

## SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL ASIA RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS CONTENTS DIGEST

April 2018

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We hereby present the sixth issue of the Russian and Persian language publication digest on regional security challenges in Central Asia. This issue of the digest covers the following: the further rapprochement of the Central Asian countries; internal political processes in Kyrgyzstan; the rethinking of the SCO's long-term strategy; geopolitical, transport and economic competition between Russia, the US, China and India in the region; and the Afghan conflict.

From a regional perspective, one of the most important recent events was that of a consultative meeting of the Central Asian leaders in Astana, which can be viewed as the first step towards turning the region into a single geopolitical actor. The state visit of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Tajikistan, which allowed both countries to significantly improve their bilateral relations, and the visit of Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to Uzbekistan can both be regarded as serious contributions to the development of Central Asian geopolitical identity, as well as to the region's stability and security. At the same time, despite these improvements, internal political processes in Kyrgyzstan, accompanied by a fundamental transformation of the domestic political field and a devaluation of intra-elite arrangements cause some anxiety, since they are liable to trigger instability and massive street protests.

The consolidation processes in Central Asia are taking place against the backdrop of intense competition between various external actors, each promoting their own economic, transport and investment projects. This applies to China and India, which primarily rely on their own ideas and projects for the region. This in turn raises the issue of the relevance of "old" regional projects, such as the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), the future development of which requires rethinking, given new global conditions and power shifts.

The geopolitical competition continues exacerbating matters in and around Afghanistan too, and this fact may adversely affect the prospects of the Afghan peace process, opening a window of opportunity for the expansion of terrorist groups to this country. The competition of external actors in Afghanistan, accompanied by their ungazetted pressure on the countries of the region, may pose challenges to Central Asia. This was illustrated by the signing of the US-Kazakh agreement on the transit of US cargo to Afghanistan via the Kazakh Caspian ports, which was negatively perceived by a significant segment of the Russian expert community, and may serve as a trigger of a new round of US-Russian geopolitical grappling. Uzbekistan, meanwhile, does its part, attempting to ease the rising tension between external actors regarding Afghanistan, offering a new Tashkent-based platform for multilateral international dialogue.

In the next issues of our digest we will continue reviewing the above-mentioned issues, as well as other regional challenges covered by targeted foreign media. The views and opinions of the authors do not necessarily reflect the position of the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation.

**APRIL/2018**

### **Self-reliance: why did the leaders of Central Asia meet in Astana?**

*Polina Khimshiashvili,  
Journalist of RBC multimedia holding (Russia)*

For the first time in thirteen years, a consultative meeting of the presidents of the Central Asian countries was held in Astana on March 5, 2018. Turkmenistan was represented by the speaker of the Turkmen Parliament. The idea to meet in the format of five was suggested by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the UN General Assembly in September 2017, an idea which was supported by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Andrei Kazantsev, Director of the Analytical Centre of the Institute for International Studies, MGIMO (Russia), emphasises that the opportunity to intensify intra-regional cooperation emerged after the election of Mirziyoyev as the President of Uzbekistan in September 2016, and his ensuing policies aimed at stabilizing and improving relations with neighbouring countries. One more reason for this consultative meeting was a building conflict between Russia and the West, as well as the less obvious conflict between China and the Western camp. Under such conditions, it is crucial for the countries of Central Asia to begin speaking with one voice when dealing and negotiating with third parties; they must, therefore, determine their common views and approaches on trade and security issues.

To allay Russia's fears about the long-term goals of this meeting, Kazakh President Nazarbayev has noted that intensifying cooperation between the countries of the region doesn't mean a departure from the focus on developing ties with Russia and China. He has assured that all Central Asian states will continue to collaborate with Moscow and Beijing, and that all agreements with them remain in force.

At the same time, he has stressed that all issues that fall within the framework of the region itself should be resolved by the countries of Central Asia themselves, without intervention from third parties. According to Nazarbayev, it will be very advantageous for all five countries to unite their potential, so as to increase trade volumes and more actively resolve regional security issues.

Kazantsev, along with another well-known Russian expert on Central Asia from the Institute of CIS countries, Andrei Grozin, are both confident that the cementing of regional cooperation in Central Asia shouldn't trouble Moscow. As per Grozin, the decrease of conflict potential within Central Asia meets Russian interests. Grozin also considers that 2017 was a rather hard year for the Central Asian

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countries due to Washington's vague priorities in the region. At the beginning of 2017, the countries of the region had hoped that Washington would primarily focus on cooperation with them in the area of oil and gas – this, notably because Rex Tillerson, the former Chairman and CEO of ExxonMobil, was appointed Head of the US Department of State. Their expectations, however, were not fulfilled. After a while, the Central Asian countries began to hope for the development of cooperation with the US in the Afghan case, yet, they were not mentioned in the new US strategy on countering terrorists in Afghanistan.

With regards to cooperation with China, all five regional states, as Grozin points out, are eager to become indispensable partners to Beijing in the transit communications area, and each of them is attempting to build the most convenient conditions for entering the "One Belt One Road initiative". According to the Russian expert, the consolidated region meets Beijing's interests. As such the current détente in Central Asia can to some extent be viewed as a response to the Chinese request for stability.

<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/03/2018/5aaa48df9a79479c52f6861c>

### **Experts analyse the outcomes of President Mirziyoyev's visit to Tajikistan**

*Sputnik news agency,  
Eurasia Daily news agency (Russia)*

Experts from Russian news agency "Sputnik" called the Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's visit to Tajikistan, held on March 9-10, 2018, a historic breakthrough. They stressed that Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his Tajik counterpart, Emomali Rahmon, managed to demolish a wall, which was erected between two nations in the Post-Soviet era. They note that the visit was carefully prepared throughout 2017, which predetermined its success, as embodied in nearly 30 bilateral agreements and memoranda. One of the most remarkable events of the visit was the abolition of the visa regime. Besides, Tashkent and Dushanbe reopened nine border checkpoints, which had been closed in the early 2000s. Given the fact that at least 1.5 million ethnic Tajiks live in Uzbekistan, both these decisions can be viewed as a huge step forward.

Mirziyoyev and Rahmon also launched a restored railway line "Amuzang - Khoshadi" which will play a significant role in boosting bilateral trade and transit cargo transportation. Both parties announced their firm intention to increase bilateral trade turnover from 0.24 to 0.5-1 billion USD in the coming years. They aim to do so by carrying out a range of joint projects in electrical engineering, the construction materials industry, light industry, and the assembly of agricultural machinery. Alexander Sobyenin, Director for Cultural, Educational and Scientific Projects of the Centre for Traditional Cultures (Russia), Shakir Khakimov, Tajik expert, Doctor of Juridical Science, and Alexander Knyazev, expert on Central Asia and the Middle East (Russia), were asked by another Russian news agency, "Eurasia Daily", to assess the outcomes of Mirziyoyev's visit.

Sobyanin highlighted the importance of personal agreements between Mirziyoyev and Rahmon as crucial for further interstate collaboration. In his opinion, Tashkent is seeking an acceptable formula for cooperation with Dushanbe in hydropower engineering and mining, being desirous to co-invest in quite a few projects. He believes that Uzbek-Tajik tensions in the hydropower sphere are a thing of the past.

Shakir Khakimov called the visit fruitful, pointing out that it is now necessary to provide a mechanism for implementing the agreements which were reached. He considers the theory about the possible threat of Uzbek political and economic expansion to Tajikistan, limiting its sovereignty, as groundless, and points out that, quite conversely, cooperation with Uzbekistan can become a spur for increasing the competitiveness of Tajik manufacturers.

Alexander Knyazev views Mirziyoyev's visit mainly through the prism of Tashkent's policy towards strengthening its influence in the region, which largely resembles that of China. Uzbekistan in particular has lent 100 million USD to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and it is clear that neither Bishkek, nor Dushanbe will repay these loans. However, as Knyazev opines, Tashkent's aim is more long-term and fundamental: namely, the given loans will create new jobs and improve the production capacities inside of Uzbekistan, since loans will be granted to those Kyrgyz and Tajik entrepreneurs who will be ready to import Uzbek products. These loans will also help Uzbekistan to make inroads in its neighbours' domestic markets. For the time being, Mirziyoyev's regional policy looks to be quite efficient. Nevertheless, Knyazev doesn't entirely rule out that it may be faced with challenges and contradictions in the future.

<https://ru.sputniknews-uz.com/politics/20180310/7683103.html>  
<https://easaily.com/ru/news/2018/03/12/eksperty-tashkent-i-dushanbe-nivelirovali-vse-protivorechiya-na-slovah>

### **The Tashkent initiative: improvisation of Berdimuhamedov, or Mirziyoyev's cold calculation?**

*Andei Uvarov,  
 Political analyst,  
 Regular contributor to the electronic edition  
 of Strategic Culture Fund (Russia)*

The outcomes of the visit of Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to Uzbekistan, held on April 23-24, 2018, were called "triumphal" by Tashkent. The Russian expert on Central Asia, Andrei Uvarov, who analysed the visit, noted Berdimuhamedov's offer to create a deliberative body of the presidents of the Central Asian countries. Uvarov underlines that this is their second official application for regional autonomy in recent months, taking into account the Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian Presidents held on March 15, 2018 in Astana. The Russian expert drew attention to the high spirits of Berdimuhamedov in Tashkent after signing a large package of agreements, and also to his statement that cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan was a

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key factor in the development of Central Asia – without, however, mentioning Kazakhstan.

One more highlight of the visit was the statement of President Mirziyoyev about the readiness of Uzbekistan to partake in the construction of the TAPI gas pipeline, which, it is hoped, will help stabilise the situation in Afghanistan. This gas pipeline should export Turkmen gas via Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. Besides this, the parties discussed: the construction of the “Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan-China” gas pipeline, with a capacity of up to 25 billion cubic metres of gas per year; the supply of Turkmen electricity via the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan route; and the establishment of the transit corridor “Central Asia-Middle East” (Uzbekistan - Turkmenistan - Iran - Oman).

Berdimuhamedov also invited Uzbekistan to explore the possibility of using the Turkmen port infrastructure on the Caspian Sea coast to create a transport corridor “Uzbekistan - Turkmenistan - Caspian Sea - South Caucasus” with access to the Black Sea ports of Georgia, Turkey, Romania, and other countries. Taking the opportunity, he invited Mirziyoyev to attend the opening ceremony of a new international sea port in the city of Turkmenbashi (Krasnovodsk) on May 2, 2018, which is slated to become a transport and logistics centre of continental importance. Uvarov believes that Tashkent – which has been hoping for access to the Caspian since Soviet times – will certainly agree to Ashkhabad's logistics proposals.

<https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2018/04/25/tashkentskaja-iniciativa-improvizacia-berdymuhamedova-ili-holodnyj-raschet-mirzieeva-46012.html>

### **Fear and distrust: Almazbek Atambayev's hopes are being shattered in Kyrgyzstan**

*“Regnum” news agency (Russia)*

Kyrgyzstan likely stands on the verge of open confrontation between incumbent President Sooronbay Jeenbekov and his predecessor, Almazbek Atambayev. In April Jeenbekov terminated a few key officials who would have been able to help the former President retain control over the state system. There is also information that criminal cases are being prepared against the ex-president's inner circle.

Grigory Mikhailov, Editor-in-Chief of the Central Asian Editorial Board of Regnum news agency, considers that Atambayev's plan is facing the threat of collapse. The essence of his plan was to bring his colleague, former Governor of the Osh region, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, to power. He would in turn become a conductor of the ex-President's influence and help the Atambayev inner circle to preserve key positions and resources. A system of checks and balances would prevent the ex-President's loss of control over the new President. This system included the Prime-minister, the State Committee for National Security, the General Prosecutor Office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the largest parliamentary faction (the pro-Atambayev Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan), and loyal media.

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However, all did not go according to plan. After Jeenbekov was elected President, several reasons intervened to shift matters, the first of which was an emergence of competition between the two Presidents' inner circles. Newcomers wanted more than to be manipulated by members of the former crew, while the old guard feared to lose influence and offices. This internal disharmony meant a failure to create a single presidential team, which planted the first seeds of mistrust and tension between Jeenbekov and Atambayev.

Mikhailov considers that at least four factors weakened Atambayev's position in the infighting.

Firstly, Prime-Minister Sapar Isakov, who was regarded as a politician from Atambayev's team, failed repeatedly in implementing most economic projects with the participation of investors. Solid companies left Kyrgyzstan, since they couldn't find a common language with authorities, and some investors turned out to have dubious reputations. All of this negatively impacted Isakov's image as a "promising and successful politician", which in turn, damaged Atambayev.

Secondly, there was growing criticism of corrupt authorities by civil society, triggered mainly by the accident at the Bishkek heat power plant in the dead of winter. The capital inhabitants interpreted that accident as the aftermath of theft, incompetence and negligence of authorities. This struck a painful blow to the government's reputation and gave its critics plenty of arguments.

Thirdly, many influential local politicians, deputies, security officials and key media started distancing themselves from Atambayev immediately after the elections, some even swearing oaths of allegiance to Jeembekov.

And, fourthly, there was a scandal surrounding the new President's brother, Asilbek Jeembekov, which became a fresh point of tensions between the two contending camps. Asilbek Jeembekov was gradually becoming a focal point of pro-President and anti-Atambayev forces in Parliament, which troubled the former President, who publicly stated to Sooronbay Jeenbekov that his brother should leave Parliament. This, however, was seen as impolite by eastern standards. Mikhailov considers that if President Jeembekov had fulfilled this demand it would have meant a loss of leverage in Parliament as well as public acknowledgement of Atambayev's authority over himself and his family.

Faced with this thorny situation, Jeenbekov, it can be assumed, decided to strike back. Within just a few days, in early April, a few key figures, loyal to Atambayev, at the Kyrgyz State Committee for National Security, including its head, were pensioned off. Almazbek Usenov, responsible for the control over Kyrgyz media, and Farid Niyazov, Presidential Apparatus Head, also decided to step down. Currently, a large number of the ex-president's protégés in the capital and regions are at risk of finding themselves required to resign too.

Given this situation, Atambayev attempted to strengthen his position by returning to public policy. On March 31, 2018, he was elected Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan. Mikhailov notes that this fact raised hopes that Jeembekov and Atambayev would find a common language and prevent the further escalation of their conflict, by fixing the existing balance of power. However, the resignation of Prime-



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minister Sapar Isakov on 19 April, 2018, dashed these hopes and opened the way for the reshuffling of political, economic and criminal spheres of influence. As all intra-elite arrangements have lost force, Kyrgyz politicians will now have to build new relationships. The intra-elite showdown is, however, not without its positive side, since it gives a chance to the Kyrgyz opposition and media to restore their strength. As regards Atambayev, Mikhailov notes, he may return to his beloved and comfortable role of a fiery street fighter, battling with injustice.

<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2401423.html>

### **Chinese and Indian projects in Central Asia are already in competition with each other**

*"Eurasia. Expert",  
Information and analytical publication  
on the Eurasian region (Russia)*

Erkin Baidarov, Senior research fellow of the Institute of Oriental Studies of Kazakhstan, parses through the Indian and Chinese regional projects on resource-rich Central Asia. He points out that both actors use soft power tools widely. A motto of Indian soft power strategy is "the force of the argument versus the argument of force", which is based on the philosophy of "ahimsa" (not to injure). Delhi also promotes its image as the world's largest democracy. In turn, China bets on the economic dimension of soft power and prefers to act through official channels. Beijing also tries to remove the cultural and language barriers between China and Central Asia by investing in the promotion of Mandarin, as well as Chinese culture and lifestyle. The distinguishing feature of Chinese approach is a reliance on traditional values.

Baidarov also emphasises the difference between the two actors' approaches towards the Afghan conflict, the management of which is an essential part of Central Asian stability and security. Regarding Afghanistan, Delhi exclusively supports the side of the government, participating in the reconstruction process and advocating for a peaceful settlement of the Afghan crisis. Unlike Delhi, Beijing calls to make the Taliban a part of the peace process, which troubles India, since it considers the Taliban as a group involved in terrorist activity, with, moreover, strong ties to Pakistan.

Meanwhile, Baidarov doesn't subscribe to the opinion that Chinese and Indian regional transport projects uncompromisingly compete with each other. In his view, India doesn't oppose any transport projects in Asia with the exception of those which violate its sovereignty and territorial integrity as, for example, the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC). This corridor crosses part of Kashmir, which India considers, in legal terms, as its unalienable territory, unlawfully occupied by Pakistan. India has however joined the "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank" (AIIB), which is regarded as a Chinese project focussed on supporting the "Belt and Road Initiative". Within the framework of AIIB economic projects, India provided a loan of 100 million USD for the joint funding of the "Shorkot-Khanewal" section of the M-4

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motorway in Pakistan, as well as 300 million USD for the Tarbela-5 hydropower project in Pakistan. This means that India has de facto already become part of both the "Belt and Road initiative" and CPEC.

Baidarov also argues that the "International North-South Transport Corridor" (India-Iran-South Caucasus, or Central Asia - Russia) isn't a challenge to the "Chinese Belt and Road Initiative"; in his view, both projects in fact perfectly complement each other.

<http://eurasia.expert/indiya-i-kitay-podbirayut-klyuch-k-tsentralnoy-azii-no-raznymi-sposobami-kazakhstanskiy-ekspert/>

### **"Pro-Chinese Integration": in whose interests is the SCO developing?**

*"Regnum" news agency (Russia)*

Following India and Pakistan's entry into the SCO, and several new security or economic challenges on the global and regional scale, the organisation's role is being actively rethought and reassessed. The Second Sochi Eurasian Integration Forum "Prospects for Development and Strengthening of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", which was held on April 17-18, was entirely dedicated to the discussion of the prior miscalculations and future prospects for the SCO's development.

As per Vladimir Paramonov, Head of the Central Eurasia Analytical Group (Uzbekistan), although the SCO countries achieved some success in strengthening regional security, the economic aspect of their cooperation still leaves much to be desired. This is mainly because of the poor design, viewed from a systematic angle, of their economic integration projects. As such, many decisions of SCO member states are merely based on their own short-term interests. In Paramonov's opinion, only China out of all SCO member states has a truly long-term planning approach with respect to integration measures.

The director of the Centre for East Asian and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Studies at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University), Alexander Lukin, has stressed that economic achievements within the framework of the SCO have so far been insignificant, officials often misleadingly presenting the outcomes of bilateral cooperation as the fruits of SCO activities. Lukin points out that the idea of creating a financial mechanism (the SCO bank) has been fruitlessly discussed for 15 years, while, for instance, the BRICS bloc has already set up its own bank. Lukin considers that the SCO's most notable successes have been in the area of security cooperation. Yet, he points out that the SCO countries need to do a great deal more in the field of international politics so as to more consistently and confidently react to the actions of the West, such as the recent US strikes in Syria.

Vitaly Tretyakov, Dean of the Graduate School of Television at Moscow State University, has noted that the key mistake of the SCO countries is that they seem unable to develop a unified policy in the field of collective security. He believes that the SCO countries should be focussed upon combining legal and diplomatic services as a gradual bedrock for new structures which could replace the self-discredited United



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Nations. In other words, Tretyakov sees the SCO as a regional alternative to the UN, and as a building block (if united with other similar structures) for a new, improved UN-analogue in the future.

Deputy Chairman of Vneshekonombank (VEB), former Deputy Minister of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, Andrey Klepach, considers that the SCO should strive to become an effective instrument for maintaining economic stability amid the US-EU sanctions against Russia and the first flashes of trade war between the US and China. Given these conditions, Klepach notes, the SCO could play a leading role in building the space for economic cooperation in Greater Eurasia, as the SCO countries account for more than half of the world's gold and currency reserves and a significant part of its financial flows. Klepach also suggests that attention should be given to the joint development of a new financial model, which would include settlements in national currencies, removing the risks of foreign exchange.

<https://regnum.ru/news/economy/2405521.html>

<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2405467.html>

### **How should Russia react to the emergence of US military at Caspian ports?**

*Alina Nazarova,  
Andrei Rezchikov,  
Nikita Kovalenko,  
Journalists of*

*"Vzglyad" Business newspaper (Russia)*

Kazakh Senate deputies ratified the protocol on amending the intergovernmental agreement with the United States on providing commercial rail transit of special cargo through Kazakhstan. US cargo will be transported via Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea to Kazakhstan (Aktau and Kuryk ports), and then by rail to Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. This event caused a rather acute reaction of the Russian expert community, which interpreted the ratified protocol as the first step towards the strengthening of US military presence in the Caspian Sea.

Alexander Sobyenin, Director for Cultural, Educational and Scientific Projects of the Centre for Traditional Cultures (Russia), evaluates this step of Astana's as anti-Russian, and considers it as an evidence of political-military pushing of US interests. At the same time, he says that this agreement doesn't threaten Russian interests, although the emergence of any US ship with military or non-military freights in the Caspian Sea is highly undesirable to Russia.

According to Alexander Knyazev, Russian expert on Central Asia and the Middle East, the use of Aktau and Kuryk ports for US military cargo transit may destroy the fragile architecture of Caspian security. The use of this route will be a strong irritant for Russia and Iran, and a further hurdle with regard to solving the problem of the Caspian Sea's legal status.

First Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee for CIS Affairs, Konstantin Zatulin, agrees with the concerns voiced by Russian

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experts and media, and emphasises that when Kazakhstan speaks of its relations with the US it actively uses the phrase “strategic partnership”, but when it comes to matters that are important to Moscow, Astana takes a neutral position. As per Zatulin, Russia and Kazakhstan had previously agreed to jointly conduct business in the Caspian Sea; the appearance of the extra-Caspian states’ armed forces is, as such, he notes, a violation of the spirit of these bilateral agreements. Zatulin additionally reminds that Iran is a Caspian state too, and it is so far unclear how it might react to the US-Kazakh deal, given the constant aggravation of US-Iranian relations. Zatulin doesn’t rule out that Washington may eventually try to set up an operational base in the Caspian Sea. He considers that this issue requires very serious discussions between Moscow and Astana and even expressed the hope that such a discussion might have already taken place. Alexander Khramchikhin, Deputy Director of the Moscow-based independent non-governmental Institute for Political and Military Analysis, holds a different view. He cast doubt about the possibility of a US military base in the Caspian Sea, since this sea is a drainless lake, into which one can only enter through the Volga River or the Volga-Don system, both of which are wholly located on the territory of the Russian Federation. Therefore, he concludes that a US military base cannot emerge there, not even theoretically.

Talgat Mamyraymov, Head of Real Politik Analytical Service (Kazakhstan), believes that Astana must have held preliminary consultations with the Kremlin on this issue, probably, even before Nazarbayev's visit to Washington. Most likely, Putin and Nazarbayev came to a consensus that the ports could be used for the transit of US cargo, as Russia is also interested in a stable Afghanistan.

Mamyraymov believes that Astana also had its own reasons to give consent to the transit of American cargo through its Caspian ports. The fact being that Kazakhstan, somewhat caught between the conflict between Russia and the US, fears that this will affect its interests. Astana therefore tries to somehow appease the US, in particular by granting the right to transit. According to the Kazakh expert, the Kazakh-US agreement will deal with transit only and it is unlikely that Astana will agree to the deployment of a US military base, as it doesn’t need a conflict with either Moscow or Tehran.

<https://vz.ru/news/2018/4/25/919608.html>

<https://vz.ru/world/2018/4/25/870297.html>

### **Tired of the war: how Tashkent proposed to end the Afghan conflict**

*Angelica Basisini,  
Alexander Atasuntsev,  
Journalists of RBC multimedia holding (Russia)*

Uzbekistan, seeking to contribute to the peaceful settlement of the Afghan conflict, organized in Tashkent on March 27, 2018, the international conference entitled “Peace Process, Security Cooperation, and Regional Connectivity”. The regional countries’ leaders were present,

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including Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Other key participants included: Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergei Lavrov; Deputy US Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Thomas Shannon; and the Representative of the UN Secretary General, Tadamichi Yamamoto.

The President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in his opening speech said that the world community should no longer ignore the expansion of international terrorist groups to Afghanistan, the ongoing violence and bloodshed, and the drug trafficking. Minister Lavrov, meanwhile, pointed out that the situation in Afghanistan keeps deteriorating. He noted that the Taliban controls, in whole or in part, up to half the country's territory, conducts active military operations against the government, and organises sabotage. Regarding ISIS, Lavrov said that it penetrates into the Northern provinces of Afghanistan bordering the CIS countries, where it sets up its strongholds, threatening the security of Russia and her neighbours.

The conference culmination was the adoption of the Tashkent declaration calling for the start of direct negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban without any preconditions. President Mirziyoyev also announced Tashkent's readiness to provide a platform for peace talks and to mediate between the Afghan opposing parties. Tadamichi Yamamoto asked countries which have contacts with the Taliban to help nudge this movement into the peace process.

Nikita Mendkovitch, Head of the Eurasian analytical club (Russia), expressed his confidence that the conference could provide an impetus to the Afghan peace process. In his opinion, the adopted declaration can be regarded as a significant breakthrough, since all countries involved, including the US, recognised that there is no alternative to peace talks. Mendkovitch reminded that Washington previously criticised Moscow for its appeals to Kabul to begin negotiations with the Taliban. This being said, Mendkovitch is nonetheless certain that the way to negotiations will be complicated, because Kabul isn't ready to create a coalition government with the Taliban and provide this movement's leaders some key posts in the executive branch. In turn, the Taliban is also not ready to change its position regarding the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan as a preliminary condition for the beginning of peace talks with Kabul.

<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/03/2018/5aba27539a794777893b7d78>

### **Afghanistan: are conditions ripe for a political solution?**

*Hasht Sobh newspaper (Afghanistan)*

The article analyses the possible ways in which the US can force the Taliban to come to the negotiating table. Given the announcement of the new US strategy for Afghanistan and the dominance of US and NATO air forces in the Afghan air, it becomes clear that the Taliban can't simply seize control of the whole country.

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At the same time, the article underlines that military pressure alone will be insufficient, because it will primarily harm ordinary militants, while the leaders of the movement lay out of reach, hiding in the safe havens of Quetta and Karachi. This fact, of course, will reduce their interest in participating in a peace process. The article also stresses another factor making the Taliban leaders unwilling to get down to negotiations: namely their confidence in unlimited access to financial and human resources. In this regard, to dismantle their confidence one should further increase pressure on Pakistan, since there is a direct link between the degree of pressure on Islamabad and the level of activity of the Taliban.

After the Second Kabul Process Conference, held in March, 2018, the Taliban also found itself under moral pressure. A clear sign of this was its refusal to give comprehensive answers to the peace proposals of President Ashraf Ghani, which included approving amnesty for Taliban fighters, recognition of the Taliban as a political party, amending the constitution, and lifting sanctions on this movement's leaders.

In conclusion, the article states that the only way to launch an efficient peace process in Afghanistan is to exert incremental moral, political, economic and military pressure on the Taliban leadership and the Pakistani military.

<https://8am.af/x8am/1396/12/23/are-conditions-for-a-political-solution-ready/>

(Translated from Farsi)

## ISIS turns towards Afghanistan

*Online-media "Jawedan" (Afghanistan)*

According to Ahmad Sayeedi, an Afghan independent expert and political analyst, ISIS's patrons seem to be reorienting their attention from Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan. Hundreds of foreign fighters from the Middle East are regularly sent to Afghanistan and, as a result, ISIS is establishing its control over vast territories stepwise, especially in the north of Afghanistan, in the provinces of Jawzjan, Saripul and Faryab, as well as in some areas of Nangarhar, Kunar, Badakhshan and the Nuristan provinces. Sayeedi notes that there is also another factor that creates favourable conditions for the expansion of ISIS influence in Afghanistan: namely, an exacerbating competition between external actors, such as the US, Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which inhibits them from proper cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism. Sayeedi further points out that the current conflict in Afghanistan is a form of proxy-war, and so one cannot exclude the possibility that the intelligence services and groups of competing states may carry out their interests via ISIS and the Taliban. The official Afghan authorities find themselves in a strange position regarding the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan, notes Sayeedi. Either they do not have accurate information about the activity of this terrorist group, or they do not provide it to people. Some officials occasionally even deny the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan. This position is maintained despite the fact that, from 2015, ISIS announced the

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establishment of its Vilayat Khorasan branch in Afghanistan and Pakistan. From this time, this group has committed many attacks on mosques, schools and Shiites in different Afghan cities, including with the use of suicide bombers.

Sayeedi considers that the importance of Afghanistan for ISIS will continue increasing, especially for its allied groups, such as the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement, Hizb ut-Tahrir; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan; and Tajik and Chechen groups. These have all fought alongside ISIS in the Middle East and are now returning to their own regions. For them, Afghanistan is the best haven and bridgehead for the further expansion to the Fergana valley and into Russian or Chinese security zones.

For the implementation of its long-term plans ISIS may try to take advantage of the ongoing global competition between the US and Russia, , and the US and China. Sayeedi supposes that ISIS may try to reconcile with the Americans so as to get access to some kind of aid, arguing that ISIS and the US have fought in the Middle East, but that they are now no longer at war. If this scenario is realised, Russia will not stand by and watch. It will instead attempt to create problems for the US and Western troops in Afghanistan through cooperation with the Taliban. This, in turn, will make the Afghan war more long-lasting and risks paralysing US actions in this country.

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(Translated from Farsi)