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University of World Economy and Diplomacy



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**Institute for Advanced
International Studies**



**Central Asia and European Union:
In Search of Sustainability**

**Edited by Mirzokhid Rakhimov, Akram Umarov and
Gulnoza Ismailova**

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Foreword

The world is at a historic crossroads. It is facing a complex of crises, from climate change and pandemics to food and energy insecurity, to bloody conflicts. We have so called polycrisis – the simultaneous occurrence of several catastrophic events. Tackling the unprecedented challenges, we all face today, requires active incorporation of unique capacity of parliamentarian diplomacy. It is precisely parliamentarians – representatives of people – can and should contribute to the enhancing trust and understanding between nations and civilizations.

Today, we stand at a pivotal moment where uniquely favorable conditions abound for advancing the partnership between Europe and Uzbekistan. Undoubtedly, unfolding deep political and economic reforms in Uzbekistan have created new environment for development of bilateral as well as multilateral ties in all spheres.

Last year President Sh. Mirziyoyev paid very successful visits to Paris and Berlin, Rome, and Budapest, met his colleges – heads of states and leaders of respected parliaments. Many high-level European dignitaries made a trip to Tashkent and had meetings in government bodies, civil society and academia.

Our cooperation with the European Union and its member states spans a broad spectrum, encompassing political dialogue, security cooperation, and robust economic and humanitarian ties. We are grateful for the continued support and assistance extended by our European partners in facilitating ongoing reforms in Uzbekistan.

Both sides share common objectives in combating extremism, religious radicalism, and international terrorism, recognizing the importance of collective action in preserving peace and stability.

President Sh. Mirziyoyev on multiple occasions emphasized our country's interest in expanding economic partnership exactly and primarily with European companies. Attracting their best practices and modern technologies will become an important factor of its modernization. On the other hand, it is with European companies that we intend to raise standards of business ethics and fight any form of corruption. The Government of Uzbekistan is committed to creating all

conditions necessary for fostering the growing presence of European business in Uzbekistan.

The present-day Uzbekistan is strikingly different from what it was just few years ago and the trend of changes is irreversible. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, it has embarked on brave and ambitious reforms aimed at ensuring genuine political and economic modernization.

There are no alternatives to building a secular, democratic state based on the rule of law, open civil society and socially oriented market economy. As the recent developments in many regions have demonstrated, non-modernized states are weak and vulnerable.

Needed actions have been taken to apply the principles of good-governance. The authorities at all levels are getting more and more transparent and accountable. The main task of government is getting more and more not only rule but provide best service to people and business.

Younger, open-minded and reform-oriented individuals, many of whom are graduates of the world's top universities, have been appointed to the key positions. The highest priority is human rights and freedoms.

Central to these renewals is expansion of the Uzbek Parliament's influence. Particular attention is being given to the establishment of a genuinely independent judicial system. An Anti-Corruption roadmap has been developed. Its focus is elimination of causes fueling corruption.

Society was awakened by reforms; people felt a sense of engagement and demonstrate highest rate of genuine political participation. The main goals of economic aspect of reforms are liberalization, support of entrepreneurship, improvement of investment climate.

Last year constitutional reform marked the beginning of a new stage in country's modernization. It will inevitably call for fundamental, more challenging, and complicated changes, for in-depth transformation including improve the quality of checks and balances system and increase the role of the parliament. Now we fully realize that genuine reforms are uneasy process. But we also fully understand that there is no way back. Transformations in Uzbekistan are irreversible.

There is no doubt that the new European Union's Central Asian Strategy as well as the Agreement on extended Partnership between EU and Uzbekistan will provide a new quality to our cooperation.

The European Union, with its immense industrial, scientific, and technological potential, occupies a central position in shaping the future of vast regions, including the Transatlantic, North Africa, the Middle East, and Eurasia. At the same time, Uzbekistan is actively shaping a proactive strategy amidst these global shifts. The rich legacy of multiculturalism in Uzbekistan, rooted in its pivotal role along the Great Silk Road, offers a solid foundation for building intercultural ties and long-term cooperation.

In this evolving landscape, Uzbekistan invites the European Union to join hands in shaping a new security paradigm, fostering regional stability, and intensifying exchanges in science, technology, culture, and human capital.

The leadership, government and parliament of the Republic of Uzbekistan are committed to strategic partnership with EU and its institutions, and each member countries.

Taking into account the above, it should be noted that this volume, "Central Asia and European Union: In Search of Sustainability" is a valuable resource for academics, enriching their knowledge of the relationship between Central Asia and the European Union. The work provides an extensive analysis of contemporary political, economic and social dynamics that shape interactions between regions. The authors of the collection present in-depth analysis and expert opinion on various aspects of relations between the EU and Central Asia. The book can also serve as a source of inspiration for further research and debate in academic circles, contributing to the development of a deeper understanding of contemporary geopolitics and interregional relations.

***Sodyq Safoev, Rector of the University
of World Economy and Diplomacy
(UWED), First Deputy Chairman of
the Senate of the Oliy Majlis***

Introduction

The relations between relations between the countries of Central Asia and the European Union have a peculiar history, and development trends and have gone through several stages. This book includes research on the theory and practice of contemporary relations between Central Asia and the European Union, carried out within the framework of the research project of the UWED Jean Monnet Center of Excellence for European Studies of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. The monograph includes sections of the authors of their countries in the region and examines the issues of comparative studies of regionalism, the EU policy towards Central Asia, the achievements and shortcomings of the European Union's strategy towards the region, the dynamics of interstate political, economic, cultural and humanitarian relations, challenges and threats to relations.

The first chapter by Khaydarali Yunusov discusses several internal and external factors that affect the development of bilateral and multilateral relations between the European Union and the Central Asian republics. These factors force the European Union to pursue a balanced policy in the region. The author pays special attention to the current state and proposes to upgrade these relations through the enhancement of externally and internally balanced policies.

Farkhod Tolipov's chapter focuses on various aspects of the problem of integration, including the applicability of a particular model implemented in other regions of the world. The regional integration in Centra Asia has gone through several stages in its development, with its successes and failures, accelerations and decelerations; it also had its supporters and opponents, optimists and pessimists. In theoretical terms, he considers the applicability of the European model and the EU experience in the Central Asian context.

Ulugbek Khasanov discusses the relationships between the European Union and the Central Asian based on the EU strategy for Central Asia and its neighbourhood policy. He analyses the need for EU experience in strengthening regional integration, considering the different levels of development of the countries of the region. The impact of the

EU's neighborhood policy is particularly notable, as is the shift in foreign policy from normative power to principled pragmatism.

Chapter of Nargiza Sodikova analyzing the formation and dynamics of EU Strategies for Central Asia in 2007 and 2019 testify to the serious intentions of not only the EU but also the countries of Central Asia in cooperation in the long term. The implementation of this strategy falls on the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, which does not allow the full implementation of the goals and objectives.

Mirzokhid Rakhimov discuss Central Asia and European Union in the context of diversity extra regional multilateral formats in Eurasia. It analyses recent tendencies in regional cooperation initiatives Central Asia, including challenges and opportunities of Central Asian intra and extra-multilateral initiatives and EU strategy toward Central Asia as case of wider regionalism. He argues that current and future Central Asian transformation will be prompted by interlink local, regional, trans-regional and global issues and challenges.

Alexey Stokov and Vladimir Paramonov examine the economic relations between Central Asia and the European Union, main trends, the nature of the activity of European financial institutions, projects and programs, the volumes and dynamics of trade in recent years.

Saida Aspandiyar and Saniya Nurdavletova discuss Multilingualism and multiculturalism issues in European Union and Central Asia, including Central Asia and European identity challenges and opportunities.

Mara Gubaydillina analyze the Environmental dimension and emphasizes that the Strategy covers issues related to the climate agenda, water resources, uranium mines, and biodiversity protection. The bilateral approach of the regional strategy of partnership between the EU and Central Asia to reduce environmental threats and the application of the effective experience of Europe can reasonably be considered a promising direction of policy for the protection of the environment and climate.

Zhansaule Zharmakhanova also discusses EU and CA cooperation in the field of environment, climate change and water resources. She mentioned the EU's 2019 strategy is a repackaged, albeit much more detailed, version of the previous one, with the core ideas of "connectivity" remaining the same for sustainable, inclusive and rules-based initiatives.

In their chapter Firdavs Kobilov and Mirzokhid Rakhimov discuss soft and smart power issues in the EU-CA relations. In particular, elaborating EU's soft and smart approaches and tools in Central Asia, its role in the internationalization of Central Asia higher education and digital diplomacy, as well as Central Asia's cultural diplomacy toward the EU.

Rustam Makhmudov analyzes external and regional players' policy toward Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power. Among them, are the USA, the EU, Central Asian countries, China, Russia, Iran, India, and Pakistan. The author argues there is still a need for a global agenda for the official recognition of the new Afghan authorities, which is based on the principles of inclusiveness in the formation of the government and building the political system of Afghanistan, respecting human rights, women and girls.

Andrey Chebotarev's chapter discusses security Issues in the EU-Central Asia relations, which demonstrates the high significance of its presence in this region through the mechanisms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The adoption of the new EU regional strategy in 2019 is one of the clearest indications of all this. In turn, its implementation is favored by the process of development of intra-regional multilateral cooperation through the annual Consultative Meetings of the Heads of Central Asian States since 2018. The document "The European Union and Central Asia: New Opportunities for Strengthening Partnership" particular attention is paid to the issues of strengthening regional security as an important factor in maintaining the viability of Central Asia.

Young researcher Yulduz Kushanova discusses Central Asian-French relations. Central Asia is a very important strategic region for France, with high concentration of natural and human resources and very good industrial and tourism potential. Central Asia is also of interest to the French Republic and despite the different levels of relations, France is one of the main trading partners in Europe for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

To sum up, this joint book is intended for researchers and students, who are interested in relations between the European Union and the countries of Central Asia. It is necessary to extend academic partnership

in the study of CA-EU relations, as well as wider interdisciplinary approaches to research contemporary international and interregional relations.

Editors

11 Approaches of the Central Asian countries, the EU and leading external and regional players to Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power

Rustam Makhmudov

Introduction

The return to power of the Taliban movement in August 2021 created for the countries of Central Asia, the European Union a necessity to adjust and even transform their approaches, taking into account the new situation and the interests of the largest global and regional players involved in the game around Afghanistan.

Taking into account that the central Afghan authorities, headed by President Ashraf Ghani, showed a complete inability to maintain their positions as a system-forming resistance force, and such regional leaders from the former Northern Alliance as Abdul-Rashid Dostum and Ismail Khan no longer had the same military and financial capabilities, as well as broad popular support, many external actors, including the Central Asian countries and many politicians in the EU, began to gradually come to the conclusion that the Taliban, most likely, came to power in earnest and for a long time.

The result of all this was their attempts to search for options for cooperation with the Taliban (except for Tajikistan so far) or to establish contacts with them, who, in turn, are trying to demonstrate that they are a responsible Afghan military and political force capable of stabilizing the situation in the country and becoming a guarantor of regional security in its Afghan segment.

The Range of New Afghan Strategies of the Central Asian States and the European Union

For the states of Central Asia, the return of the Taliban as the leading political force meant another adjustment of their foreign policy approaches to this country over the past thirty years. After gaining independence in 1991, the states located north of the Amu Darya saw five serious epochs of transformation of the internal political situation in Afghanistan.

The first transformation took place in 1992, when President Muhammad Najibullah was overthrown, which meant the end of the civil war of 1989-1992. and the establishment of power by the group of Mujahideen who formed the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA) led by Burhanuddin Rabbani.

However, the formation of the ISA did not become the beginning of the stabilization of the country, but was only a prologue to a new civil war of 1992-1996. At its first stage, it was between former allies - Ahmad Shah Massoud, Abdul-Rashid Dostum, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Abdul-Rasul Sayyaf, Yunus Khalis, Mohammad Nabi and others.

At the second stage, the Taliban movement, founded by Mullah Muhammad Omar, joined this struggle. The Taliban managed to defeat the Gulbuddin Hikmatyar group in 1995, to capture in 1996 Kabul and establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), which was officially recognized by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The Taliban emirate lasted until 2001, when it was overthrown by an international coalition led by the United States, assisted by the commanders of the Northern Alliance. As a result of the military operation, another Islamic State of Afghanistan was formed, which existed for 20 years with the military and financial support of the West, until it was demolished by the Taliban through a long guerrilla campaign, the success of which was determined by the withdrawal of Western military troops.

It is obvious that the states of Central Asia each time had to revise their strategies regarding Afghanistan in the field of security, economy, trade, as well as re-build the lines of diplomatic behaviour with intra-Afghan players, and therefore the events of August 2021 became a serious challenge for them, as the epoch which lasted for two decades came to end.

Outwardly, *Turkmenistan* amongst the Central Asian countries reacted most calmly to the return to power of the Taliban. This is apparently due to the fact that in the previous period when the Taliban was in power, rather constructive relations were established between them and Ashgabat. In addition, Turkmen diplomats have likely been in active

contact with the Taliban since it became clear that the US would be completing its mission in Afghanistan.

This is denoted by the fact that, while many external players were pondering their next steps, the Consul General of Turkmenistan in Mazar-i-Sharif had already met with the head of the Taliban representation in Balkh province almost immediately after the movement took Kabul²⁵⁰. Also, there have been quickly established contacts between the Turkmen authorities and the Taliban on the issues of protecting the state border, ensuring customs, sanitary, phytosanitary and other types of control and supervision carried out when moving goods across the border. No major changes were noticed in the work of the Imamnazar-Akina and Serhetabad-Turgundi border checkpoints.²⁵¹

In the following months, several significant events took place at the level of political contacts between Ashgabat and the Taliban. First of all, it should be noted the congratulatory message of the Taliban on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the independence of Turkmenistan on behalf of the Prime Minister of the IEA, Mulla Mohammad Hasan Akhund, in which he called Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov "dear brother" and thanked him for his help and willingness to cooperate.²⁵²

The second significant event was the interview of the former President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, which he gave on October 1, 2021 to TASS - Russian news agency. He stated in it, that Ashgabat is ready to work closely with "the new government of Afghanistan to further strengthen the traditionally fraternal Turkmen-Afghan relations, provide the necessary assistance in order to normalize

²⁵⁰ The Consul General of Turkmenistan in Mazar-i-Sharif held a meeting with the head of the Balkh province // MFA of Turkmenistan, August 18, 2021: <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2751> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁵¹ Message for the media // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, August 18, 2021: <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2750> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁵² "Талибан" поздравил президента Туркменистана, назвав "дорогим братом" //ТенгриNews, 29 сентября 2021: https://tengrinews.kz/world_news/taliban-pozdravil-prezidenta-turkmenistana-nazvav-dorogim-449927/ (access date: 10.04.2022).

the situation in this country as soon as possible and ensure its sustainable socio-economic revival." ²⁵³

And, finally, one can consider as the third significant event the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashid Meredov to Kabul on October 30-31, 2021, where he held meetings with Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund, Deputy Prime Minister Mavlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi and Minister of Défense Mavlawi Mohammad Yakub . During the talks, the Head of the Turkmen Foreign Ministry said that the presence of representatives of the Islamic Emirate at international meetings already appears to be necessary. ²⁵⁴

The created positive political climate in bilateral relations allows Ashgabat to make attempts to give another impetus to the implementation of strategically important for the Turkmen economy infrastructure projects, primarily the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, especially since the new Afghan authorities themselves demonstrate high interest in its implementation. As Minister of Défense of the Afghan Transitional Government Mavlawi Mohammad Yaqub noted at a meeting with Rashid Meredov, Kabul will pull out all stops to ensure the security of infrastructure and economic projects between the two countries, and since national security is ensured, now is the best time to implement them. ²⁵⁵

As subsequent events showed, Turkmenistan and the Taliban seem to be serious about getting the construction of TAPI up and running as soon as possible. On February 28, 2022, the Taliban presented to the Ambassador of Turkmenistan to Afghanistan Khoja Ovezov and the Director General of the TAPI project Muhammetmyrat Amanov the TAPI gas pipeline security plan. In turn, the Turkmen side announced the

²⁵³ Туркмения заявила о готовности работать с новым правительством Афганистана // Информационное агентство ТАСС, 1 октября 2021: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12556539> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁵⁴ Attendance of Representatives of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in International Meetings is Urgently Needed: Turkmen Foreign Minister // Bakhtar News Agency, October 10, 2021: <https://bakhtarnews.af/attendance-of-representatives-of-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-in-international-meetings-is-urgently-needed-turkmen-foreign-minister/> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁵⁵ Ibidem

completion of construction work on the Turkmen section and the intention to start construction of the Afghan section in the near future.²⁵⁶

The TAPI gas pipeline should send the resources of the supergiant “Galkynysh” field with reserves of more than 20 trillion cubic meters of natural gas to Pakistan and India. The planned pumping capacity is 33 billion cubic meters per year. The cost of the project is up to \$10 billion. At one time, the ADB, EBRD, IDB, the Saudi Development Fund, and others announced their intention to participate in financing TAPI, but the political events that took place in Afghanistan in August 2021 put issue of international financing of the project in limbo.

For Ashgabat, TAPI is of strategic importance, as it will allow it to enter the markets of South Asia, which are experiencing a growing energy shortage and create a constant source of currency resources, as well as reduce its dependence on China, which has become almost the only major buyer of Turkmen natural gas.

In general, it can be stated that it is not important for Turkmenistan which government is in power in Afghanistan - secular or religious, the main thing is that it is recognized by the international community, controls the situation in the country and is interested in building TAPI and implementing other infrastructure projects that meet Turkmen long-term interests.

The fundamental changes in Afghanistan were also perceived quite calmly by *Uzbekistan*, although shortly before the Taliban seized Kabul, the sharp aggravation of the military and political situation in the Afghan military and political field nevertheless caused certain concern in Tashkent. This is denoted by the participation of Uzbek military units in the exercises at the “Harb-Maidon” training ground, together with the military from Tajikistan and the Russian Federation, which took place on August 5-10, 2021.

However, when the Taliban seized the Afghan capital on August 15, 2021, Uzbekistan showed a rather calm perception of the event. Already

²⁵⁶ TAPI security plan shared with Turkmenistan // The Kabul Times, 28.02.2022: <https://thekabultimes.gov.af/tapi-security-plan-shared-with-turkmenistan/> (access date: 30.05.2022)

on August 25, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, during his working trip to the Navoi region, stated that Uzbekistan predicted events of that kind in Afghanistan two years ago and therefore instructions were given to establish a dialogue with the Taliban, although at that time no country had yet communicated with them. The Uzbek leader also announced that he received clear security guarantees from the Head of the political office of the Taliban in Doha (Qatar), Mullah Abdul Ghani Barodar, while noting that the country's defence power is ready for any development of the situation.²⁵⁷

The positive approach of Uzbekistan to the new power landscape in Afghanistan was shown by the speech of Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the SCO summit held on September 17, 2021, where he proposed to unfreeze Afghan state assets in foreign banks in the amount of up to 9.5 billion dollars against the backdrop of the unfolding humanitarian crisis in that country.²⁵⁸ The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan also proposed to regularly hold high-level meetings in the SCO-Afghanistan format with the involvement of observer states and dialogue partners.²⁵⁹ Further, speaking already at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2021, the President of Uzbekistan called for the creation of a permanent committee on Afghanistan under the UN, not to allow the isolation of this country and not leave it alone with the problems that have arisen.²⁶⁰

The visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan Abdulaziz Kamilov to Kabul on October 7, 2021, during which he met with Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan

²⁵⁷ "We predicted that these events would happen." The President on the situation in Afghanistan // *Gazeta.uz*, 27 August 2021: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/08/27/afghanistan-new/> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁵⁸ Uzbekistan proposed to unfreeze Afghanistan's assets in foreign banks. What is known about them? // *Gazeta.uz*, September 17, 2022.: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/09/17/frozen-assets/> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁵⁹ Chairmanship of the SCO passed to Uzbekistan // Official website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, September 17 2022: <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/4620> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁶⁰ Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly // Official website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, September 21, 2021: <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/4632> (access date: 10.04.2022).

Amir Khan Muttaki and discussed the issues of bilateral economic cooperation in the field of transit of goods, energy, trade and reconstruction of the airport in Mazar-i-Sharif, can be ranked as a milestone event for the establishment of relations between Tashkent and the Taliban.²⁶¹

The main approaches of Uzbekistan to the changes that have taken place in Afghanistan have already been formed by December 2021 and announced by Abdulaziz Kamilov on December 8, 2021 at the second ministerial meeting in the Italy-Central Asia format. The Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan voiced the position of the country and several fundamentally important proposals.

First of all, he noted the need for a constructive dialogue with the new authorities of Afghanistan in order to avoid the re-transformation of this country into a so-called "rogue state" and provide a humanitarian corridor to Afghanistan in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, as well as take measures to lift sanctions, unfreeze Afghanistan's international assets and help in restoration of the country's banking system.

He also outlined the importance of launching the development of a post-conflict strategy for Afghanistan and highlighting as a priority its more active involvement in regional economic integration processes and the implementation of socio-economic projects in this country. In addition, Uzbekistan expects that the new Afghan authorities will fulfil the following international obligations: the creation of an inclusive government, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, preventing the deployment of terrorist groups in the country, ending contacts with them, maintaining good-neighbourly relations with the countries of the region, observing fundamental rights and human freedoms, including women and national minorities.²⁶²

²⁶¹ Foreign Ministers of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan met in Kabul // *Gazeta.uz*, October 7, 2021: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/10/07/uzb-afg/> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁶² Узбекистан рассчитывает на содействие Италии в вопросах региональной безопасности // *Gazeta.uz*, 9 декабря 2021. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/12/09/italy/> (access date: 10.04.2022).

Speaking of the strategic approaches of Uzbekistan in building relations with the new Afghan authorities, one should highlight their pragmatic nature. They focus not on contentious issues, such as the return of military aircraft and helicopters previously moved to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan by former ISA Air Force pilots, or Afghan debts for the supplied Uzbek electricity, but on long-term economic issues that can bring mutual benefits.

First of all, we are talking about the construction of the Termez - Mazar-i-Sharif - Kabul - Peshawar railway, which should become a strategically important transport corridor connecting the economies of South and Central Asia. The implementation of this project will reduce the delivery time of goods from Pakistan to Uzbekistan from 35 to 3-5 days, and the cost of transporting one 20-pound container along the Tashkent-Karachi route will be \$1,400-1,600 compared to \$2,600-3,000 spent on delivery from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas to Tashkent.²⁶³

Of course, Afghanistan will also benefit from this railway, both in the form of transit fees and its inclusion in the vast railway and trade networks of the Eurasian continent. The new Afghan authorities demonstrate their interest in this matter, as evidenced by their participation in the conference held on December 6-7, 2021. in Tashkent, a trilateral Uzbek-Afghan-Pakistani meeting to discuss the project for the construction of the trans-Afghan railway.²⁶⁴

In principle, the Taliban, since returning to power, has demonstrated a positive attitude towards building constructive and mutually beneficial relations with Tashkent, as evidenced by the congratulatory message on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Uzbekistan's independence, in which it was called by the movement a "brotherly country".²⁶⁵

Such a major regional player as *Kazakhstan* at first perceived the fundamental changes that took place in Afghanistan with extreme

²⁶³ «Мазари-Шариф — Пешавар»: коридор в новое будущее Центральной и Южной Азии // Gazeta.uz, 11.02.2021: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/02/11/route/> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁶⁴ В Ташкенте состоялись международные переговоры по Трансафганскому коридору // АКЦИОНЕРНОЕ ОБЩЕСТВО О‘ЗБЕКISTON TEMIR YO‘LLARI, 09.12.2021: https://railway.uz/ru/informatsionnaya_sluzhba/novosti/26145/ (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁶⁵ O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Tashqi ishlar vazirligining rasmiy vakili Yusup Kabuljanov // Telegram, 01.09.2021: <https://t.me/mfaspokesperson/443> (access date: 10.04.2022).

concern, as indicated by the message to the people of the republic, which President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev addressed on September 1, 2021. He stated in it that “The situation in Afghanistan, the general increase in global tension put before us the task of rebooting the military-industrial complex and the Military Doctrine. Strengthening the defence capability, increasing the efficiency of response to threats should also become the priorities of state importance.” According to him, “The modelling of risks coming from outside has become highly relevant. There should be carried out stress tests, worked out scenarios, and on their basis, there will be developed and adjusted the state apparatus action plans.”²⁶⁶

Two days later, participating in the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF), the President of Kazakhstan focused the participants' attention on the threats that could be caused by the \$85 billion worth weapons left behind by the Americans when leaving Afghanistan, as well as the problem of refugees. In the same place, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev outlined the position of Nur-Sultan on the international recognition of the Taliban government. “We proceed from the fact that it is necessary to judge by deeds, not by words. Our wishes boil down to ensuring that a lasting peace is established in this country,” he said. He also pointed out that Kazakhstan adheres to a single line with Russia and the CSTO member states.²⁶⁷ The Kazakh leader made a very important remark that showed how Ak-Orda perceived the power of the Taliban at that time: "Being realists, we constate that the Taliban came to power in this country for a long time."²⁶⁸

As for the issue of official recognition of the Taliban government, the Kazakh authorities are trying not to rush, focusing on the positions of leading international players. There are two key provisions in the Kazakh

²⁶⁶ Message of the Head of State Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to the people of Kazakhstan // Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 01.09.2021: <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/poslanie-glavy-gosudarstva-kasym-zhomarta-tokaeva-narodu-kazahstana-183048> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁶⁷ Tokayev: More than \$85 billion worth weapons left in Afghanistan after the US left // Anadolu Agency, 03.09.2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/токаев-в-афганистане-после-ухода-сша-осталось-вооружение-более-чем-на-85-млрд/2354371> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁶⁸ Tokayev said that the Kazakh embassy came into contact with representatives of the Taliban // TASS news agency, 03.09.2021: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12295757> (access date: 10.04.2022).

position. Firstly, there are two resolutions of the UN Security Council dated in 2003 and 2011, which recognized this movement as illegal, and therefore, in terms of recognizing the Taliban, the position of the permanent members of the UN Security Council will play a decisive role.²⁶⁹ The second provision is that the new government of Afghanistan must be inclusive, respect and protect the rights of ethnic groups, women and children, and fight terrorism and drug trafficking.²⁷⁰

At the same time, by mid-October 2021, pragmatism is beginning to prevail in the position of Kazakhstan, and it was shown by the working visit of a delegation led by the Special Representative of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan for international cooperation Yerzhan Kazykhan to Kabul on October 17. He met with Abdul Ghani Baradar and Amir Khan Muttaki. The main issues of their negotiations were the provision of humanitarian assistance by Kazakhstan to the Afghan people and the restoration of trade and economic ties.²⁷¹

The diplomatic activity of Nur-Sultan in the Afghan direction somewhat decreased in early 2022 due to the January unrest in Almaty, however, in general, the main provisions of the Kazakh political line towards the Taliban seem to be quite clear and pragmatic.

In the context of the formation of relations between Kazakhstan and the Taliban, the fact of the reaction of representatives of the new Afghan authorities to the January riots in Almaty is interesting. Thus, Foreign Ministry spokesman Abdul Kahar Balkhi posted the following message on Twitter: “Afghanistan is closely following the current situation in Kazakhstan and, as a close neighbour and trading partner, is concerned about the recent unrest there. He calls on the government and protesters

²⁶⁹ Tokayev spoke about an important circumstance regarding the Taliban movement // TengriNews, 03.09.2021: https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/tokaev-rasskazal-vajnom-obstoyatelstve-dvijeniyu-taliban-447570/ (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁷⁰ President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev received Foreign Minister of North Macedonia Buyar Osmani // Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 10.09.2021: <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/prezident-kasym-zhomart-tokaev-prinyal-ministra-inostrannyh-del-severnoy-makedonii-buyara-osmani-1081813> (access date: 10.04.2022).

²⁷¹ Tokayev's special envoy met with representatives of the Afghan administration // TengriNews, 10/17/2021: https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/spetspredstavitel-tokaeva-vstretilsya-predstavitelyami-451435/ (access date: 10.04.2022).

to resolve their controversy through dialogue and peaceful means and bring peace and stability to the country."²⁷²

Kyrgyzstan's initial reaction to the Taliban's overthrow of Ashraf Ghani's government was also marked by a high level of concern. September 16, 2022 at the CSTO summit, President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov said that the military and political situation in Afghanistan could negatively affect the security of Central Asia, and the formation of a theocratic state in the region negatively affects the current situation.²⁷³ Nevertheless, he recognized the need to engage in dialogue with the new Afghan authorities in order to stabilize the situation in that country as soon as possible. Regarding the issue of the structure of the political system of Afghanistan, Sadyr Japarov expressed hope for the formation of an inclusive government.²⁷⁴

Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Taalatbek Masadykov spoke about the likelihood of Bishkek's official recognition of the power of the Taliban. According to him, "Kyrgyzstan will not separately - without the CSTO countries - make a decision on recognizing the new Afghan government."²⁷⁵ It should be noted that Taalatbek Masadykov personally accompanied the batch of Kyrgyz humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, which he handed over in Kabul to Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar on September 23, 2021.²⁷⁶

Unlike the above-mentioned four states of Central Asia, *Tajikistan* adopted the toughest stance against the Taliban, which created a line of

²⁷² The Taliban called for a peaceful settlement in Kazakhstan // Kommersant, 01/06/2022: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5156049> (access date: 11.04.2022).

²⁷³ Japarov is concerned about the security of Central Asia because of Afghanistan // Sputnik Tajikistan, 16.09.2022: <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210916/zhaparov-csto-afghanistan-1042292802.html> (access date: 11.04.2022).

²⁷⁴ Japarov: it is necessary to conduct a dialogue with the Taliban // Sputnik Tajikistan, 16.09.2022: <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210916/kyrgyzstan-zhaparov-afghanistan-odkb-1042293388.html> (access date: 11.04.2022).

²⁷⁵ Taalatbek Masadykov: Kyrgyzstan is on a position of observer in the attitude to Taliban // Information agency 24 Kg, 24.11.2021: https://24.kg/vlast/214744_taalatbek_masadykov_kyrgyzstan_napozitsii_nablyudatelya_pootn_osheniyu_ktalibanu/ (access date: 11.04.2022).

²⁷⁶ The delegation of the Kyrgyz Republic delivered humanitarian aid to Afghanistan // Official website of the Presidents of the Kyrgyz Republic, 09/23/2021: http://president.kg/ru/sobytiya/20735_delegaciya_kirgizskoy_respubliki_dostavila_v_afganistan_gumanitarnuyu_pomosh (access date: 11.04.2022).

tension both between Dushanbe and Kabul, and within the region. The official Tajik position is that Afghan Tajiks should take a worthy position in the future government of Afghanistan, since they make up more than 46% of the population of this country and Dushanbe will never recognize “any other government formed in this country through oppression and persecution, without taking into account the position the entire Afghan people, especially all its national minorities.”²⁷⁷ The Tajik side stands for the formation of a truly inclusive government.

Dushanbe's tough stance predictably led to a Taliban backlash, which was also fuelled by Dushanbe's support for the Panjshir Valley resistance movement led by Ahmad Massoud Jr. and former Vice President Amrullah Saleh. On September 26, 2021, Abdul Ghani Baradar accused Tajikistan of interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and stated in an interview with Al-Jazeera that "for every action there is a reaction."²⁷⁸ Abdul Salam Hanafi also said that interference by one country in the internal affairs of its neighbour cannot serve anyone's interests” and assured that Afghanistan wants to have good relations with Tajikistan.²⁷⁹

At some point, it even went so far as to demonstrate the power capabilities of the parties. Emomali Rahmon received a parade of military personnel, border guards and law enforcement officers in the Darvaz region of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region bordering Afghanistan. In turn, the Taliban, according to media reports, announced the transfer of military units of the Taliban to the border with Tajikistan.²⁸⁰

The Tajik-Afghan diplomatic squabble continued in early 2022. At the CSTO online summit on January 10, 2022 President Emomali

²⁷⁷Rahmon proposed to create an inclusive government of Afghanistan with the participation of Tajiks // Anadolu Agency, 25.08.2021: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/мир/рахмон-предложил-создать-инклюзивное-правительство-афганистана-с-участием-таджиков/2345718> (access date: 11.04.2022).

²⁷⁸ The Taliban accused Tajikistan of interfering in the affairs of Afghanistan // RIA Novosti, 26.09.2021. <https://ria.ru/20210926/tadzhikistan-1751870494.html> (access date: 11.04.2022).

²⁷⁹ Mikhail Kotlyar "These brave people wear vests with explosives" // Gazeta.ru, 02.10.2021: https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2021/10/02_a_14044945.shtml (access date: 11.04.2022).

²⁸⁰ Taliban to deploy suicide bombers to Afghanistan's borders by Najibullah Lalzoy // The Khaama Press News Agency, 02.10.2021: <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-to-deploy-suicide-bombers-to-afghanistans-borders-4574567547/> access date: 12.04.2022).

Rahmon proposed creating a security belt around Afghanistan due to the aggravation of the situation on the Tajik-Afghan border, along which the clashes between the Taliban themselves are going on.²⁸¹ He also noted that only on the CSTO borders there are located more than 6 thousand ISIS militants and 40 camps and terrorist training centres in the northeastern provinces of Afghanistan.²⁸²

In turn, Deputy Minister of Information and Culture of the interim Taliban government, Bilal Karimi, wrote on Twitter on this matter: “We strongly reject the assertion of the President of Tajikistan that a number of camps for destructive activities have been created in Afghanistan in the areas bordering Tajikistan.” He laid the blame for what is happening on “some Afghan fugitives and individuals” who are “transmitting to international players and neighbouring countries false information that is in no way true.” Bilal Karimi assured neighbouring countries, including Tajikistan, that nothing would threaten them from the territory of Afghanistan.²⁸³

Thus, relations between Tajikistan and the Taliban have every prospect of becoming a long-term factor of tension in the region, in contrast to the Uzbek and Turkmen areas, which are becoming platforms for strengthening Central Asian-Afghan trade and economic ties and security.

For the *European Union*, the establishment of the power of the Taliban movement, like for the countries of Central Asia, meant the need for a serious adjustment of its Afghan strategy.

The previous strategy aimed to assist Afghanistan, given that the country was led by the governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, as well as the fact that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was in the country from 2001-2021. It was during this period that the EU provided Afghanistan with 4 billion euros of development assistance, thus

²⁸¹ Rahmon proposed to create a security belt around Afghanistan // RIA Novosti, 10.01.2022: <https://ria.ru/20220110/afganistan-1767159601.html> (access date: 12.04.2022).

²⁸² Rahmon announced the strengthening of the positions of IS in Afghanistan // RIA Novosti, 10.01.2022: <https://ria.ru/20220110/odkb-1767149841.html> (access date: 12.04.2022).

²⁸³ The Taliban answered Rahmon about terrorist camps near the CSTO borders // Sputnik Tajikistan, 11.01.2022. <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20220111/taliby-rahmon-terroristy-odkb-1044722756.html> (access date: 12.04.2022).

making Kabul the largest beneficiary of this type of European financial assistance in the world.

The 2014-2020 there was a program at the heart of the EU's development assistance strategy in Afghanistan, containing three priority sectors: 1. Peace, stability and democracy; 2. Sustainable growth and jobs; 3. Basic social services.

All of this was in turn aligned with The Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, which was the governmental five-year strategic development plan for achievement of self-sufficiency by Kabul. The European Union has also made a major contribution to The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, providing critical support to the poorest sections of Afghan society and helping the government build and strengthen institutions.²⁸⁴

However, it was obvious that due to the change of power in the country, such programs could no longer be implemented. The halt in the allocation of assistance for the development of Afghanistan can be considered as an indicator of a change in approach. Earlier, in 2020, the EU planned to provide assistance to this country in the amount of 1.2 billion euros in the period of 2021-2025.

After August 15, 2021, the EU faced completely different questions. First of all, the question over how to respond to the victory of the Taliban at the official level. The first reaction followed on August 17 - EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, during a press conference following an emergency meeting of EU foreign ministers, said the following: “We will need to build a dialogue with the authorities located in Kabul, whoever they may be. The Taliban have won the war and we should have a dialogue with them.”

At that time, he identified two priority goals in the EU's dialogue with the Taliban. The first is the evacuation of EU citizens and those Afghan citizens who have worked with the Europeans for 20 years and

²⁸⁴ International Partnerships, Afghanistan // European Commission, 2018-2021: https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/afghanistan_en#:~:text=The%20EU's%20overall%20strategic%20objectives,Basic%20social%20services (access date: 12.04.2022).

want to leave the country. The second task is to prevent the emergence of a new migration crisis due to the situation in Afghanistan.²⁸⁵

Seventeen days later (September 2-3, 2021), at the meeting of EU Foreign Ministers in Brdo (Slovenia), there was developed the first formula for Europe's relations with the Taliban - "not to recognize the Taliban, but also not to stop contacting them on certain conditions." We can note several statements made at the meeting that laid the foundations for this model of political perception of the Taliban by the EU.

For example, German Foreign Minister Heiko Masa said that "Afghanistan has a new reality, whether we like it or not. And we don't have time to lick our wounds now. The European Union has a role to play, and we must act quickly to do so." We can also note the statement of Josep Borrell: "In order to support the people of Afghanistan, we will need to maintain contacts with the new government in Afghanistan. But this does not mean recognition, it will only be operational contacts."

As a result of the meeting, five criteria were announced that will determine the level of activity of EU contacts with the Taliban.

1. Whether or not Afghanistan will again become a haven for international terrorism and whether the export of terrorism to other countries will begin;

2. Respect for human rights, in particular women's rights, the rule of law and freedom of the press;

3. Formation of an inclusive government with the participation of as many different groups of Afghan society as possible;

4. Respect by the Taliban for the procedure of delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid;

5. Compliance by the Taliban with the obligation to allow foreign nationals and Afghans who wish to leave the country.

Also, as a result of the meeting, an agreement was reached on the organization of the EU representation in Kabul, depending on the security conditions.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ EU recognizes Taliban victory in Afghanistan // RBC.ru, 17.08.2021: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/08/2021/611be7c29a7947549ca51dc5> (access date: 14.04.2022).

²⁸⁶ Five conditions for the Taliban. What did the EU decide on Afghanistan? // Deutsche Welle, 03.09.2021: (access date: 14.04.2022).

The "EU Foreign Ministers in the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions" of September 21, 2021 can be considered as another guide for developing EU approaches to relations with the Taliban. Based on it, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced in October 2021 the allocation of a general EU support package in the amount of 1 billion euros. The package includes €227 million in humanitarian funding for emergency humanitarian assistance in the following sectors: food and nutrition, housing, water and hygiene-related activities, health care, education and protection. The implementation of the assistance began in January 2022.²⁸⁷

The meeting in Doha (Qatar) on November 27-28, 2021 can be considered the first contact between EU diplomats and the Taliban after the fall of the government of Ashraf Ghani. The EU delegation was led by Tomas Niklasson, the EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan. In turn, the Taliban delegation was headed by acting. Foreign Minister Maulavi Amir Khan Motaki. It was emphasized once again in a press release from the European External Action Service (EEAS), issued after the talks, that "This dialogue does not imply EU recognition of the interim government (*Afghanistan*), but is a part of operational cooperation in the interests of the EU and the Afghan people." Representatives of the European delegation declared their intention to continue providing humanitarian assistance to needy Afghans in accordance with the principles of humanity, independence, impartiality and neutrality.²⁸⁸

It should be noted that in developing new approaches to Afghanistan, the European Union is actively cooperating with the countries of Central Asia. In particular, on February 23, 2022, a meeting of special representatives of the countries of Central Asia and the European Union for Afghanistan was held in Tashkent, following which a statement was made on the possibility of cooperation between the EU

²⁸⁷ Afghanistan: EU supports the education, health and livelihoods of the Afghan people with €268.3 million // European Commission, 18.01.2022: https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/news/afghanistan-eu-supports-education-health-livelihoods_en (access date: 15.04.2022).

²⁸⁸ Representatives of the EU and the Taliban held talks in Doha // Interfax, 29.11.2021: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/805422> (access date: 15.04.2022).

and Central Asia to support the Afghan people and ensure security and sustainable development in the region.²⁸⁹

The meeting participants also reached a consensus on the conditions and procedure for formal recognition of the Afghan government. As Ismatulla Irgashev, Special Envoy of the President of Uzbekistan for Afghanistan, said, “we agreed that we would continue to develop a consolidated approach to the Afghan problem and the issue of recognition or non-recognition, (the decision) would not be made separately by each country.” According to him, "It will be such a consolidated approach when we see that the demands of the international community are heard in Kabul and the new interim government of Afghanistan is committed to its promises."²⁹⁰

Influence of other actors on the policy of the Central Asian countries and the European Union in Afghanistan

Speaking about the new policy of the countries of Central Asia and the European Union towards Afghanistan, it should be noted that it is not a “thing in itself”, but is influenced by the policies of other significant external actors (USA, China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, India) and fundamental processes taking place on the world stage that directly affect Afghanistan. In this regard, Central Asia and the European Union cannot ignore the interests of these countries and processes due to their economic, military and geopolitical power and significance.

The **United States** remains the most important factor influencing the situation in and around Afghanistan, even despite the withdrawal of its military troops from that country. The systemic influence of the Americans on the processes in Afghanistan and on the Taliban movement itself becomes possible thanks to Washington's key position in the global banking and financial system.

The US, immediately after the Taliban came to power, froze 7 of the \$9.5 billion Afghan funds held in foreign accounts. According to the

²⁸⁹ Представители ЕС и "Талибана" провели переговоры в Дохе // Газета.uz, 23.02.2022: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/02/23/eu-ca/> (access date: 15.04.2022).

²⁹⁰ Решение стран ЦА и ЕС о признании властей Афганистана будет консолидированным — Исмадулла Иргашев // Газета.uz, 23.02.2022: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/02/23/afganistan/> (access date: 15.04.2022).

Executive Order signed on February 11, 2022 by President Joe Biden, \$7 billion of the Central Bank of Afghanistan frozen in the US will be transferred to a consolidated account at The Federal Reserve Bank of New York. It is envisaged that \$3.5 billion could be used to pay compensation to American citizens affected by terrorism, including families of victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The remaining 3.5 billion will be used to provide humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people.²⁹¹ Also, Washington, along with other Western donors, stopped sponsoring the Afghan state budget. According to the New York Times, foreign grants formed at one time 75% of the Afghan budget and 45% of GDP.²⁹²

To this we can add that the financial instruments that the USA has, in many respects, allow them to regulate financial and humanitarian assistance to the Taliban from other countries. The key role here is played by the US Treasury, which issues licenses for financial transactions with Afghanistan.

From September 24 to December 10, 2021, the US Department of the Treasury issued several licenses that allow limited export and re-export operations for the supply of food, medicines and medical equipment to Afghanistan.²⁹³ The Ministry of Finance also gave permission for personal non-commercial money transfers to Afghanistan, thanks to which Western Union Co. and MoneyGram International Inc. resumed the provision of their services in this direction.²⁹⁴ All this made it possible for international organizations to start programs to provide targeted assistance to needy groups of the Afghan population.

²⁹¹ FACT SHEET: Executive Order to Preserve Certain Afghanistan Central Bank Assets for the People of Afghanistan // The White House, 11.02.2021: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/02/11/fact-sheet-executive-order-to-preserve-certain-afghanistan-central-bank-assets-for-the-people-of-afghanistan/> (access date: 16.04.2022).

²⁹² Goldbaum C., Afghan Economy Nears Collapse as Pressure Builds to Ease U.S. Sanctions // The New York Times, 27.11.2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/27/world/asia/afghanistan-economy-collapse-sanctions.html> (access date: 20.02.2022).

²⁹³ The United States allowed limited financial transactions with the Taliban // RIA.ru, 09/24/2021: <https://ria.ru/20210924/taliby-1751707760.html> (access date: 17.04.2022).

²⁹⁴ Psaledakis D. and Landay J. U.S. formalizes guidance allowing personal remittances to flow to Afghanistan // Reuters, 10.12.2021: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-formalizes-guidance-allowing-personal-remittances-flow-afghanistan-2021-12-10/> (access date: 17.04.2022).

It should be noted that the United States itself plays today a leading role in providing humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable groups of the Afghan population. As of February 2022, the US contribution to funding the UN humanitarian plan in Afghanistan was estimated at \$421 million, followed by the EU - 277 million, Germany - 182 million, UK - 113 million, France - 80 million, Denmark - 74 million, Japan - 60 million, Sweden - 53 million, the Netherlands - 30 million and Canada - 27 million dollars.²⁹⁵

Of course, without this assistance, the Taliban will be very vulnerable to domestic political and social challenges, generated by the deteriorating economic situation in the country. Therefore, the Taliban are largely forced, albeit with difficulty, to meet the US and the West on some key issues of a humanitarian value nature, gradually softening their former tough fundamentalist attitudes.

In the event that they deviate from following the requirements, then both a tough diplomatic and financial reaction from the West immediately follows. The last example is the reaction of the United States and the EU, which supported it, to the decision of the Afghan Ministry of Education to postpone indefinitely the start of classes in schools for girls older than the sixth grade. US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalin Porter said Washington has cancelled a number of previously scheduled meetings with the Taliban and sees their decision as a "potentially turning point in our cooperation."²⁹⁶

The freezing by the World Bank the four \$600 million projects in Afghanistan can be regarded as a financial response to the uncertainty with the start education of girls over 6th grade.²⁹⁷

At the same time, the new Afghan authorities are looking for ways to break out of the "financial trap", the keys to which are in the US. They pin high hopes on *China*. Acting Afghan Interior Minister Sirajuddin

²⁹⁵ Afghanistan: What humanitarian aid is getting in? by Shruti Menon // BBC, 14.02.2022: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59518628/> (access date: 17.04.2022).

²⁹⁶ US cancels Taliban talks over reversal on girls' education // Deutsche Welle, 26.03.2022: <https://www.dw.com/en/us-cancels-taliban-talks-over-reversal-on-girls-education/a-61267124> (access date: 18.04.2022).

²⁹⁷ Afghanistan: World Bank freezes projects over girls' school ban // BBC, 30.03.2022: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60923196> (access date: 18.04.2022).

Haqqani during the meeting held in January 2022 with Wang Yu, the Chinese Ambassador to Kabul, urged Beijing to promote international recognition of the Taliban government.

However, it should be noted that China has its own game in this country, which in some respects intersects with Chinese global plans. It is quite obvious that the PRC is unlikely to unilaterally recognize the Taliban government in circumvention of the UN Security Council. However, the Chinese are trying to exploit the corridor of opportunity that they have today thanks to their close contacts with the Taliban.

In particular, Beijing is trying to prevent the transformation of Afghan territory into a base zone for Uighur terrorist groups that pose a threat to stability in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR). In this regard, it relies on the Taliban, realizing that this movement, while trying to get financial and humanitarian assistance, as well as international recognition, will meet the Chinese interests.

In addition to this, China is trying to stake its interests in the mining sector of Afghanistan. Of potential interest to Chinese companies are deposits of copper, lithium and rare earth metals, which will strengthen China's position in the technological race within the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

In 2007, Chinese companies Jiangxi Copper and Metallurgical Corporation of China won a tender to develop Mes Ainak copper ore deposit in Logar province. However, due to security issues, its development was never started. After the Taliban came to power and the prospects for stabilizing the situation in the country appeared, Chinese interest in Ainak began to revive. This is indicated by Jiangxi Copper's statement that it is monitoring the development of the situation in Afghanistan and will start developing the deposit as soon as possible.²⁹⁸ Ainak is the largest undeveloped copper deposit in Eurasia with potential reserves of 11 million tons.

²⁹⁸ Китайская компания Jiangxi Copper изучает возможность добычи медной руды в Афганистане // TASS.ru, 13.09.2021: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/12374007> (access date: 20.04.2022).

Beijing is also eyeing Afghanistan's lithium deposits. As shown by the results of American geological studies in 2010, the value of potential lithium reserves in the provinces of Ghazni, Herat and Nimroz alone can reach 3 trillion dollars.²⁹⁹

For China, lithium is a strategically important raw material, given its plans to become the world leader in the production and export of electric vehicles, the heart of which is lithium-ion batteries. By 2028, Chinese automakers plan to reach production volumes of 8 million electric vehicles.

The Afghan deposits of rare earth metals (REM), which are critical for high-tech industries may be of even greater significance for the technological and geopolitical interests of Beijing. China is the world leader in REM production, and if Chinese companies manage to establish control over Afghan REM, then its position in this segment of the world market of raw materials in terms of exerting influence will be similar to the positions of OPEC in the world oil market. According to Afghan estimates, REM reserves can reach 1.4 million tons. The largest deposit in the country is Khaneshin in Helmand province.³⁰⁰

China's strategic interests in Afghanistan may also lie in the transport and communications sphere. One of the problems for Chinese long-term interests in Eurasia in recent years was the difficulty of connecting the two sections of its One Belt, One Road - Central Asia and Pakistan (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor). If China manages to build motorway and railroad corridors through Afghanistan, this will allow it to create a continuous space for the movement of Chinese goods in the vast regions of Inner Eurasia and South Asia.

²⁹⁹ Iftikhar Gilani. ANALYSIS - Vast lithium reserves to transform Afghanistan from aid to trade economy// Anadolu Agency, 13.12.2021: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-vast-lithium-reserves-to-transform-afghanistan-from-aid-to-trade-economy/2446019#:~:text=In%20a%20survey%20conducted%20in,at%20a%20staggering%20%243%20trillion> (access date: 20.04.2022).

³⁰⁰ Mapping Afghanistan's untapped natural resources by Mohammed Hussein and Mohammed Haddad // Al Jazeera, 24.09.2021: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/24/mapping-afghanistans-untapped-natural-resources-interactive#:~:text=Industrial%20minerals&text=Afghanistan%20has%20an%20estimated%201.4,at%20Khanneshin%20in%20Helmand%20province.> (access date: 21.04.2022).

If we talk about the new Afghan strategy of the Central Asian countries, then it cannot but take into account the above interests of China, since this country is their leading trade, economic and investment partner, and this factor must always be kept in mind. Accordingly, this will have a corrective impact on the EU policy towards Central Asia and Afghanistan.

In many respects, a similar factor also applies to another leading external player in the Afghan field — *Russia*. Currently, Russian policy towards the Taliban and the changes that have taken place in Afghanistan is largely shaped through the prism of geopolitical confrontation with the West, which is clearly manifested against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict.

For Moscow, first of all, is important that no danger emanates from the territory of Afghanistan to its allies in Central Asia, since otherwise any threat to regional stability will deprive it of additional resources to ensure security on its southern flank in the face of economic sanctions.

In this regard, Russia is demonstrating certain steps to improve relations with the Taliban, which seem to be of a test nature, in order to find out to what extent the Taliban can behave as a responsible political force capable of maintaining stability within the country and making well-considered decisions in the foreign arena.

The accreditation of a diplomat from the new Afghan government in Moscow can be considered as an indicator of this approach. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said at the session of the Third Meeting of Foreign Ministers in the Format of Afghanistan's Neighbouring Countries in Tunxi (China), "Last month, the first Afghan diplomat sent by the new authorities arrived in Moscow and received accreditation in our ministry." He also noted that, despite the "lack of managerial experience, financial and economic restrictions, political and diplomatic pressure from the United States and its allies, the new administration of Afghanistan, in general, manages to cope with keeping the state afloat."³⁰¹

³⁰¹ Lavrov announced the accreditation in Russia of the first diplomat of the Taliban government // Interfax, 31.03.2022: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/832297> (access date: 21.04.2022).

The circumstance that Moscow is testing the Taliban may be evidenced by the fact that it puts a hold on promoting the issue of recognizing the new authorities in the UN Security Council. In Russia, the Taliban is still subject to the decision of the Supreme Court of 2003, which considers the Taliban a terrorist organization and its activities are prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation.

The Russian position on the issue of official recognition of the Taliban was most fully expressed by Zamir Kabulov, the special representative of the President of the Russian Federation for Afghanistan. According to him, “Both the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the President of Russia have repeatedly said that there is a set of demands from the world community – it is the ethno-political inclusiveness of the government. There are representatives of other ethnic groups in the government, but they are all members of the Taliban movement.”

The second condition for the recognition of the Taliban is the fulfilment of basic human rights norms, first of all, the rights of women and their rights to employment. At the same time, he explained that “Russia does not impose its own views on this issue. Afghanistan has cultural and religious traditions, while other Muslim countries have similar traditions, and we can take the experience of other countries as an example.”³⁰²

Sergei Lavrov at a meeting in Tunxi also said on this occasion that "the main obstacle to the recognition of the government in Kabul remains its insufficient representativeness" and that the new authorities should represent not only the country's various ethnic groups, national and religious minorities, but also political forces.³⁰³

Russia's policy towards the new Afghanistan is also determined by geo-economic issues. In the face of confrontation with the West and the closure of many segments of European and American sales markets, Russian business needs new consumers of its products and raw materials.

³⁰² Russia called inclusiveness a condition for recognizing the Taliban government // Polit.ru, 08.02.2022: <https://m.polit.ru/news/2022/02/08/talib/> (access date: 21.04.2022).

³⁰³ Lavrov announced the accreditation in Russia of the first diplomat of the Taliban government // Interfax, 31.03.2022: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/832297> (access date: 21.04.2022).

A stable Afghanistan could provide such an opportunity, facilitating deliveries to the growing markets of South Asia through its territory.

Therefore, the meeting of representatives of the railway companies of Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation "Uzbekiston Temir Yollari" and "Russian Railways" held in October 2021, where the sides discussed the design of the trans-Afghan railway "Termez-Mazari-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar" and reached the agreement on the exchange of technical and cartographic parameters between design structures and research institutes, looks quite expectable.³⁰⁴

The participation in the Trans-Afghan Railway project can become for Russia an additional link with Pakistan to strengthen the ties, which Russian diplomacy has been purposefully developing in the recent years with certain degree of success. We are talking about agreements on the construction of the "Pakistan Stream" gas pipeline, which were reached between Russian Energy Minister Nikolai Shulgin and Pakistani Ambassador to the Russian Federation Shafkat Ali Khan in May 2021. This gas pipeline which is 1.1 thousand km long and has a throughput capacity of up to 12.4 billion cubic meters per year should connect the terminals for receiving Russian LNG in Karachi with a power plant in Lahore.³⁰⁵ Moscow's high interest in the Pakistan Stream is shown by its reaction to the removal of Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan on April 9, 2022, as a result of a vote of no confidence in the parliament. On April 12, Vladimir Putin congratulated Shahbaz Sharif on his election as Prime Minister of Pakistan, and the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed hope that the new Pakistani government would continue to work on the mutually beneficial Pakistan Stream gas pipeline project.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ Uzbekistan starts construction of Trans-Afghan railway // Sputniknews.ru, 29.03.2022: <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20220329/uzbekistan-nachal-stroitelstvo-transafganskoy-jeleznoy-dorogi--smi-23630144.html> (access date: 21.04.2022).

³⁰⁵ Russia and Pakistan signed an agreement on the construction of the Pakistan Stream gas pipeline// TASS.ru, 28.05.2021: https://tass.ru/ekonomika/11503511?utm_source=ru.wikipedia.org&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ru.wikipedia.org&utm_referrer=ru.wikipedia.org (access date: 21.04.2022).

³⁰⁶ Russia hopes for the continuation of the "Pakistan Stream" with a new prime minister // RIA.ru, 13.04.2022: <https://ria.ru/20220413/gazoprovod-1783403286.html> (access date: 21.04.2022).

Meanwhile, not only Moscow, but also the states of Central Asia and the EU in their new Afghan strategy also cannot ignore the position of *Pakistan*, which is always actively involved in Afghan affairs and traditionally has close ties with the Taliban.

At present, the policy of Islamabad can be characterized as an attempt to maintain constructive relations with the world community and at the same time pursue its own strategic interests in Afghanistan.

This can be seen in the Pakistani stance towards official recognition of the Taliban government. As early as August 19, 2021, the Pakistani ambassadors to the United States and the UN assured that Islamabad would follow the position of the international community on the issue of recognizing the Taliban. In an interview with CBS News, Pakistani Ambassador to the US Asad Majid Khan said that the Taliban's current behaviour would also influence Pakistan's decision. Pakistani Ambassador to the UN Munir Akram added: "They want acceptance and recognition from the international community, and we must use these levers to ensure good behaviour on their part."³⁰⁷

On August 20, followed the reaction of the Pakistani military. Army General Qamar Javed Bajwa said, "Pakistan expects the Taliban to keep their promises to the world community regarding women and human rights and not allow Afghan land to be used against any other country."³⁰⁸

Meanwhile, some political leaders and forces in Pakistan, immediately after the Taliban came to power, called for official recognition of it. On September 15, 2021, the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa declared its full support for the recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. He was supported by representatives of the opposition Pakistan People's Party and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). It was stated that the international community should unfreeze

³⁰⁷ Anwar Iqbal. No unilateral recognition, Pakistan assures US, others // Dawn, 19.08.2021: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641511/no-unilateral-recognition-pakistan-assures-us-others> (access date: 22.04.2022).

³⁰⁸ Pakistan expects Taliban will fulfil promises on women and human rights: Army chief // Dawn, 20.08.2021: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641660/pakistan-expects-taliban-will-fulfil-promises-on-women-and-human-rights-army-chief> (access date: 22.04.2022).

Afghan assets and not impose the issue of inclusive government upon the new authorities, since Afghanistan is an independent country.³⁰⁹

An influential Pakistani opposition politician, president of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) alliance, Maulana Fazlur Rahman, spoke out for the recognition of the new Taliban government. He called on Islamabad to immediately recognize the Taliban government in order to bring stability to war-torn Afghanistan.³¹⁰

The second strategic goal of Islamabad is the desire to maintain its former high influence on the Taliban in order to prevent even a theoretical strengthening in Afghanistan the position of its existential adversary represented by India and to weaken the terrorist organization Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which poses a serious threat to Pakistani national security, as it can use Afghan territory to harbour and train its fighters. On 21st of August, just 6 days after the fall of Kabul, Pakistani Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zahid Hafiz Chaudhry stated in a weekly media briefing that Pakistan would ask the new Afghan government to take action against the outlawed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

According to the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), there were 207 terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2021, a 42% increase over 2020. As a result of these attacks, 335 people were killed. The TTP alone is responsible for 87 attacks, 84% more than in 2020. The TTP itself claimed 282 attacks in 2021 and cited a figure of more than 500 law enforcement officers killed. In January 2022 alone, the Pakistani Taliban announced 42 more attacks.³¹¹

In October 2021, Pakistan began talks with some groups within the TTP on the issue of reconciliation, as revealed by former Prime Minister

³⁰⁹ KP govt backs recognition of Taliban rule in Afghanistan // Dawn, 15.09.2021: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1646423/kp-govt-backs-recognition-of-taliban-rule-in-afghanistan> (access date: 22.04.2022).

³¹⁰ Pakistan must recognise Taliban govt, says Fazl // Dawn, 20.09.2021: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1647298/pakistan-must-recognise-taliban-govt-says-fazl> (access date: 22.04.2022).

³¹¹ Madiha Afzal. Pakistan's ambivalent approach toward a resurgent Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan // Brookings, 11.02.2022: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/11/pakistans-ambivalent-approach-toward-a-resurgent-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan/> (access date: 22.04.2022).

Imran Khan himself.³¹² It was reported that mediation efforts were undertaken by the Afghan Taliban with the direct participation of Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of the Haqqani network. However, the negotiations were not successful. Experts believe that the TTP has every chance of gaining long-term footholds in the Afghan border areas, since the Afghan Taliban and the TTP are "two sides of the same coin." In favour of their close ties can count the fact that Taliban released several TTP leaders who were imprisoned, and Maulavi Fakir Mohammad was one of them.³¹³

Also, in Favor of their close ties counts the increase in the number of attacks by TTP militants on the Pakistani military, penetrating from the adjacent territory of Afghanistan. In turn, the Pakistani army is forced to carry out bombing strikes, which resulted in killing Afghan civilians. All this naturally leads to aggravation of Afghan-Pakistani relations. The death of 47 Afghan civilians in the provinces of Kunar and Khost was one of such incidents.³¹⁴

Another irritant to relations between the Taliban and Pakistan is Islamabad's continued construction of barbed wire along the Durand Line, the 2,600-kilometer border between the two states, unrecognized by Kabul. According to Pakistani data, the work is almost completed. In turn, the Taliban oppose the division of a single Pashtun ethnic group and carry out actions to destroy the system of border fences.

At the same time, it should be noted that despite the existing contradictions, the Taliban and Pakistan are both interested in the development of transport and energy projects linking Central and South Asia. In this regard, the question arises as to what will ultimately become the prevailing factor — the existing contradictions of the parties or long-term economic interests.

³¹² Govt in talks with TTP groups for reconciliation process: PM Imran // Dawn, 01.10.2021: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1649520> (access date: 22.04.2022).

³¹³ Islamabad to ask Kabul for action against TTP // Dawn, 21.09.2021: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641737/islamabad-to-ask-kabul-for-action-against-ttp> (access date: 22.04.2022).

³¹⁴ Tensions increase between Taliban and Pakistan over attacks // Deutsche Welle, 21.04.2022: <https://www.dw.com/en/tensions-increase-between-taliban-and-pakistan-over-attacks/a-61535921> (access date: 22.04.2022).

The return of the Taliban to power completely confused all the cards of *India*, which until then had close ties with the government of Ashraf Ghani and was one of its largest trade, economic and investment partners. Delhi's total economic development assistance to Afghanistan amounted to \$3 billion. At the time the Americans left, Indian companies were implementing 400 projects in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.

The construction of the Salma hydropower and irrigation dam with a capacity of 42 MW in the province of Herat and the Zaranj-Delaram highway with a length of 218 km and a cost of \$150 million are amongst the projects that can be considered significant for Indian-Afghan cooperation. It is along this road that India delivered 75 thousand tons of wheat to Afghanistan from the Iranian port of Chabahar during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several thousand Afghans have been educated and trained in India over the past twenty years.³¹⁵

As of the end of 2020, India exported to Afghanistan goods worth \$855 million, mainly raw sugar (\$174 million), textiles (\$113 million) and pharmaceutical products (\$70.7 million). In turn, Afghan exports to India amounted to \$499 million and were mainly represented by tropical fruits (\$132 million), resins (\$111 million) and grapes (\$96.9 million).³¹⁶

However, today the Taliban's Afghanistan is a challenge for Delhi and, first of all, in the field of security. Indian experts believe that the Taliban is a puppet of Pakistan and Afghan territory can be used to base terrorist groups that pose a threat to Indian national security. Delhi did not forget that in July 2008, the Indian Embassy in Kabul was attacked by the Haqqani Network, whose representatives are now members of the highest governing bodies of Taliban Afghanistan, and the death of Indian specialists who took part in the construction of the Zaranj-Delaram highway. In this regard, India was once quite sceptical about the Doha process.

³¹⁵ Nirupama Subramanian. Explained: What are India's investments in Afghanistan? // Indianexpress, 16.07.2021: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-indias-afghan-investment-7406795/> (access date: 24.04.2022).

³¹⁶ India - Afghanistan: Bilateral trade // OEC, 2020: [https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/afg#:~:text=Historical%20Data&text=\(%2470.7M\).- ,During%20the%20last%2025%20years%20the%20exports%20of%20India%20to,exported%20%24499M%20to%20India/](https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/afg#:~:text=Historical%20Data&text=(%2470.7M).- ,During%20the%20last%2025%20years%20the%20exports%20of%20India%20to,exported%20%24499M%20to%20India/) (access date: 24.04.2022).

Despite all this, the Indian government cannot but take into account the changing realities in which many countries in the region look to the Taliban as an uncontested force capable of stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. This currently leads to some adjustment of its policy, in which two points can be distinguished.

First of all, according to Arvind Gupta, a well-known Indian analyst, Director of the International Vivekananda Foundation, “India understands that it will have to increasingly rely on the countries of the region to resolve the situation in Afghanistan. That is why it has stepped up consultations with Russia, Iran, countries of Central Asian and other countries. In this context, there should be considered Modi's exhaustive speech at the SCO summit, in which he put terrorism at the centre of attention when discussing the situation in Afghanistan. The recalibration of India's Afghan policy and more active interaction with the countries of the region, including the SCO, is one of the consequences of the seizure of power in Kabul by the Taliban.”³¹⁷

The second important point is attempts to find points of convergence of interests with the most constructive politicians within the transitional government of Afghanistan to launch a new stage of Indian-Afghan relations. Indian humanitarian aid can act as a catalyst for this process. In particular, Delhi promised to provide Afghanistan with 50 thousand tons wheat, and by the end of May 2022, 12 thousand tons were delivered by trucks through Pakistan.³¹⁸

The news which appeared on May 17, 2022, that India is exploring the possibility of opening its embassy in Afghanistan, but without a high-level diplomatic mission, to provide consular services is quite symbolic

³¹⁷ Arvind Gupta. How will the collapse of the government in Afghanistan affect relations between India and the US? // MDK "Valdai", 10.11.2021: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/afganistan-indiya-ssha/> (access date: 24.04.2022).

³¹⁸ India sends 2,000 tons of wheat to Afghanistan as humanitarian aid // EurasiaDaily, 20.05.2022: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2022/05/20/indiya-otpravila-afganistanu-2-000-tonn-pshenicy-v-kachestve-gumanitarnoy-pomoshchi> (access date: 25.05.2022).

against this background. As you know, India closed its embassy in Kabul after its capture by the Taliban in August 2021.³¹⁹

In turn, the Taliban is also expressing interest in opening an Indian embassy. As stated by Suhail Shaheen, the head of the political office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in Doha on May 23, 2022, IEA guarantees the full safety of Indian diplomats. However, India must sever all ties with the government of former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and establish ties with the new Afghan authorities based on national and mutual interests.³²⁰

For another key external player in the Afghan political field, *Iran*, the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from that country was both a positive development and a challenge. Positive in the sense that many Iranian experts have traditionally considered the presence of US troops along the entire eastern border of Iran as a threat to national security. In turn, the new situation becomes a challenge from the point of view that there is a certain probability that Tehran's relations with the Taliban will worsen in the new conditions, taking into account the difficult relations of the Taliban with Hazara Shiites and Afghan Tajiks who are close to Iran. As the recent past shows, in 1998 Iran and the Taliban were on the verge of a military conflict after the assassination of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif.

However, immediately after the fall of Kabul, Iranian officials were rather neutral about the event, focusing their statements not on the Taliban's assessments, but on the Afghan people.

Thus, the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared the support of the people of Afghanistan and the need to restore this country.³²¹ In turn, Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi noted that "military

³¹⁹ India is exploring the possibility of opening its embassy in Afghanistan // EurasiaDaily, 17.05.2022: <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2022/05/17/indiya-izuchaet-vozmozhnost-otkrytiya-svoego-posolstva-v-afganistane> (access date: 25.05.2022).

³²⁰ «Taliban Recommends: India Better Cut All Ties With Former Afghan Authorities // EurasiaDaily, 23.05.2022: <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2022/05/23/taliban-rekomenduet-indii-luchshe-razorvat-vse-svyazi-s-byvshimi-vlastyami-afganistana> (access date: 25.05.2022).

³²¹ Iran's Khamenei vows support for Afghan people // CGTN, 27.08.2021: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-08-29/-Iran-s-Khamenei-vows-support-for-Afghan-people-1370ZDa4E24/index.html> (access date: 27.05.2022).

defeat and the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan should be an opportunity to restore life, security and lasting peace in this country" and "Iran will do everything possible for stability, which is today the primary need of Afghanistan, and as a neighbour and sister country invites all (intra-Afghan) groups to reach a national agreement."³²²

In general, Tehran's official position regarding the changes that have taken place in the neighbouring country was formulated and announced by November 10, 2021 by the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani at the Third Meeting of the Regional Security Dialogue in New Delhi. It includes six items:

1. The countries that caused the current situation in Afghanistan must take responsibility for the current troubles in that country;
2. The need for a comprehensive effort to form an inclusive government composed of representatives of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan;
3. Assistance to the Afghan people in solving their problems and preventing a humanitarian crisis in the country. The Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to provide all its facilities for this purpose, including its roads and port facilities, especially the facilities in the Chabahar port;
4. Putting pressure on the United States to unlock the financial resources of the Afghan people;
5. Combating the threat of terrorism posed by Daesh and Takfiri groups in Afghanistan. At the same time, it is necessary to identify and block the financial channels of these groups;
6. Offering assistance in resolving the migration crisis, as well as assistance to countries hosting Afghan refugees.³²³

In parallel, Iran has activated the tools of practical bilateral diplomacy. On November 15-16, 2021, Special Representative of the President of Iran for Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Komi paid an official

³²² Raisi: America lost the war, Iran will do everything to stabilize Afghanistan // EurasiaDaily, 16.08.2021: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2021/08/16/raisi-amerika-proigrala-voynu-iran-sdelaet-vse-dlya-stabilizacii-afganistana> (access date: 27.05.2022).

³²³ Iran steps up Afghan diplomacy // Tehran Times, 09.11.2021: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/466877/Iran-steps-up-Afghan-diplomacy> (access date: 27.05.2022).

visit to Afghanistan. The purpose of his visit was to discuss political, economic, security and Afghan refugee issues with interim government officials.³²⁴

There was also activated the economic vector of Iranian policy. Iranian commercial attaché Ibrahim Hussein promised to help Kabul create the conditions necessary to start oil trading by "fixing existing problems" and building the necessary facilities.³²⁵

On November 11, 2021 Afghanistan and Iran have signed an agreement on the supply of 100 megawatts of electricity, Tolo TV channel reported, citing the energy company Da Afghanistan Breshna Shirkat (DABS). According to DABS, Afghanistan needs 850 megawatts of electricity per year, 620 megawatts is imported from neighbouring countries, and 230 megawatts comes from domestic sources.³²⁶

On November 27, the Head of the Iranian-Afghan Chamber of Commerce, Hossein Salimi, offered the Taliban Iranian investment in the development of mines. According to him, the corresponding proposal of the Iranian side will allow the Taliban to increase income from mines through investment and export of technical and engineering services, and they will be able to maintain imports at the same level.³²⁷

At the same time, although Iran recognizes that the Taliban today is an objective reality in the country that needs to be dealt with, nevertheless, it is trying to realize its interests related to supporting the Persian-speaking Tajiks of Afghanistan and the Shiites-Hazaras. This is indicated by the position and statements of many officials about the need to form an inclusive government, which would include representatives of various political forces.

³²⁴ Iran's special envoy for Afghanistan visits Kabul, says U.S. supports ISIS // Tehran Times, 15.11.2021: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/467078/Iran-s-special-envoy-for-Afghanistan-visits-Kabul-says-U-S> (access date: 27.05.2022).

³²⁵ Taliban ready to buy oil from Iran, says ACCI chief // Tehran Times, 26.10.2021: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/466381/Taliban-ready-to-buy-oil-from-Iran-says-ACCI-chief> (access date: 27.05.2022).

³²⁶ DABS to Import 100 Megawatts of Electricity from Iran by Amina Hakimi // Tolo News, 11.11.2021: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-175401> (access date: 29.05.2022).

³²⁷ Iran is ready to invest in the development of Afghan mines // Afghanistan.ru, 27.11.2021: <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/147203.html>

For example, on August 23, 2021, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Said Khatibzadeh said that Iran stands for an inclusive government in Afghanistan and will continue to support the Afghan people. Iran hopes that Afghan groups will make the most of the opportunity created by the withdrawal of trans-regional forces from the country, create an inclusive government and establish good relations with neighbours.³²⁸

The fact that inclusiveness is understood precisely as taking into account the political and cultural interests of the Afghan Tajiks and Hazaras is evidenced by the very emotional reaction of the Iranians to the anti-Taliban uprising in Panjshir. At the official level, Tehran reacted with a statement by Foreign Ministry spokesman Said Khatibzadeh. According to him, "Panjshir has only a political solution, and the siege of Panjshir is in no way acceptable from the point of view of international law and humanitarian law," he said at a regular briefing.³²⁹

In turn, the former Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan Abolfazl Zohrehvand, in an interview with IRNA, said the following: "It is not clear whether the Taliban want to continue to maintain their ideological and ethnic superiority on their agenda ... Uzbeks and Hazaras, the main ethnic groups of Afghanistan, do not play any role in power, while the Tajiks are in a position of resistance in the Panjshir Valley. In addition, well-known politicians such as Abdullah Abdullah are under house arrest." In his opinion, the Taliban do not want to be flexible and continue to raise the issue of the Islamic Emirate and Panjshir has become their Achilles' heel.³³⁰

A landmark event in this regard was the decision of the Tehran city council on September 10, 2021 to name an alley in the northern part of

³²⁸ Iran calls for inclusive Afghan government // Tehran Times, 23.08.2021: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/464239/Iran-calls-for-inclusive-Afghan-government> (access date: 27.05.2022).

³²⁹ Iran says siege of Panjshir Valley contravenes international law // Tehran Times, 06.09.2021: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/464758/Iran-says-siege-of-Panjshir-Valley-contravenes-international> (access date: 27.05.2022).

³³⁰ Taliban have not presented clear plan for running Afghanistan, ex-ambassador says // Tehran Times, 01.09.2021: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/464579/Taliban-have-not-presented-clear-plan-for-running-Afghanistan> (access date: 29.05.2022).

the capital in honour of the Afghan Panjshir in order to show sympathy for the people of Afghanistan fighting against the Taliban.³³¹

The present level of distrust of the Taliban in official circles and society is evidenced by the statement of the foreign policy adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, the Head of the Strategic Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran on Foreign Relations, Kamal Kharrazi, according to which Iran cannot forget the murder of its diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998, although both the Taliban and Pakistan then assured Tehran of their safety.³³² Though, there is also a high level of distrust on the Afghan side, as indicated by anti-Iranian protests in Herat and Kabul in April 2022 after the release of videos allegedly humiliating Afghan refugees in Iran.³³³

Conclusion

Summing up the foregoing, it should be noted that a complex tangle of a new game is being tied around Afghanistan today, in which the countries of Central Asia and the EU are the part of a group of important actors, on whose positions the development of the situation in the Afghan political, ethnic, economic and humanitarian field largely depends. Meanwhile, the complexity of the game lies in the fact that too many influential actors embodied in the United States, China, Russia, Pakistan, India and Iran are trying to realize their own long-term interests, in which rivalry with competitors takes one of the key places. At the same time, they have their own views, often determined by historical, ethnic and religious reasons, on the system of political structure and governance in Afghanistan, which may conflict with the ideas professed by the Taliban. Of course, all these cannot be ignored by the countries of Central Asia and the EU, and it will affect the adjustment of their long-term strategies regarding Afghanistan, as well as the nature of bilateral relations between

³³¹ Tehran's alley named after Afghanistan's Panjshir // Tehran Times, 10.09.2021: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/464887/Tehran-s-alley-named-after-Afghanistan-s-Panjshir> (access date: 29.05.2022).

³³² Iran Tells Taliban To Form An Inclusive Government To Receive Support // Iran International, 26.10.2021: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/20211026159165> (access date: 29.05.2022).

³³³ Iran summons Afghan envoy after protesters throw rocks at diplomatic missions // Reuters, 12.04.2022: <https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-summons-afghan-envoy-after-protesters-throw-rocks-diplomatic-missions-2022-04-12/> (access date: 29.05.2022).

the countries of Central Asia and the EU in the field of security and cooperation.

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