the Turkmen minority, to whom Ashgabat provides all kinds of material assistance; trade and economic relations: Turkmenistan exports grain and energy resources to Afghanistan, which is very important today in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in this country (according to media reports, the Taliban have significantly reduced customs duties); export of electricity, etc. However, all of the above possibilities do not expand bilateral relations to such an extent that the implementation of the TAPI project would allow.

### *Relations between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan*

Afghanistan, on the basis of its own interests, from the first days of independence of Turkmenistan, maintained good relations with this country. Due to its economic interests, Turkmenistan has also

cooperated with all the governments of Afghanistan. Below we will briefly dwell on two key goals of Afghanistan in the system of relations with Turkmenistan:

***First, the expansion of economic relations.*** Due to the forty years of crisis, Afghanistan is in economic crisis and the stability of the power structures is largely dependent on foreign aid. In order to reach the level of self-sufficiency, the authorities of Afghanistan, developing economic strategies and projects, determined the expansion of trade and economic ties with neighboring countries as a priority of their policy. For Afghanistan, the implementation of the TAPI project will allow receiving, in addition to income from transit gas supplies, access to natural gas for its own needs. Therefore, after the formation of a new government in Kabul, they will try and negotiate with Turkmenistan on the implementation of this project. Pakistan is also interested in the implementation of this project, which can help to attract foreign investment for the implementation of TAPI.

***Second, the recognition of the political legitimacy of the new authorities in Afghanistan.*** The new Afghan government needs to develop relations with foreign countries so that they recognize their legitimacy. In the aftermath of the August 15 events, the newly formed Taliban government needs international recognition. If Turkmenistan recognizes the Taliban government, the latter will achieve their goals, since they will be able to establish ties with the neighboring country at the bilateral level. In this context, Turkmenistan is the best option for strengthening bilateral political relations due to its neutral foreign policy. With the strengthening of political relations, the guarantee of non-interference in each other's affairs can become a reality.

### *Prospects for relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan*

Thanks to the existing format of bilateral relations, cooperation between the two countries, including with the new government of Kabul, i.e. The Islamic Emirate will remain unchanged. In this context, taking into account the economic needs of both sides, Turkmenistan, in particular, will make great efforts to implement the TAPI project, and preserve security issues in bilateral relations.

### *2. Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan*

Due to its geopolitical position in Central Asia and economic and transport potential, the Republic of Uzbekistan is an important northern partner for Afghanistan. Tough pragmatism, which is carried out by Tashkent, is primarily aimed at ensuring the interests of Uzbekistan and concentrates on three areas:

- 1) the Afghan market as an opportunity for the export of Uzbek products: light industry, electricity, essential goods, etc.
- 2) access through Afghanistan to the sea route and expansion of transport links of Tashkent with the countries of South Asia and the Middle East
- 3) guarantees of the national security of Uzbekistan

Taking into account the ambiguity of the future government in Kabul, the Tashkent authorities have taken an unprecedented step since 2018: they have invited the Taliban delegation to Uzbekistan and provided



a negotiating platform for the warring parties. The Tashkent format of the inter-Afghan peace talks was suspended by Russia due to competition in the Moscow format, and thus Uzbekistan showed that, if possible, it can claim the role of a regional player in the most complicated processes of the surrounding regions and countries. It is worth noting that the border of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan is the most protected and in the era of I. Karimov a lot of work was done to strengthen it. In the period when Western troops entered Afghanistan, Uzbekistan provided its territory for the coalition forces: in Termez, the armed forces of Germany were based in Navoi of the US Air Force. Uzbekistan took an active part in the inter-Afghan peace talks in Doha in Qatar, and several times hosted a Taliban delegation. According to Sh. Mirzoyoyev's statement dated August 27, 2021, two years ago he gave instructions to establish close ties and cooperation with the Taliban (representatives of the movement were invited to open their office in Tashkent), in order to reduce potential threats from the southern direction: "We began to communicate with [by the Taliban] not yesterday, but two years ago. When no country had yet communicated with them, I gave instructions: "We need to establish a dialogue with them."

Throughout its independence, Uzbekistan has recognized and established relations with the power that has real power in Afghanistan. Despite this, the special services of Uzbekistan were involved in an adventure when, with the assistance of the Turkish special services, they wanted to turn Abdurrashid Dostum, the leader of the Uzbeks of Afghanistan, into a serious political figure in this country. The specificity of the political life of Afghanistan is such that only Pashtuns and Tajiks can compete for power there. Other ethnic groups, due to their small size, must enter into a coalition with one of these groups. Realizing their failure, the Uzbek authorities did not support Dostum in the last elections and recognized the victory of Ashraf Ghani. Dostum's escape from Balkh completed the myth of this man and turned him into an outsider. Uzbekistan has centuries-old ties with Afghanistan, a significant part of which is written in the common language for these states - in Persian.

Taking into account the multifaceted nature of relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, let us dwell on the main points:

***First, economic goals and attracting Afghan capital.*** Given its geopolitical position and common border with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan pursues a pragmatic policy with this country. In its foreign policy, Uzbekistan is guided primarily by economic interests, and Afghanistan is no exception. In this context, over the past 20 years, Uzbekistan has been able to attract large private investment of Afghan entrepreneurs, especially from the northern provinces, into its national economy under state guarantees. At present, there are a large number of enterprises in Uzbekistan created with the funds of Afghan businessmen. For example, Afghan entrepreneurs have invested heavily in the development of the Surkhandarya region, especially in the city of Termez, as well as in other regions of Uzbekistan. In terms of export volume, Uzbekistan is one of the ten largest trade and economic partners of Afghanistan. At present, the volume of trade between the two countries exceeds \$ 1 billion. Uzbekistan's exports include, for the most part, goods produced in this country.

***Second, the connection of transport arteries: railways and highways.*** Uzbekistan was the only republic of the Soviet Union that had a road with Afghanistan: across the famous Friendship Bridge, through which the USSR troops were withdrawn on February 15, 1989. Uzbekistan has been and remains an attractive country for external actors who have ongoing interests in Central Asia. Thus, it was Uzbekistan that benefited more from the presence of Western forces in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of ISAF forces from this country. The Tashkent authorities took measures to repair and build the railway and

connected Termez with Mazori Sharif (this branch of the railway is served by Uzbek specialists). There is also a road connection between these cities. Uzbekistan is taking steps to build a railroad from Mazori Sharif to Herat and then connect its railways to Iran. In this vein, in order to achieve its own goals, the type of government in Afghanistan is not important for Uzbekistan and the Tashkent authorities use all opportunities to realize their interests: from bilateral formats to the capabilities of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

***Third, the export of electricity.*** Today Uzbekistan is one of the largest suppliers of electricity to Afghanistan. Tashkent is actively promoting the construction of the necessary infrastructure (construction of substations and power transmission lines) in Afghanistan with the attraction of foreign investment and grants, where the contractors are companies from Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan is also one of the most important internet providers to Afghanistan.

***Fourth, the strengthening of political ties.*** To achieve its own economic goals, Uzbekistan has worked and will work with the beloved government of Afghanistan. Over the past 2 years, Tashkent has been actively consulting with both the official Kabul and representatives of the Taliban movement. Therefore, it is important for Tashkent to have close ties with real power and authority in Afghanistan and therefore Uzbekistan maintains high-level political relations with the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In this context, the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan to Kabul and the meetings of various delegations of the two countries at different levels prove the priority of economic issues in bilateral relations.

***Fifth, security and military coordination.*** After NATO forces entered Afghanistan, with their financial support, relations were established between the armed forces and security agencies of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Afghan security forces attended short-term refresher courses in Uzbekistan. Given the IMU's presence in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan has been able to forge mutually beneficial relationships with both the central government and the Taliban. To ensure the security of its own borders, Uzbekistan has established relations with the new government, and thereby are trying to prevent the penetration of extremist groups into its territory.

***Sixth, cooperation in the field of culture and education.*** Uzbekistan has developed and carried out a lot of work in the field of culture, science and education due to the presence of the Uzbek-speaking minority in the northern provinces of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan provides Afghan students, mainly ethnic Uzbeks, with quotas for their study in short courses in specially created training centers. The faculties of the Uzbek language were opened in the universities of the north-east of Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan provided them with literature. The Tashkent authorities have played an important role in the emergence and functioning of print and visual media in the Uzbek language in the north-east of this country and will continue this activity in the future.

### *Relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan*

The modern government of Afghanistan, like its predecessors, pursues certain goals in the system of relations with Uzbekistan, which can be summarized as follows:

***First, there are economic goals.*** The resilience of the Taliban government in Kabul relies heavily on

foreign aid and grants to bolster its position. In this vein, the expansion of economic ties with foreign countries, especially neighbors, is becoming important. Afghanistan is more interested in expanding ties with Uzbekistan due to the country's productive potential in agriculture and basic food production. In the north of Afghanistan, several Uzbek companies have been established with the participation of their capital, which produce clothing, food and other essential goods. Attracting investments to Afghanistan, including from Uzbekistan, will largely depend on the stability of this country.

***Second, joining the transport arteries of the northern neighbors.*** The northern direction is one of the most important vectors of Afghan trade, since it provides a connection between Afghanistan and the northern countries, and also reduces Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan and Iran. Transit through Afghanistan carries out mutual trade between the regions of Central on the one hand, and South Asia and the Middle East on the other, and brings a lot of income. Also, Afghan agricultural goods through the countries of Central Asia enter the markets of Kazakhstan and Russia, which also meets the long-term interests of Afghanistan. Therefore, taking into account the aforementioned interests, the new government of Kabul is also interested in strengthening relations with the northern countries, including Uzbekistan.

***Third, political goals.*** The Taliban government is seeking to expand political ties with other countries in order to gain international legitimacy. In this vein, Uzbekistan, as a northern neighbor, can play a positive role. This country recognizes any government that will control the situation in Afghanistan.

## Prospects for Uzbek-Afghan relations

In its foreign policy, Uzbekistan has designated the expansion of trade and economic ties with Afghanistan as a permanent priority. First of all, these are: attracting direct Afghan investments; export of electricity; construction of alternative transit routes; export of essential goods to Afghanistan, etc. Despite this, Uzbekistan severely suppresses illegal entry into its territory of citizens of this country and suppresses the influence of extremist organizations of Uzbek origin on the consciousness of its population. In the future, Uzbekistan sees two priorities in relations with the Afghan authorities: expanding economic ties and ensuring security. It is obvious that the Taliban government will retain the priorities of its predecessors in the system of relations with Uzbekistan.

### *3. Tajikistan's policy towards Afghanistan*

Tajikistan is the closest and kindred state of Afghanistan, which leaves its own typos in the expansion of interstate relations. Over the three decades of its independence, Tajikistan has consistently supported the central legitimate government of Afghanistan, which makes Dushanbe's position different from all other neighbors of Kabul. To understand the importance of expanding cooperation between countries, the following features should be noted:

***First, Afghanistan is a close and kindred country, and Farsi is spoken in both countries.*** Tajikistan and Afghanistan share a common culture and history. Tajiks make up 46% of the population of Afghanistan, which is several times larger than in Tajikistan itself. The Tajiks of Afghanistan are an

autochthonous population and are actively involved in all spheres of life in this country.

**Second, close intersocial relations:** Tajiks, unlike other peoples of Central Asia, understand Afghans without translation, many watch Afghan TV channels (the key media of Afghanistan create content in Persian) and are involved in the social media space of this country.

**Third, the interest in the events in Afghanistan in the society of Tajikistan has no opportunistic specifics**, i.e. does not appear in times of crisis, but is constantly covered by independent media and discussed in the Tajik segment of social networks. In general, the situation in Afghanistan is an object of constant attention of statesmen and public figures, intelligentsia, experts and ordinary people.

**Another important feature of Tajikistan's policy is that at the moment our country is the only neighbor of Afghanistan** that did not hold official negotiations with representatives of the Taliban movement and did not invite them to Dushanbe, but consistently, for more than 25 years, adhered to the approach (in including during the first rule of the Taliban (1996-2001) did not have official relations), that it is necessary to cooperate only with the central and legitimate government.

Tajikistan's position on Afghanistan differs from its neighbors in Central Asia and even Russia and China. At the meeting of Emomali Rahmon with the Pakistani Foreign Minister, the head of Tajikistan noted that in order to urgently solve problems in the field of politics and security, he considers it necessary to create an inclusive government in Afghanistan as soon as possible with the participation of representatives of all ethnic groups, primarily Tajiks, who make up about 46% of the population of Afghanistan. and Dushanbe will not recognize a government formed only by the Taliban.

Tajikistan's concern over the events in Afghanistan is due to the following factors:

- 1) for the entire period of independence, the states of Central Asia at the bilateral and multilateral levels designated countering international terrorism as a factor in ensuring regional security;
- 2) the practice of the Taliban, i.e. the violent seizure of power and the formation of an Islamic emirate, can activate marginal-minded elements who want to repeat this in their countries, including the states of Central Asia. The Taliban precedent significantly changes the security system in Central Asia, and challenges and threats will shift from a potential to a real one;
- 3) Tajikistan has the longest border with Afghanistan and today the northern provinces of this country are controlled by foreign fighters, including those of post-Soviet origin: IMU, Jamaat Ansorulloh, Islamic Movement of East Turkestan, Lashkari Tayyib, Al-Qaeda and others. The militants of Central Asian origin primarily threaten their countries and one cannot believe the statements of the Taliban, who, while claiming the opposite, in reality used them in their offensive campaign.

It should be emphasized that from the first days of independence, Tajikistan, in cooperation with Afghanistan, did not consider the ethnic component in its policy, and has consistently expanded relations with the legitimate central government of this country. The statements of the political leadership of Tajikistan on the situation in Afghanistan are aimed at ensuring the interests of all ethnic groups of multinational Afghanistan. As noted above, Tajiks in Afghanistan are an autochthonous population, they are not a national minority, but are widely represented in all spheres, in power, business, civil society, etc. such a peace will be fragile and the central government will carry out repressions against them. In this situation, the humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan will be even larger.

As for the Taliban themselves, they are, in fact, a Pashtuno-centric movement, and other peoples are poorly represented in their ranks, and therefore do not have the potential to influence their overall policy. In this vein, based on the statement of President Emomali Rahmon, we can conclude that Tajikistan recognizes the government that will be formed with the participation of all Afghan citizens at their will, and without the current domination of the Taliban. Thus, the position of official Dushanbe comes from a clear understanding of the national interests of Tajikistan and especially the priorities in the field of security.

Today, this position is one of the open and accurate among the neighboring countries and international actors regarding the ongoing processes in Afghanistan. Briefly, you can outline the goals of Tajikistan in relation to Afghanistan in the following aspects:

***First, the expansion of economic cooperation.*** Afghanistan is an important area of Tajikistan's foreign economic relations: trade is carried out both with this country and in transit to other states of South Asia and the Middle East. Thus, according to the Minister of Transport of Tajikistan, the Nizhniy Pyanj-Sherkhon-Bandar checkpoint is second only to the Fotekhobod-Oybek checkpoint in the north of Tajikistan in terms of workload, and a significant part of trade and cargo transportation both to Afghanistan and other countries of South Asia go through this point. Tajikistan exports part of its products and is also engaged in the re-export of goods produced in other post-Soviet countries.

***Second, the export of electricity and the interconnection of the energy systems of Central and South Asia.*** Tajikistan takes the leading place in the world in terms of existing reserves of environmentally friendly electricity. Dushanbe is a major supplier of electricity to Kabul and sells its products at a lower price than its neighbors. Another important project is the CASA-1000 transmission line, which will connect the countries of Central and South Asia through Afghanistan. Pakistan and India (in the future) are potential buyers of Tajikistan's electricity, which will be exported through the CASA-1000 power transmission line, although today different assessments appear about this line, but its relevance will remain. As the growth of the population and economies of these countries will lead to more substantial consumption of electricity. With the launch of the planned hydroelectric power plants in Tajikistan, it becomes possible to meet the needs of neighbors. If it is possible to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan, the needs of this country for electricity will increase several times, and compliance with the safety regime for the flow of electricity may further increase the volume of exports from Tajikistan.

***Third, cooperation in the field of transport and expansion of transit potential.*** For Tajikistan, it is important to expand the transit potential and the Afghan direction opens up great opportunities for its implementation. Through the territory of Afghanistan you can reach the seas, i.e. ports of Gwadar (Pakistan) or Chobahor (Iran). Both of these areas are of particular importance for Tajikistan. Another interesting project is the use of the Wakhan corridor, which separates Tajikistan and Pakistan. The construction of a highway between Chitral (Pakistan) and Ishkashim (Tajikistan) will connect the road infrastructure of both countries and will enable both Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries to enter the port of Gwadar. In this vein, Tajikistan is interested in expanding relations with the countries of South Asia, since this direction largely contributes to the achievement of the country's strategic goals: to get out of the communication deadlock and turn into a transit country.

***Fourth, security cooperation.*** This direction is the most important component of interstate relations. Since the political leadership of Tajikistan in all their meetings on bilateral and multilateral formats always focus on the situation in Afghanistan and the assistance of the world community to a peaceful



settlement of the protracted conflict.

***Fifth, cultural and humanitarian cooperation.*** Due to the proximity of language and culture, there is great potential for expanding cooperation in this area. People's diplomacy is highly developed between people of art, science, and the intelligentsia. Tajikistan is interested in expanding cultural and humanitarian cooperation with Afghanistan.

## Relations between Afghanistan and Tajikistan

The Taliban government has already “threatened” and “offered” cooperation several times because of the tough policy of Tajikistan. Therefore, it is difficult to guess what the nature and content of bilateral relations will be. But if relations develop in a natural way, then the 5 points listed above will also cover the interests of Afghanistan, but will be justified differently.

***First, the prospects for Tajik-Afghan relations.*** In its foreign policy, Tajikistan has designated the formation of a belt of security and confidence along the entire perimeter of its borders. Despite this, the violent seizure of power by the Taliban, in the opinion of Tajikistan, is a bad precedent, since during the era of their first rule they terrorized all the inhabitants of the country. The experience of Afghanistan and analysis of the situation show that it will be difficult for the Taliban to control the situation in this country, since, in fact, this movement is heterogeneous and there is already competition between their different factions. In this vein, the position of Tajikistan is aimed both at ensuring the national interests of Dushanbe itself and enhancing the potential for ensuring stability and security in Central Asia. As much as the international community wants to remain silent, there are forces inside Afghanistan that do not recognize the Taliban's authority and intend to fight them. With the Taliban as a dependent force, the rise of Pakistani and Iranian influence, as well as Russia and China, has been uncomfortable for many actors. Consequently, turbulent events will unfold in Afghanistan in the short term. In this vein, based on the statement of President Emomali Rahmon, we can conclude that Tajikistan recognizes the government that will be formed with the participation of all Afghan citizens at their will, and without the current domination of the Taliban.

***Second, in the field of security,*** new problems may appear in the short term: first of all, this will be associated with the penetration of radical ideas from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and other countries of Central Asia. It should be emphasized that the IMU and Ansorulloh, given the Taliban's conciliatory position, can increase the recruitment of citizens of the region (according to media reports, this is already happening), i.e. this threat is urgent. In the foreseeable future, if the Taliban strengthen their power in Afghanistan, then this country will be the center of a stretch of radical-minded residents from other countries, and the challenges and threats for all Central Asian states will grow. Therefore, the countries of the region, including key players, need to be prepared for any scenario of the development of events in Afghanistan and should not diminish or underestimate the potential of outgoing challenges and threats.

***Third, Tajikistan is ready for any turn of events in Afghanistan:*** over the past 20 years, a number of measures have been implemented to strengthen the borders in the southern direction. For many years, Tajik border guards have been crossing illegal border crossings, but after 2009, with the appearance of foreign fighters in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, the situation there began to change, and Tajikistan pays great attention to this issue. The infiltration of foreign fighters can be assessed as unlikely,

since: they are all, like the Taliban, outwardly dependent, i.e. are supported by regional players and will not take such a step without their corresponding growth;

1. There are not many of them in number, and the more bobble many of them got families;
2. Unpopularity of ideas and religious convictions of those groups of citizens who are accustomed to living in a secular system and prefer it;
3. The armed forces of Tajikistan have sufficient potential to repel threats from the southern direction.
4. Thus, the prospects for relations between Tajikistan and Afghanistan against the background of the forcible seizure of power by the Taliban look vague.

#### *4. Real and potential threats and challenges to the countries of Central Asia*

Issues related to the military-political situation in Afghanistan and new problems that have emerged in the field of security, actualize the thesis of the incompatibility of the political structures of Afghanistan with its neighbors. The countries of Central Asia are consistently forming secular nation-states, and a theocratic religious regime emerged in Afghanistan with the arrival of the Taliban. Thus, ideological differences on a fundamental basis create significant challenges for the countries of Central Asia.

***First, there are ideological problems.*** The new Afghan government is essentially religious and ethnic (over 90% are Pashtuns), where all positions are held by people only with theological education. It is obvious that the type of power system will be the same as it was in 1996-2001. In the future, this factor has the ability to "revive" various groups of citizens with a radical outlook within the states of the region. Although the export of religious ideology to the countries of the region is assessed as low, the violent seizure of power by an extremist group such as the Taliban is a dangerous precedent. Currently, according to the domestic legislation of the Central Asian countries, the Taliban movement is a banned terrorist organization.

***Second, there are security problems.*** The nature of extremist and radical groups is such that, after strengthening their positions and influence in the occupied territory, they can support similar forces and organizations abroad. In this vein, the Taliban are no exception and their guarantees are not durable. For the countries of Central Asia, in the medium term, the most important issue will be the strengthening of their own security capabilities. The factor of the presence of militants of Central Asian origin requires constant attention and monitoring of the situation in this country.

***Third, the restart of the so-called Great Game in Afghanistan.*** The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the expansion of the influence of other major players in the Afghan political field may trigger a policy of opposition and rivalry in this country and other neighboring regions. As noted above, today the topic of the branch of IS Khorasan is being actualized by major powers and powerful international media, which may indicate the beginning of a new geopolitical game in Afghanistan, which will have an impact on the foreign policy and strategy for ensuring the security of the Central Asian countries.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is obvious that the crisis situation in Afghanistan will persist in various forms, depending on many factors in the medium and long term. The Taliban government will have difficulty in maintaining its own system of power, and in the medium term, due to the realities of this country, it will not be able to continue to function in this format.

The experience of the Karzai and Ghani administrations shows that the Central Asian countries need to pay great attention to planning and taking comprehensive measures to strengthen the foundations of their statehood and security. A key lesson from the events in Afghanistan is that the assistance from external partners is always temporary and situational, and hence, the attention must be refocused on 'the local', including developing the capacity of the state and its citizens, who are interested in stability, security and sustainable development. In sum, a resilience approach, announced by the EU back in 2012, needs to be fully applied and implemented in the region, and Afghanistan in particular, to shift the focus on the needs of the local communities, and a bottom-up and around approach to local governance.