

THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE WITHDRAWAL OF US TROOPS AND ITS IMPACT ON REGIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract. *The end of two decades of counterterrorist operations and the subsequent withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan created a complex military and political situation in that country. The government of Uzbekistan reacted neutrally to the policy of the Taliban and expressed its readiness to provide all possible assistance to the Afghan people. Today, Uzbekistan's Afghan strategy is aimed at maintaining pragmatic economic cooperation with any legitimate government in Kabul and strengthening the defense capability of the national army to neutralize potential threats from the south. In implementing this strategy, the government of Uzbekistan is interested in cooperation with its neighbors from Afghanistan, world powers and international organizations. In this regard, the article analyzes the situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US troops and its impact on the regional security, including national interests of Uzbekistan.*

Keywords: *American withdrawal, situation in Afghanistan, ISIS-K, Afghan war, Taliban, humanitarian crisis, impact on neighbors, Pakistan, Russia, China, Turkmenistan, foreign policy of Uzbekistan, transport infrastructure projects, Uzbekistan's position, international community.*

Introduction. After President Joe Biden announced on 14 April 2021 the full, rapid and unconditional withdrawal of all international military forces from Afghanistan by 11 September, the military-political situation in the country became complicated. In a short period of time, the Taliban first managed to occupy the northern, northwestern and western parts of the country bordering the Central Asian states and Iran, in early August the provincial administrative centers and finally on August 15, 2021, Kabul without a resistance. The Taliban first sought to prevent outside interference in the previous Afghan war by establishing control of Afghanistan's borders with neighboring countries and taking control of the main transport infrastructure connecting the country's provinces with Kabul. The support of the Gulf states, especially Pakistan's support, has also been a key factor in the Taliban's success. The sudden collapse of the Afghan official government in Kabul has turned the process of evacuating coalition forces and Afghan citizens who collaborated with them into chaos.

The formed gaps in security of Afghanistan as a result of withdrawal of US troops and seizure of power in Kabul by Talibs led to growth of activity of such international terrorist groups as al-Qaeda and Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) and it among other factors created conditions of emergence of an unpredictable military-political situation in Afghanistan.

In these conditions, Central Asia states, in general, neutrally reacted to policy of Talibs and expressed their readiness to provide all possible assistance to the Afghan people. At the same time, Tajikistan remains the only country in the region which is not supporting regime of Talibs.

The president of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev noted that not only Uzbekistan or the neighboring countries, but also the whole world are interested in the establishment of peace in Afghanistan, the Uzbek-Afghan border has been opened, the supply of food, petroleum products and electricity has been restored, and it is impossible to isolate Afghanistan and throw it into the whirlpool of problems in the current difficult. The ongoing tense military-political situation in Afghanistan may

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delay the implementation of Uzbek projects and initiatives (economic, energy, transport, etc.) in the Afghan direction.

Today, Uzbekistan's strategy in Afghanistan is aimed at continuing pragmatic economic cooperation with any legitimate government in Kabul and strengthening the army's defense capabilities to neutralize potential threats from the south. In implementing this strategy, the Government of Uzbekistan is interested in establishing cooperation with Afghanistan's neighbors, other leading countries and international organizations. The Afghan factor has played a key role in the development of Uzbek-American relations. Washington recognizes Tashkent as a strategic partner in the region in the implementation of projects aimed at resolving the Afghan problem.

Main part. Mutual mistrust among members of Ashraf Ghani's government, corruption, military depression and as a result of effective propaganda some elite units of the army, including special forces, transfer to the Taliban have decided the fate of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Experts note that President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan was a foregone conclusion. As long as Joe Biden served as vice president under the Obama administration, he advocated limiting the war in Afghanistan from a missionary point of view and withdrawing troops from the country. Although the White House's decision has been criticized by politicians, opinion polls show that 73 percent of Americans support it[1].

Intelligence agencies and analysts were well aware of the fall of the regime in Kabul, but they predicted that it would take several months. The sudden collapse of the Afghan official government in Kabul has left the evacuation of coalition forces and allied Afghan civilians in chaos. This has tarnished the image of the United States in the international arena, as well as caused the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

When President Biden announced on 14 April 2021 withdrawal of US forces, he tied it to a US domestic political event – the twentieth anniversary of the al-Qaeda's September 11 attacks on American soil. As so often, America's Afghan policy was pegged to what might sound good to a domestic US audience rather than its consequences for Afghanistan – good or bad[2].

Given the demands of the situation in Afghanistan, the United States did not seek to support the available status quo with new drones MQ-9 Reaper, which can fly over Afghanistan for 26 hours non-stop, conduct surveillance and deliver air strikes if necessary[3]. Former Pakistani ambassador to Washington Hussain Haqqani said that he always considered Joe Biden's statement that “our war is not with the Taliban, but with al-Qaeda” to be a simplistic thinking.

In June 2021, a report leaked by the US intelligence service predicted that the Ghani government in Kabul would collapse within 90 days of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan[4]. But the Taliban's lightning-fast attacks came as a surprise to the Afghan government and the international community. No one expected the fall of the government in Kabul before the withdrawal of the US military and its allies.

The US military academy at West Point estimates that the Taliban's main force is about 60,000, with other sources estimating between 75,000 and 80,000. According to the Newlines Institute, a Washington-based think tank, the Taliban have covered their expenses by selling drugs, smuggling, and collecting taxes from farmers and other businesses in areas under their control. They also received financial support from oil-rich Arab states in the Persian Gulf. According to the US Central Intelligence Agency, the Afghan government's annual budget in 2017 was USD2.2 billion,

which did not differ much from the Taliban's income. The Taliban's annual revenue was around USD 1.5 billion[5].

In the report of NATO it is said that, in 2020 the Taliban earned USD464 million through the mining industry, USD416 million through drug trafficking, USD240 million came from foreign donors, USD240 million from product exports, and USD160 million in local taxes[6]. According to Reuters, the Taliban demanded compensation of 5 million afghanis (about USD 66.5 thousand) a year from the Afghan National Energy Company Breshna, threatening to damage power lines. As a result of victories over government troops, the Taliban have seized USD 84 billion in modern weapons, various types of armored vehicles, night vision devices and artillery equipment left by the Americans in Afghanistan.

The support of the Gulf states, especially Pakistan's support, has also been a key factor in the Taliban's success. Although the official noted that Islamabad is neutral on the issue of the civil war in Afghanistan, but experts believe that Pakistan will be able to hide the Taliban's field commanders in the mountainous regions adjacent to Afghanistan and provide them with permanent support through their special services. According to the expert of the Carnegie Center, Aqil Shah, the Pakistani army and intelligence services are helping the Taliban through the free movement of militants and weapons across the border, the treatment of wounded militants in Pakistani hospitals, their ability to travel with a Pakistani passport, and their ability to set up businesses in major cities.

In the 1990s, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were the three countries that recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Another state of the Persian Gulf, Qatar, has granted asylum to the Taliban's political leadership from Doha and has helped establish relations with the international community.

The Taliban movement has sought to intensify diplomatic efforts in parallel with military operations in seizing power in Kabul. The political leaders of the movement were received by the foreign ministries of Russia and China, during the negotiations, the Taliban delegation promised that their struggle would not go beyond the borders of Afghanistan. The Wall Street Journal correspondent Chao Deng says that the Taliban see China as a source of international legitimacy, a potential economic sponsor and ally, as a means of influencing Pakistan.

The security vacuum following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and seize power in Kabul by Taliban has led to an increase in the activities of international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province and it among other factors created conditions of emergence of an unpredictable military-political situation in Afghanistan. Observers believe that the fares of terrorist groups in Afghanistan could be a decisive factor in the period after the international forces left the country, preventing the Civil War and finding peace.

One of the most serious threats the Taliban movement faces in consolidating its power in Afghanistan could be the activation of the Islamic State of Khorasan terrorist group. Today, despite the fact that the group's support base in Afghan society is dwindling, militants continue to be recruited from the Salafi sect in the east of the country.

Faisal Devji, a professor at Oxford University, warned that the Taliban's biggest enemy is not the Western community or liberal Afghans, but the global Islamic State which has emerged as a result of al-Qaeda's decline. Unlike the Taliban, al-Qaeda was a global project in the hands of the West after the Cold War, while ISIL was a product of the US invasion of Iraq[7].

The Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), a regional cell of the ISIL terrorist organization, aims to establish an “Islamic State” in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and neighboring areas, particularly in Central Asia. The cell is named after the historical province of Khorasan, which in the Middle Ages covered Afghanistan, Iran and parts of Central Asia. In January 2015, in the Kurram Agency (FSA), a group of disgruntled field commanders of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban formed the Khorasan Province. ISIL-K is made up of the Taliban, the Turkestan Islamic Movement faction, the Uighur Islamic Party of Turkestan, and a number of other foreign terrorist groups. The emergence of the Islamic State cell on the AfPak border is nonrandom. The instability in the region is explained by the internal confrontation between the Afghan government and the Taliban (Afghan and Pakistani) and the geopolitical interests of the leading states. In 2015-2018, a group of ethnic Uzbeks led by former Taliban commanders operated under the banner of the Islamic State in the north of the country, particularly in the Darzob and Kushtepa districts of Juzjan Province. The group was crushed by the Taliban in a military operation in August 2018, and its militants surrendered to government forces, while terrorists of Central Asian descent surrendered to the Taliban. Several emirs of the Khorasan region have been killed in the past. Terrorists operating under the banner of Khorasan Province remain largely in eastern Afghanistan, particularly in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces[8].

After the death of Mullah Omar, in 2015, the Afghan Taliban formed the Red Unit with high military training and discipline in order to maintain unity in the movement and punish the Taliban who joined ISIS-K. The Red Unit has become an important component of the Taliban's fight against ISIS-K threats in Afghanistan. The Red Unit team was sent to the western province of Farah, on the Iranian border, where a Taliban splinter group had formed under the dissident commander Mullah Muhammad Rasool. The Red Unit's commandos had a devastating effect on Rasool's group, killing several of his men and forcing him to flee to Pakistan[9]. Mullah Rasool was later arrested by Pakistani police.

It is known that the Taliban has been active in Afghanistan for many years. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan A. Kamilov also noted this in his interview. Unlike the Taliban, the Islamic State-Khorasan group in Afghanistan and Pakistan has accepted calls for jihad against non-Muslims around the world. The Center for International and Strategic Studies noted that ISIS-K militants have carried out hundreds of attacks against the civilian population in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including minority Shiites and US-led coalition forces. The US government considers ISIS-K as a constant threat to itself and its allies in Southern and Central Asia[10]. In an interview with the Associated Press, a US Department of Defense official said that the Donald Trump administration invited the Taliban to fight together against the Islamic State group during the signing of a peace agreement in Doha, in February 2020.

The Khorasan Province group, meanwhile, has sharply criticized the Taliban, questioning their religious beliefs and accusing the Taliban of being a tool in US policy in the region. Thirteen US soldiers, numerous Afghan civilians and more than two dozen Taliban fighters were killed in a suicide attack by ISIS-K militants outside Kabul airport on August 26, 2021. In this regard, Gen. Mark Milli, chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff US Army, who made the report, said that the US intelligence services are re-evaluating the possibility of future terrorist attacks from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State recover faster than previously predicted. As the United States withdrew its troops from Afghanistan, the Pentagon's ability to respond quickly to ISIL-K militants was limited, and the intelligence community's ability to monitor the group's activities was weakened. Officials from the administration of Joe Biden noted that the Islamic State group is just one of many terrorist threats that

the United States is fighting around the world, noting that the risks arising from it can be eliminated with the help of drones from the Gulf or other military bases located in the region.

The Washington administration says it is concerned that Afghanistan could become a base for extremist groups planning to attack the West. In a September, 2021 interview with CNN, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said the United States was taking “all possible means” to counter the threat. The Pentagon has said it does not have to coordinate with the Taliban interim government to strike ISIL and al-Qaeda positions in Afghanistan.

In turn, the Taliban press secretary, Zabihullah Mujahid said several times that ISIL-K could pose no threat to the country’s security, confirming that in August 2021, the Taliban killed ISIS-K leader Abu Omar Khorasani.

According to experts, at present, the main problem facing the Taliban is not ISIL, but the prevention of social tension, the strengthening of state institutions and the stabilization of the Afghan economy, as well as the non-recognition of the interim Taliban government by the international community. In the current difficult situation, Washington's policy of “freezing” Afghan assets and isolating the Taliban government increases the risk of a resumption of civil war in the country.

Although the interim government of Taliban was not recognized by the international community, foreign ministers of interested countries such as Qatar, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and special envoys across Afghanistan of Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and the UN held talks in Kabul with interim government leaders, including Mullah Mohammed Hassan Akhund. Pakistani officials announced that Islamabad would take a joint decision with other Afghan neighbors to recognize the Taliban government. They noted that the decision would be collective and would repeat the basic requirements for the Taliban: to form an inclusive government, respect human rights and ensure that Afghanistan does not become a haven for terrorists[11].

Interestingly, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, one of the three countries that recognized the Taliban regime in the 1990s, announced during a visit to India that this time the Taliban had no ties with the interim government. One of the reasons why the Saudis have so far remained neutral may be due to the resurgence of al-Qaeda and ISIS in Afghanistan[12].

In Doha Taliban’s Foreign Ministry Deputy Sher Muhammad Stanikzai met with Turkey’s ambassador to Qatar and said that the ambassador was “ready to develop a positive and constructive relationship with Taliban government”.

On September 18, 2021, the president of the Russia V. Putin stressed the need to work together with the interim government of Afghanistan, formed by the Taliban, at a meeting of the heads of state of the “SCO-CSTO” format. The Chinese leader Xi Jinping also called on the international community to support Afghanistan at this summit. The SCO member states participating in the summit agreed to define the terms of cooperation with the Taliban government “on the basis of mutual consensus”.

Central Asian states have not reacted sharply to the Taliban’s policy, but have expressed their readiness to provide all possible assistance to the Afghan people. However, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon remains the only country in the region whose relations with the Taliban regime are uncompromising. He spoke at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, calling the events in Panjshir a humanitarian catastrophe. He also noted that 46 percent of the population of Afghanistan is

composed of Tajik-speaking peoples, and that it is necessary to form an inclusive government through elections in the country. In response, two deputy prime ministers of the Taliban interim government, Mullah Baradar and Abdul Salam Hanafi, said in a statement that Tajikistan was interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs and that thousands of fighters would be sent to Takhar province, which borders Tajikistan.

The 76th session of the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2021 discussed the threat of an economic crisis in Afghanistan and the issue of allowing the Taliban to use “frozen” Afghan assets. In particular, the president of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev, speaking at the session, noted that Uzbekistan is strengthening a completely new political environment in the spirit of mutual solidarity and respect, close military and strategic partnership in the region, and noted that the main goal is to transform Central Asia into a prosperous and sustainable development, a place of trust and friendship. In this regard, Uzbekistan proposed to adopt a special resolution of the UN General Assembly on strengthening the interdependence of Central and South Asia. In his speech, the president noted that not only Uzbekistan or the neighboring countries, but also the whole world are interested in the establishment of peace in Afghanistan, the Uzbek-Afghan border has been opened, the supply of food, petroleum products and electricity has been restored, and it is impossible to isolate Afghanistan and throw it into the whirlpool of problems in the current difficult [13]. It is known that the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev in September 2020 at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly proposed to establish a permanent committee on Afghanistan at the UN.

President Sh. Mirziyoyev in the meeting of heads of state in the format of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-Collective Security Treaty Organization in Dushanbe noted that a completely new reality has emerged in Afghanistan - in a very short time, the Taliban has consolidated all power and the need to form a capable government in Afghanistan that includes all ethno-political groups [14]. He also said that the prospects for stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan depend on the restoration of Afghan statehood and the development of cooperation between the international community and Afghanistan. In his speech, the President touched upon Uzbekistan's position on cooperation in Afghanistan, noting that dialogue with the new government will be carried out in proportion to the fulfillment of its commitments. These include: not to give safe haven to international terrorist organizations; Prevent the use of Afghan territory against third countries; ensuring that fundamental rights and freedoms of man, including women and national minorities, are respected. All of the above are listed as Taliban obligations.

It was also emphasized by the president of Uzbekistan that the importance of continuing socio-economic and infrastructural projects in Afghanistan, as well as the fact that the new authorities must guarantee security in the implementation of joint projects are important.

Discussion. The ongoing tense military-political situation in Afghanistan may delay the implementation of Uzbek projects and initiatives (economic, energy, transport, etc.) in the Afghan direction. It is known that in recent years, Uzbekistan's initiatives to address the Afghan problem have played a positive role in raising the country's image in the international arena. In particular, the Afghan factor has played a key role in the development of Uzbek-American relations. Washington recognizes Tashkent as a strategic partner in the region in the implementation of projects aimed at resolving the Afghan problem.

In recent years, the Government of Uzbekistan has been actively continuing negotiations with the Taliban movement. In August 2018, the head of the Doha political office of the movement

Mohammed Abbas Stanikzai, in August 2019, the Taliban delegations headed by Mullah Abdulgani Baradar visited Tashkent. In addition, in February 2020, at the signing ceremony of the US-Taliban peace agreement in Doha, the minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan A.Kamilov participated and repeatedly met with representatives of the Taliban and discussed issues of peace. On October 7, 2021, the delegation headed by A.Kamilov held talks with the deputy of the interim government of the Taliban on political issues Mullah Abdul Kabir in Kabul.

Today, Uzbekistan's strategy in Afghanistan is aimed at continuing pragmatic economic cooperation with any legitimate government in Kabul and strengthening the army's defense capabilities to neutralize potential threats from the south. In implementing this strategy, the Government of Uzbekistan is interested in establishing cooperation with Afghanistan's neighbors, other leading countries and international organizations.

Nowadays, the problem of Afghanistan remains one of the most discussed in relations between Pakistan and Uzbekistan. In particular, during a state visit to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on March 3-4, 2022, the President of Uzbekistan discussed with Prime Minister Imran Khan issues of trade, investment, transport and transit through the territory of Afghanistan, as well as practical cooperation in solving the Afghan problem. It should be noted that Pakistan is economically interested in solving its transit and energy problems and increasing the employment of its Indian Ocean seaports within the framework of the Chinese "One Belt - One Road" project, through the opening of the northern trade route.

Until recently, in Uzbekistan the taking place events in Afghanistan and Pakistan were considered as a source of threat and the trend of a certain distancing from them and preservation of formal level of communication was noted. However, since 2016 the approach to this question cardinally changed, and at the initiative of the president Sh. Mirziyoyev, for the first time the neighboring Afghanistan was recognized as the country of opportunities. Afghanistan connects Uzbekistan with the South Asia where lives 1.8 billion people, the huge market for sale of goods and investments that can serve as an incentive for the Uzbek industry, agriculture and the service sector. The falling of the government of A.Ghani for very short term and formation of an interim government by the Taliban in Kabul, were also unexpected for the Uzbek diplomacy. A month before the falling of power in Afghanistan, a number of the economic projects directed to the solution of the Afghan problem was discussed at the international conference in Tashkent.

Uzbek political scientist F.Mirzaboev said that from the city of Termez to the Karachi port of Pakistan is the shortest route from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean. The strategic task of Uzbekistan is to reach the Karachi Sea port and create convenient transport corridors in this direction. Without carrying out this task, it is impossible to effectively conduct trade with the world, to ensure the solidarity of national products, to increase export potential and to promote economic development [15].

Today, a completely new reality has emerged in Afghanistan - the Taliban have seized power and announced the formation of a new interim government. The government list did not include representatives from the administration of former President A.Ghani. Muhammad Hassan Akhund, a longtime head of the former Taliban government, has been appointed acting prime minister.

Coordinating efforts with Pakistan and Turkmenistan could also be effective in addressing this issue. With experience in relations with the Taliban government, Turkmenistan as a neutral state is interested in peace-making in Afghanistan, that to use the transit capacity of the neighboring

country. In the mid-1990s, the decision of the Central Asian leaders to create a regional security system under the leadership of the Russia was not supported by the President of Turkmenistan S.Niyazov, who agreed to establish good relations with the Taliban.

In the current situation, the Uzbek side has limited opportunities to address the consequences of the difficult military-political situation in Afghanistan. Official Tashkent should pursue a pragmatic policy on Afghanistan and continue to pursue a policy of non-interference in the political process within the country, without taking sides with any political or ethnic group. Based on the long-term interests of the national security of the Republic of Uzbekistan, it should maximize its interests in relations with Afghanistan and establish strategic cooperation with regional and foreign actors in their implementation, even if there is any legitimate government in Kabul.

Results. In the current conditions, the possibilities of resolving the complex military-political situation in Afghanistan by the efforts of the Uzbekistan party are limited. It is desirable that the official Tashkent pragmatic conduct its policy on Afghanistan and continue its policy of non-interference in the internal political processes of the country, without standing on the side of either this or that political or ethnic group. Due to the long-term interests of the national security of the Republic of Uzbekistan, it is necessary to maximally determine its interests in relations with Afghanistan, and to establish strategic cooperation in this regard with regional and foreign actors in their implementation, even if there is any government with a legitimate status in Kabul.

First of all, through the efficient use of the capabilities of various formats, it is possible to give a positive result search for the opportunity to systematically solve the problems that have been complicated for 40 years around Afghanistan. It is of strategic importance for Uzbekistan to establish international cooperation aimed at solving the Afghan problem, taking into account the potential impact of such powerful countries as the United States, China and the Russia competing in the region and maintaining a thorough balance between them. Also, coordination of actions in cooperation with Pakistan and Turkmenistan can be effective in solving Afghan problem.

In the future, the development of cooperation with the Russia in solving the Afghan problem requires a specific approach. From a geopolitical point of view, the Russia tries to keep the countries of Central Asia in its orbit. For the countries of the region, the opening of the road to South Asia, which has been closed for more than a century, may not correspond to the strategic interests of Russia in the region. Possibly, for this reason the Kremlin constantly tries to exaggerate a situation in Afghanistan through media controlled by it, representing the social and political processes happening in the country as a threat to the countries of Central Asia.

In the 90-ies of the 20th century, the Kremlin, which had a high influence in the military-political circles of the countries of the region, managed to mobilize the states of Central Asia (excluding Turkmenistan) to support the Northern Alliance in the Afghan civil war. Although President V.Putin argues that it is necessary to work together with the Taliban government, but seeks to realize Russian geopolitical interests in Afghanistan with the Tajik government efforts, which is practically in its political influence.

Conclusion. In general, as evidenced by the facts, as a result of recent geopolitical changes, the following risks have arisen around Afghanistan that threaten the regional security:

firstly, exploiting the security gap created by the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in order to allow various terrorist groups to settle in the country;

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secondly, the unleashing of a civil war between various groups of the Taliban movement, divided due to socio-economic problems and supported by external actors;

thirdly, the beginning of the New Great Game due to geopolitical competition in the region from such powerful countries as Russia, the USA, Great Britain and China.

Also, the fact that the transport corridors in the southern direction remain closed will weaken the position of Uzbekistan in the process of economic integration in the north. The persistence of security threats on Uzbekistan's southern borders will lead to an increase in defense spending.

The negative situation that may arise as a result of the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan makes it difficult to fulfill the tasks set out in Washington's foreign policy strategy for Central Asia. In this sense, it is in the national interest of Uzbekistan to influence the new geopolitical situation in Central Asia by developing bilateral and multilateral relations with the United States in various formats.

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