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Afghanistan in the context of Russian and Chinese projects

Abstract. *In this article, the authors consider issues related to the current situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of American troops. A country that has been in a state of political chaos for the past forty years, accompanied by a bloody civil war. Today, Afghanistan is characterized as a «fail state», a hotbed of global drug trafficking, corruption, and Islamic fundamentalism. The statement of the great Afghan thinker Muhammad Iqbal Lahori that «Afghanistan is the heart of Asia, and if the heart loses peace, then Asia will lose peace» has become prophetic. The situation in Afghanistan has shackled the attention of the world community to emerging problems. The chaos generated in Afghanistan has a significant impact on events in the world, and primarily affects the countries of Central Asia. Considering the second coming to power of the Taliban as a threat to the spread of religious extremism and fundamentalism in the region, we practically do not pay attention to the geopolitical consequences. The withdrawal of Americans from Afghanistan, in fact, means that the countries of Central Asia have no geopolitical alternative to the dominance of China and Russia in the region. Does this mean that the «new big game» and the struggle for dominance over Central Asia has finally ended not in favor of the Anglo-Saxon world? remains open. One thing is for sure that the current situation means that soon the strategy of the United States and the EU in relation to Central Asia will be revised.*

Keywords: *Afghanistan, China, Russia, Taliban, «geopolitical lock», Central Asia.*

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Introduction

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan has created geopolitical tensions in the Greater Central Asia region. No one in the world imagined that the fall of President Ashraf Ghani's power would be so rapid. Twenty years of American presence in the country, a trillion dollars spent, broad international support could not consolidate, or we can say legitimize power among ordinary Afghans. History is cyclical,

and so it was with the regime of Muhammad Najibullah, although it lasted for more than three years, and it was quite capable and controlled the situation in the country after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. The fall of President Ghani's power is no longer an urgent problem, the problem of the post-American structure of the country and the role of US geopolitical rivals in the region, such as Russia and China, comes to the fore.

Officially, Moscow [1] and Beijing [2] have not yet recognized the legitimacy of the new Afghan

government but have stated that they are ready to cooperate under certain conditions. For Russia and China, the Taliban movement has always been a threat to their national interests in the Central Asian region. Because their first coming to power in 1996 was met with apprehension by Moscow and Beijing and was recognized as a terrorist, and when the American campaign in Afghanistan began in 2001. China and Russia did not hinder, but on the contrary, sought to coordinate their actions together with the Americans.

Since the situation in the region has changed a lot, the withdrawal of Americans from Afghanistan, can it mean the closure of the American project «Greater Central Asia»? How will further developments develop in the region, will the region turn into a zone of exclusive interests of Moscow and Beijing? These issues are on the agenda for modern world politics, and in this study, we will try to reveal them.

Research methodology

As part of the study, the authors were based on the principles and paradigms characteristic of the school of political neorealism. In the work, a set of methods determined by the purpose and objectives of the study, as well as the logic of the study, were chosen as methodological foundations. The methods of scientific analysis, synthesis, and political forecasting and modeling are used in the work.

Russia's interests in Afghanistan

For Russia, the Taliban was a threat, but the Kremlin perceives Central Asia as a zone of exclusive influence, and CSTO allies and the last military bases in the post-Soviet space are mainly located there. Dislike of the Taliban in the mid-90s was because at that time Russia was in a political and economic crisis accompanied by the growth of pan-Islamism and ethnic separatism, in the Caucasus and the Volga region. The coming to power of the Taliban in 1996 was perceived as a threat to open a new front of confrontation on the southern borders. Russia's inaction in relation to the seizure of the northern regions of

Afghanistan and the subsequent withdrawal of the Taliban to the southern borders of the CIS. It was in the autumn of 1996 that the request of the Republic of Uzbekistan for assistance to Uzbekistan if Tashkent was attacked by the Taliban was ignored, which led to the suspension of Uzbekistan's activities within the CSTO.

The Taliban was a kind of «scarecrow» for the Central Asian republics, which tried to distance themselves from Moscow. The threat of penetration into Central Asia was beneficial to Russia, as it allowed the Kremlin to manipulate secular and authoritarian regimes in the region. The complicated strained relations between Russia and the Taliban did not allow Russia to take an active part in economic developments in the region. The support of the leaders of the Northern Alliance, the former main enemy of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and the deposed President Burhanuddin Rabbani, made it impossible for any dialogues between the Taliban and Russia. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the Taliban recognized the independence of Ichkeria [3] (the Chechen Republic) and arrested a Russian plane in Kandahar. Then, for the Central Asian republics, the Northern Alliance was positioned as the force that could stop the penetration of religious extremism into Central Asia, since both Uighur separatists and militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan fought on the side of the Taliban.

China's interests in Afghanistan

Over the centuries, China and Afghanistan had had warm and reciprocal relationships mostly in trade and economic affairs until the Soviet military troops invaded in 1979. During the US control (2001-2021) the territory interests of China were limited to the minimum only remaining to have the trade cooperation between the two countries [4]. However, the PRC has not followed any political priority, as it had no strong influence on the region. Chinese interests have been raised recently as the US military base announced to leave the Afghan territory. The official Beijing has changed its position from long-term disinterest

to close cooperation toward Afghanistan. In very deed, strategically Afghanistan would be an ideal corridor for Beijing to realize its "March to the West" policy by extending the economic and political influence on the Greater Central Asian region and the Middle East [5].

Sino-Afghan relations have experienced many types of stages since the September 11 terror attack in New York which affects China's role and place in the region. In the 2000s, many experts forecast that China would probably play an important role in the economic and political life of Afghanistan by implementing the BRI [6].

Biden's decision on the immediate withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan made China use the current situation and build up economic and security interests in the region. Economic interests emanate from China's high-tech industry, which is dependent on rare metals while Afghan soil is rich in lithium. Lithium is one of the main elements of big-capacity lithium-ion batteries, which are broadly applied in electric vehicles and renewable energy sources. Respectively, China is the world leader in producing lithium-ion battery sources products and may search for channels to negotiate with the Taliban to get a beneficial agreement on the rights of ownership of lithium mining areas.

Afghanistan's mineral deposits are estimated at approximately \$3 trillion, especially rich in rare earth, copper, chromium, bauxite, oil, natural gas, zinc, uranium, marble, and gold.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also one of the main priorities of Chinese economic interests in the region. If Beijing negotiates with Talibans, the BRI can be extended from Pakistan to Afghan territory via Peshawar-Kabul motorway accordingly providing new breath to BRI to get access to the Middle East and beyond easily and fast.

Discussion

We agree with the opinion that the real threat posed by Afghanistan has been exaggerated and is often economically and politically motivated [7]. The Taliban is not interested in turning Central Asia into an Islamic emirate, as they

are not able to do it. The Taliban does not have the strength or the means for this purpose. Any active intervention of the Taliban in the affairs of the Central Asian states may lead to conflict and the loss of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan. The image of the Taliban movement as a dangerous movement was formed for the geological purposes of the leading states. The Kremlin's desire to spread its influence in the world and the desire of the United States to constantly increase its military presence is the factor that determines the strategic importance of the region. Despite many statements that Russia is a partner of NATO and the United States in the «war on terrorism,» the Kremlin considered the presence of Americans in Afghanistan as part of a larger White House plan to encroach on Russia's security.

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is characterized as the main geopolitical failure of American policy in the Central Asian region, and, accordingly, the success of the policies of Russia and China. However, several experts believe that the White House was aware of the situation of the Afghan army, about the mood in society, and knew that the government of Ashraf Ghani would not last long, the only thing was unknown how long it could last. When President Joe Biden was asked if there would be a repeat of the events of 1975 when soon after the withdrawal of American troops, the Saigon regime fell under the blows of North Vietnamese troops. Then-President Biden said, «Taliban is not the North Vietnamese army [8]». According to the assumptions of the American military leadership, the Afghan government forces had to at least keep strategic facilities, major transport highways, and major cities under control. This would allow the government to ensure viability and continue to be an ally of the United States in the region.

The United States admitted the possibility of ties between the Taliban and Russia, experts reported, but Russia denied the existence of ties [9]. However, the Pentagon and the White House did not assume that China and Russia would move closer to the Taliban since there were the above differences. The United States was

confident that Russia would traditionally support the anti-Taliban forces in the face of ethnic Tajik and Uzbek formations, and thus waited for a repeat of the events of the fall of 1996.

So why did Russia and China enter close relations? Firstly, it is dictated by the geopolitical situation in the world. Increasing pressure on the PRC attempts to isolate it from the world market by building a belt of «countries loyal to the USA» around the PRC. The active exaggeration of events related to the «re-education camps» and the support of anti-Chinese sentiments in Muslim countries, and the continuation of economic sanctions against Russia, force Beijing and Moscow to change tactics in certain regions. Russia and China need a force that can ensure the security of transport corridors in Afghanistan, and now the Taliban are the only force that suits Moscow and Beijing. Afghanistan is primarily necessary for Russia as a transport corridor for the active penetration of Russian energy resources into the markets of India and Pakistan. Back in the mid-90s, Russia raised the question of the expediency of negotiating with the Taliban for the construction of a gas pipeline to India and Pakistan. The TAPI gas pipeline, from which Russia and China were «excluded», is becoming relevant, and the possibility of Moscow and Beijing participating in it is quite possible.

Results

When it comes to security interests, China takes a clear, consistent, and relatively restrained position on the Afghan issue [10]. On the issue of Afghanistan, the main views of China and the international community are largely the same, but China has its own independent policy, reflecting its own special interests, concerns, and priority goals of China. China has many concerns about Afghanistan, but the most visible one is the security and stability in Xinjiang. China maintains normal and good relations with the Afghan government and is actively involved in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, providing it with financial support and other assistance. China supports international assistance to Afghanistan but avoids direct

military intervention in Afghanistan. China rarely criticizes the US war in Afghanistan but doubts the effectiveness of the war and refuses to join the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) initiated by the United States. China opposes the Taliban because the Taliban are closely associated with East Turkestan - the Uyghur separatist forces - but China has been wary of the Taliban to avoid direct conflict with them. China supports Afghans in their own governance of Afghanistan and hopes that the Kabul process can go smoothly so that the Afghan government can enjoy more autonomy and take on more responsibility. At the same time, China is also preparing for various unexpected situations.

Faced with the challenges of the new situation, China needs to do everything it can to help Afghanistan achieve peace and stability, which is in the best interests of China. China needs to establish close relations not only with the central government of Afghanistan but also with local forces to strengthen the protection of China's investment and economic interests. China needs to maintain contact with the Taliban to be able to communicate when needed. Both the Afghan government and the United States hope the Taliban can come to terms. China's contact with the Taliban should not be a political issue, and it is an important way to exert constructive influence. China should intensify its consultations with neighboring countries and make full use of the role of multilateral mechanisms, especially the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China also needs to maintain cooperative relationships with other major countries to ensure a smooth transition in Afghanistan. On the question of Afghanistan, the common interests of the major powers are at a higher level. Finally, China needs to be prepared for unexpected situations.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is the most important factor in the formation of the Kremlin's permanent geographical strategy, which is mainly based on dominance on the continent of Eurasia and on the territory of the former Soviet Union, which is strategically important in the process

of maintaining Russia's identity and status as a «great power».

For Beijing, Afghanistan is primarily necessary to overcome the geo-economic barrier in the form of a «Loop of anaconda», with which the United States is trying to surround the territory of China. The Afghan direction is important in the sense that it is possible to lay a route through it to bypass the territory where the Kremlin or the White House traditionally have strong positions.

The question of the essence of the Taliban as a radical movement seeking to «capture» or establish an Islamic Emirate in the region recedes into the background. The Taliban understand that their rapid success was due to several factors, among which it is important that they were seen as a force that could stop the civil war in the country that has been going on for more than 40 years. In addition, the Taliban now need to consolidate their power in the country and gain recognition of legitimacy abroad. Based on this, it can be argued that the Taliban need to somehow negotiate with China to restore the economy because it is Beijing that can provide the

necessary investments to the Afghan economy. Dialogue with Moscow is necessary, as the Taliban are aware of the importance of the region for Moscow.

The situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of American troops, most experts bring to the fore, the issues of possible export of ideas of religious radicalism to the countries of the region, the issue of a humanitarian character, possible famine, and migration crisis in the region. However, at the same time leaving the issues of the «geopolitical lock» for the countries of the region not considered. The withdrawal of Americans from the region means the closure of the Greater Central Asia project. The transformation of the «new Afghanistan» into a zone of exclusive interests of Beijing and Moscow may mean that we are practically in the grip of China and Russia, and any processes in the region will proceed from the interests of these powers. Whether this can be considered a complete victory for the diplomacy of the Middle Kingdom and the Kremlin, of course, time will show.

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Ресей мен Қытайдың жобалары аясындағы Ауғанстан

Аңдатпа. Мақалада авторлар американдық әскерлер шығарылғаннан кейінгі Ауғанстандағы жағдайға қатысты мәселелерді қарастырады. Соңғы қырық жыл ішінде азамат соғысымен бірге саяси хаос жағдайына айналған ел, қазіргі таңда Ауғанстан «сәтсіз мемлекет», әлемдік есірткі трафиінің, сыбайлас жемқорлық пен исламдық фундаментализмінің ошағы ретінде сипатталады. Ауғанстанның ұлы ойшылы Мұхаммед Икбал Лахоридің «Ауғанстан-Азияның жүрегі, ал егер жүрек тыныштығынан айырылса, онда Азия бейбітшілікті жоғалтады» деген сөзі көріпкелділік болды деп айтуға болады. Ауғанстандағы туындаған жағдай әлемдік қоғамдастықтың назарын өзіне аударды. Ауғанстанда пайда болған хаос әлемдегі оқиғаларға және ең алдымен Орталық Азия елдеріне айтарлықтай әсер етеді деуге толықтай негіз бар. Талибанның билікке екінші келуін аймақтағы діни экстремизм мен фундаментализмнің таралу қаупі ретінде қарастыра отырып, біз іс жүзінде оның геосаяси салдарына назар аудармаймыз. Американдықтардың Ауғанстаннан кетуі іс жүзінде Орталық Азия елдерінде Қытай мен Ресейдің аймақтағы үстемдігіне геосаяси балама қалмағандығын білдіреді деуге болады. Бұл өз кезегінде «жаңа үлкен ойын» және Орталық Азия үшін күрес англо-саксон әлемінің пайдасына аяқталмағандығын білдіре ме? Бұл мәселе әлі өз жауабын таппағандығы анық. Қалыптасқан жағдай жақын болашақта АҚШ пен ЕО-ның Орталық Азияға қатысты стратегиясы қайта қаралатынын білдіреді деп айтуға болады.

Түйін сөздер: Ауғанстан, Қытай, Ресей, Талибан, «геосаяси құлп», Орталық Азия.

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Афганистан в контексте проектов России и Китая

Аннотация. В данной статье авторы рассматривают вопросы, связанные со сложившейся ситуацией в Афганистане после вывода американских войск. Это страна, которая вот уже на протяжении последних сорока лет находится в состоянии политического хаоса, сопровождающегося кровопролитной гражданской войной. Сегодня Афганистан характеризуется как «несостоявшееся государство», рассадник мирового наркотрафика, коррупции и исламского фундаментализма. Высказывание великого афганского мыслителя Мухаммеда Икбала Лахори о том, что «Афганистан – это сердце Азии, и если сердце лишится покоя, то Азия лишится мира» стали пророческими. Ситуация в Афганистане сфокусировала внимание мирового сообщества. Хаос, порождённый в Афганистане, оказывает существенное влияние на события в мире и в первую очередь на страны Центральной Азии. Рассматривая второе пришествие к власти талибов как угрозу распространения религиозного экстремизма и фундаментализма в регионе, мы практически не обращаем внимание на геополитические последствия. Уход американцев из Афганистана фактически означает, что у стран Центральной Азии не остается геополитической альтернативы доминированию Китая и России в регионе. Значит ли это, что «новая большая игра» и борьба за господство над Центральной Азией окончательно завершились не в пользу англо-саксонского мира? Вопрос остается открытым. Одно можно с уверенностью сказать: сложившаяся ситуация показывает, что в скорейшем будущем будут пересмотрены стратегии США и ЕС в отношении Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: Афганистан, Китай, Россия, «Талибан», «геополитический замок», Центральная Азия.

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