

INTERVIEW WITH POLITICAL ANALYSTS FROM INDIA AND PAKISTAN ABOUT THE AFGHANISTAN SITUATION

The editorial board of the journal “Russian Political Science” publishes within “Russian Political Science — A Space for Dialogue” project another exclusive interview with the founder and president of the Society of Education and Culture ALFAAZ in Mumbai, a researcher at the Center for Central Eurasian Studies of the University of Mumbai, Dr. Shoaib Khan and senior researcher for South and Central Asia at the Strategic Vision Institute (analytical center in Islamabad (Pakistan), author of the book “The Troubled Triangle: US-Pakistan Relations under the Taliban’s¹ Shadow” (Routledge publishing house) Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai (Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai).

The main topic of the interview is the socio-political situation in Afghanistan.

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Andrey Gorokhov, the editor-in-chief of Russian Political Science journal: How do you assess the current situation in Afghanistan? And what prospects do you see for the development of Afghanistan?

Dr. Shoaib Khan: At present the situation in Afghanistan is grim in its uncertainty and it is too early to say anything. The World has to wait and watch for a period when everything is clear. This time the Taliban has promised to go ahead with some reforms as well as include various factions and militant groups in their Government.

Afghan political unity remains fragile. Most Afghans overwhelmingly want peace, but also want to preserve the cur-

rent constitutional system that includes democracy, personal freedoms, free media and women’s rights. The Taliban have said little to reassure citizens that their views have changed from the extreme restrictions they brutally enforced previously.

The overwhelming majority of Afghans want peace and want to safeguard the existing constitutional system

The speed of the Taliban’s territorial gains and collapse of the Afghan government surprised their people, neighbours and the whole world, despite earlier

¹ The Taliban is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

intelligence assessments of the situation on the ground. The American withdrawal has encouraged the Taliban to stake their future on the battlefield, not at the negotiating table. The question now is whether the international force can prevent the Taliban from using violence to monopolize power.

Taliban have operated as an insurgent force, attempting to expel NATO forces from Afghanistan and defeat the democratically elected Afghan government. As Western forces have begun to withdraw from the country in recent years and government authority has weakened, Taliban forces have filled the vacuum.

The future of Afghanistan remains on the behaviour of the Taliban regime. If they behave well in domestic as well as in foreign policy, the international community will surely support them but if they start anything related to harsh radicalism or support to any terrorist groups or faction then the Taliban regime must be ready to face the consequences internationally and from their neighbours and nearby powers.

Besides Pakistan, China and Russia have come forward on terms with the Taliban government. This act of Moscow and Beijing is a positive sign as powers need to get involved with Taliban regime instead of isolating them so that they can contain them from any untoward act.

Industrialization would help Afghanistan overcome economic difficulties

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai: The current situation in Afghanistan is quite uncertain. Following the fall of Kabul, there is a number of challenges to the Taliban: economy, legitimacy and recognition by the international community and criticism of human rights. There is one big hope with the Taliban: that is China. China may also extend recognition to the Taliban and it could be followed by Russia, Iran and Pakistan. However, Pakistan will be cautious due to the international community reaction where it is placed on the grey list

of FATF¹. However, as far as I see Afghanistan's future, it could be stable once the international community cooperate with the Taliban, the U.S. release Afghanistan's assets, and China extend its economic aid to them.

Andrey Gorokhov: Can we say that the United States has transferred power in Afghanistan to the Taliban movement (the organization is banned in Russia)? If this is the case, what are the US plans for Afghanistan in the future? And why did the Americans transfer power to the Taliban movement (the organization is banned in Russia)?

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai: Absolutely not! The U.S. never wanted the Taliban to come to power in Afghanistan. Even the U.S. for eight years was not ready to talk to the Taliban as a peace process. However, when Obama entered the Oval Office, he assumed there is no other way but to talk to the Taliban.

Dr. Shoaib Khan: Violence in the country has been high since 2020, after the Taliban signed a deal with the United States, the latest campaign against Afghan cities has been unexpectedly fast. Actually US never transferred power to Taliban directly, they allowed Taliban to gain power. US failed everywhere in their plans, the super power lacks wisdom in their plans. Whether its Vietnam or Iraq except creating mess they have done nothing. Give me one example where the US and their allies helped to install a stable government.

I have another doubt that this may also have been a strategy of US to come back and stay in Afghanistan once the trouble is created. This will give them a reason to come back. Since last 20 years were the Americans on picnic in that country. Taliban existed even during the Karzai Government. As far as I know I heard about Taliban regaining their position since last

¹ Editor's note: intergovernmental organization "Group for the Development of Financial measures to combat money Laundering", Eng. Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering — FATF.

eight years. The question is what the Americans were doing and what kind of fight were they involved.

In the past there were talks of Good Taliban and Bad Taliban and also there have attempts to use Taliban as a shield against the newly emerging ISIS¹ in that country. Afghanistan is a landlocked country and its politics is also affected by the influence of neighbouring countries. Americans also did not take into consideration the neighbouring powers. I do not see any American role or Washington's determination in stabilizing a powerful regime in Kabul.

Andrey Gorokhov: Why, in your opinion, did the President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani leave the country, run away from Afghanistan? And how would the situation have developed in Afghanistan if President Ashraf Ghani had not left the country?

Dr. Shoab Khan: First of all I am surprise to see the way the Northern Alliance forces surrendered. Again the question arises that in these 20 years what the US, Western and even Indian armed personell present there fulfill their responsibilities of training the Afghan National Armed forces. Billions of Dollars were spend on these forces and administration and yet the result was nil. They say Pakistan supported the Taliban to come back in that sense Pakistan proved to be a better coach than US, West or India in training the militants. Their students Taliban came to power swiftly suprising the whole world and the US trained government forces ran away from the scene creating chaos in the whole country. Of course if Ashraf Gani had stayed in the country, situation would have been different, but the question is in these 20 years: Gani and his predecessor Hamid Karzai — what type of administration they were involved in that they were unable to concentrate on the armed forces.

Since the time of Karzai news of Taliban regaining foothold in many areas began pouring in. Yet there were no timely action against these forces. Time and again there were attacks on Government forces and the US forces as well. I am surprised to see Ashraf Gani addressing the nation and requesting all the tribes to join hands in stopping Taliban at a time when the Taliban forces were on the outskirts of Kabul. A leader who runs away from the country with all the cash instead of facing and dying for the country, what can one expect from the leader like Ashraf Gani?

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai: Of course, Ghani fled the country. What happened to him was his own deeds. If he had taken the intra-Afghan talks serious, the situation in Afghanistan could have been different which would allow him a respectful way but he choose the worst option of humiliation and stucked to rule.

Andrey Gorokhov: Can we say that the main beneficiary of the change of power in Afghanistan is Pakistan? And what prospects do you see for cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan?

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai: Afghanistan was under occupation of foreign forces and no regional or global powers wanted the US presence in Afghanistan. When the US was about to attack Afghanistan and Bush contacted Russia for support, Moscow of course supported the US but also demanded they will have to leave after operation. A long US presence was not acceptable for Moscow. Similarly, China supported the US but didn't support the US long presence. So was the case of Pakistan and Iran which considered the US presence a threat for their security. As for as Pakistan's cooperation with the Taliban government in Afghanistan is concerned, they could have smooth relations because of one major factor along other: Taliban will not allow the Afghan soil to be used against Pakistan. Islamabad has long accused the post-9/11 Afghan government for harboring India there and allowing India to use the Afghan soil against Pakistan.

¹ Editor's note: "Islamic State" (IS, ISIS) is a banned organization in Russia.

Dr. Shoaib Khan: The first mistake the US and Western powers did was to resist the Soviet forces. Afghanistan was much modern under the communist regime at least this would have saved the country from being radicalized. The US and Western powers not only supported the mujahedeen fighters but also brought in Laden and other groups to join the party. The Saudi money poured in and Wahabism flourished in the sub-continent.

Once the Soviets were out, Americans ignored their incomplete task of installing a stable government and also ignored those forces in Pakistan which helped Taliban to come up. Instead after the fall of Taliban in 2001, they installed Northern Alliance an anti-Pakistan Government in Kabul which pushed Pakistan out of the country and invited India to play a big role which the Pakistanis did not tolerate. Instead the Americans should have installed a neutral government friendly to all the neighbours.

The Afghan government with its anti-Pakistan attitude forgot that their 60% border trade is with Pakistan. There were also news that groups fighting against Pakistan like Tehrike Taliban and the Baluch separatists were allowed to use Afghan soils and even many training camps were active. Pakistan and other neighbouring countries were not invited to invest in that countries. In such a situation what can one expect from Pakistan? If not Taliban they would have helped any other group. Today 90% of Afghanistan is under the control of Taliban and if Taliban are under the control of Pakistan, the benefit from that country will sure to be in favour of Islamabad. There are already reports of increasing border trade between the two at a time when other borders of landlocked Afghanistan is closed.

Andrey Gorokhov: There are fears that the Taliban (the organization is banned in Russia) movement may provide support to other terrorist groups. For example, this is what Republican Congressman Michael McCaul says in the United States. How can you comment on these concerns?

Dr. Shoaib Khan: These Taliban are different from the previous version of 2001. At least from their words if not in action. According to them women will be given equal rights and other progressive works, educational institutions will function as per routine. The world is on the wait and watch position in the near future. Yes, there are fears that other resurgent groups like the TTP, Al Qaeda and of all the most ISIS may regain their foothold in the country. There are also suspicion that the Taliban regime may allow them to flourish if not helping them directly.

Looking at the happenings in recent years the US talking of using the Taliban against ISIS show that there are hopes of Taliban taking action against such groups which they have done in some parts of the country. Now TTP is working against Pakistan with the help of which the Afghan Taliban have regained the power. The Taliban may not allow these groups to work against their ally. Instead the Taliban government may be used by the near neighbours and powers to fight against such forces. Even Taliban know well that they are already isolated by the US and West by supporting such groups they may be isolated even from those powers which are in contact with them.

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai: The West do not believe the Taliban to stick to their commitments however, if we see, they have fulfilled their commitments not only regarding the Doha deal¹ but also care about the human rights in Afghanistan. And even provided amnesty to all their opponents and those involved against them for decades. Taliban have been assuring the world they will not allow the Afghan soil to be used against any nation. Hence, there is no chances of using the Afghan soil against Russia. Taliban know they have to rule and for that sustained rule they needed international support. Hence, they

¹ Editor's note: The agreement on the restoration of peace in Afghanistan is a peace treaty signed on February 29, 2020 in Doha (Qatar) between the United States and the Afghan Taliban movement.

will try their level best to ensure stability and peace in Afghanistan.

Andrey Gorokhov: Afghanistan has huge problems in the humanitarian sphere. The literacy rate in Afghanistan in 2018 was only 43.02%. How will this problem be solved? And will it be solved in the near future?

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai: Afghanistan economy is quite weak and has been under wars for the last more than four decades. Hence, education is at its lowest ebb. However, two factors can play a vital role in increasing the literacy rate in Afghanistan: Taliban seriousness to education and the international community support to Afghanistan. However, it will take considerable time.

Dr. Shoaib Khan: This also depends on the policy of Taliban. If one looks into the humanitarian development history of Afghanistan the predecessors of Taliban and even their predecessors since the reign of Kings, not much has been done in this sphere. Whether it was King Amanullah, King Zahirshah, his successor Dawood and others, this was the time when Afghanistan was considered as a peaceful country. Except some tribal clash here and there the country had enough time to progress or invite investment.

Before the Soviet invasion though Afghans were being educated in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran some wealthy enough even moved to US and Europe. After the Soviet invasion a part of the population was being educated in Soviet Union too. The problem is the same as in the thirds world country. When people they get highly qualified move to more advanced countries for better prospects. This happened with the Afghans too.

The present situation may create more havoc if the clashes escalates in the country. In such a situation the human development index may go from bad to worse. If everything runs smoothly as being promised by the new regime the domestic and international cooperation is always there to lend a helping hand.

Andrey Gorokhov: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has called for the protection of cultural and historical heritage sites located in Afghanistan. Everyone remembers that in 2001, despite the protests of the world community, including Islamic countries, the Bamiyan Buddha statues were destroyed by the Taliban (the organization is banned in Russia). Can there be repeated cases of destruction of the cultural and historical heritage of Afghanistan already in 2021?

Dr. Shoaib Khan: Remember that the Taliban is a Wahabi , Salafi ideologists. They never tolerate any idols around them even if they are not worshipping it. These ideologists not only show intolerance towards other religions but also towards Muslims of different sects whether it's the Shrine of Sufi Saint or even Shiite groups. Even any heritage though of Muslim past may be in danger because of them.

Time will tell of this new regime again I will say that the words used by this new regime gives some hope for a reformists attitude in control of the country. Yes, if preserved Afghanistan is a land full of history right from the ancient Greco-Bacterian, Gandhara arts to the medieval rulers and travelers who have left their marks in history. The country has also been an important destination for the travelers particularly on the silk route which also passed through the mountains ranges across the length and breadth of these empires.

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai: The Taliban of 1990s and today is quite different. We can hope for the preservation of the cultural and historical sites in Afghanistan. If the Taliban make the same mistake, they did in their previous rule, they will surely lose legitimacy and support form the outer world.

Andrey Gorokhov: What major economic projects can restore the economy of Afghanistan? What can Russia, China, India and Pakistan offer for the development of the Afghan economy?

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai: The Afghan economy as we know faces serious challenges and it can't survive without any foreign aid. Afghanistan needs foreign investments in its natural resources especially lithium which would provide for a major share in its economy along other minerals excavation. Besides, any industrialization would help to overcome its economic challenges. All the regional countries would play their best possible role to stabilize Afghanistan as an unstable Afghanistan is a threat to their own security.

Dr. Shoaib Khan: The Taliban's rapid advance towards Kabul is causing concern not only about Afghanistan's future but also about the impact on other countries in the region and their economies. Iran and then Iraq lie to the west of Afghanistan. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are to the north. But the immediate focus for financial markets and investors is eastern neighbour, Pakistan.

The long-term stability and security of the country and its immediate neighbors ultimately rests on economic renewal. A key element in that economic renewal will entail bringing Afghanistan and its neighboring countries effectively into the global trading system. We must help Afghanistan and its neighbors to rebuild the trade links that historically joined these societies.

Afghanistan and its neighbors share limited domestic markets, distant export markets, depend on a limited number of export commodities, and the lack of an institutional and legal basis for market based economies. Solutions to these problems that contain a regional perspective need to be found and implemented.

A rising tide of regional economic cooperation, it was hoped, would complement international assistance programs in carrying Afghanistan through the post-conflict years. The region contains as many problems as it does solutions. Particularly disconcerting are the indications that several states in Afghanistan's neighborhood are becoming more assertive, possibly reviving older geostrategic aims.

While none of its neighbors and other interested powers have yet pursued a course to destabilize the Afghan state or threaten its recovery, some seem prepared to extend their influence in Kabul through their traditional, divisive Afghan clients. Only with a renewed commitment of the international community to Afghanistan will it be possible to succeed in holding back these potentially disruptive political currents.

In the current situation when a big part of its population is leaving the country in vast numbers which also includes its human potentials this may also prove to be one of the largest brain drains in any country. To carry on business in such a country with chaos in administrative level whether the government or private may be a difficult task for the new regime.

India has already participated in the development works as they were invited by the previous regime, it depends on the new government in the country to what extent they have relations with New Delhi. With Pakistan who has already shared a large part of border trade and also share the ethnic Pushtun population have the potential to increase trade as already Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan have entered an agreement on a railway transit route which depends on the new regimes decision and the stability in the country.

China also sees an opportunity in the country and already talks are going on with the Taliban who are also in touch with Russia when Moscow is also pressing hard for a negotiation. China and Pakistan see in terms of Belt and Road initiative in which the central country to be included. The northern neighbours of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan also are keen to invest and increase the present trade if everything goes right. As these northern neighbours also share their ethnic Uzbek and Tajik population in the country.

Andrey Gorokhov: And one more question — how can the situation in Afghanistan affect the geopolitical situation in the region, especially the situation and processes in neighboring countries (Ta-

jikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Pakistan, India and China)?

Dr. Shoaib Khan: Russia, China, and Iran have much to gain (or lose) from Afghanistan's peace process. In recent years, they have been directly involved in Afghan politics: both formally, through state-to-state diplomatic relationships, and informally, through support to various political factions. Russia and Iran have become more proactive regional players in Afghan affairs since the start of the Afghan peace process in 2018. Additionally, China's partnerships with these countries will further define the Afghanistan that emerges after the US military withdrawal.

Moscow's engagement in the Afghan peace process and its involvement in regional platforms particularly through the Troika-plus grouping of the United States, Russia, China, and Pakistan has more to do with the threats it faces from Afghanistan's insecurity, religious extremism, drug production, and drug trafficking. At this point, the primary concern of Russia and Central Asian countries is their own security; they want to be sure that Afghanistan's post-US withdrawal insurgency or political instability will not cross their borders. Russia will likely find ways to work with the Taliban, which many expect to hold power in the new Afghanistan.

The conference in Tashkent, Uzbekistan was originally supposed to focus on regional connectivity in South and Central Asia. But the Taliban's surge in recent weeks consumed the regional conference and has many in the region wary of what's next. As U.S. and NATO forces draw down their military presence in Afghanistan, the country's northern neighbors have

witnessed Taliban fighters swiftly overrun most of the rural parts of northern Afghanistan, establishing control over nearly all of the 1,500-mile border between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. By all indications, Central Asian states are preparing for a new reality in Afghanistan, one where the Taliban control most, if not all, of the country.

The frontline states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan all reacted with a demonstrative flexing of military muscle, shoring up border security. The Taliban's relationship with Central Asia, particularly Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, goes back many years. While Uzbekistan has been very active in support of the U.S.-led Afghan peace process, Tajikistan has already accepted Afghan refugees and reportedly set up tent camps for hundreds of fleeing Afghans.

They have also requested support for dealing with refugees from the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in anticipation of more refugee flows across their border. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, on the other hand, have been very cautious in opening up their borders for refugees.

The countries of Central Asia have reason to be concerned about Afghanistan in the wake of the Western withdrawal. Yet it remains unclear how they will mitigate the security risks, and what major power support to do this might look like.

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai: Being neighbors, all these states have stakes in Afghanistan. All try to have a favorable government in Kabul to either serve their interests or at least not become a threat to them.