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A Tajikistan Perspective on the Afghan Crisis



James Watt CVO served as British Ambassador to Egypt, to Jordan and to Lebanon. He has dealt with the major issues and conflicts affecting West Asia and the Arab world and has extensive commercial experience in those markets.

The Ambassador Partnership's James Watt spoke to Tajikistan's Ambassador to the United Kingdom, His Excellency Masud Khalifazoda, about his country's perspective on the recent developments in Afghanistan.

I think we have all spent much of the past three weeks reading news and commentary about the sudden end of the US-led NATO presence in Afghanistan. It is a huge story in a number of ways: the implications for state-building in Afghanistan itself; the message it might be giving to resurgent international jihadists; how American power is now perceived, and what the actual implications are for American security guarantees in different parts of the world; what it means for NATO, whose non-US members are feeling bruised; and – inevitably – what the debacle implies for President Biden's prestige and standing domestically.

Among all this the regional implications have barely been mentioned. And the international media have provided little in the way of a platform for regional voices. In order to help fill that gap, on 26 August I discussed with Tajikistan's Ambassador in London, His Excellency Mr Masud Khalifazoda, his country's perspective on the recent developments.

We took as our starting point a recent official statement released by the Tajikistan Government on 25 August following the meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital, between President Emomali Rahmon and the visiting Pakistani Foreign Minister, Mahmoud Qureshi. These are some excerpts:

As a close neighbour, Tajikistan has always supported the restoration of lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan and remains committed to this position. In order to urgently address the political and security problems of the neighbouring country, it is necessary to establish an inclusive government with the participation of all national minorities, especially Tajiks in Afghanistan, who make up more than 46% of the population.

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The state structure in this neighbouring country should be determined by referendum and taking into account the position of all citizens of the country.

Tajikistan will not recognize any other government that is formed in this country through oppression, without taking into account the position of the entire Afghan people, especially all its minorities. They also stressed that Tajiks have a worthy place in the future government of Afghanistan.

I asked the Ambassador for his government's thinking. As a key neighbour of Afghanistan, Tajikistan finds itself dealing with a potential crisis of security, and the question arises of how to influence the future policies in Afghanistan in ways which uphold Tajikistan's principles and interests. As the quote above shows, the President has taken a strong stand. What was the background to this, and what is the extent of Tajikistan's stake in the security of Afghanistan?

Tajikistan cannot be indifferent to Afghanistan's fate for several reasons. Firstly, the two countries are neighbours and are connected by a 1400km common border. They have a common history, a common culture and a common language. For many centuries they have together created a Persian-speaking civilization on a vast territory, which has made a huge contribution to the history of human civilisation.

In the view of the government in Dushanbe, today one of the major threats to regional security was precisely the current situation in Afghanistan, which it feels is on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe as a result of the withdrawal of the coalition forces. President Rahmon had made an appeal that long-suffering Afghanistan should not be dragged back into the whirlpool of war. As a close neighbour, Tajikistan had always supported the restoration of lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan and remained committed to this position.

Tajikistan believes that one of the critical long-term solutions in this regard is the creation of a favourable environment for the transit potential of Central Asian countries including Afghanistan, as well as the establishment of the infrastructure required for the free movement of goods and services in the region. Tajikistan was taking part in the rehabilitation of the social economic infrastructure of Afghanistan through connecting the transport arteries of the two countries, creating an energy bridge known as CASA-1000, thereby providing the Afghan population with essential commodities.

The Tajik position is crystal-clear on one principle: peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan can be achieved only through an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process. No less importantly, any political settlement has to be inclusive and represent the interests and protect the rights of all Afghans, including the interest and rights of all ethnic groups in that country. Including of course the large ethnically Tajik and Dari-speaking minority.

What about Tajikistan's experience when the Taliban held power in Afghanistan from 1996-2001? What might be different this time? In those previous years of Taliban rule in Kabul, the northern provinces of Afghanistan remained outside the Taliban's control. These served as a

buffer zone between the Taliban and Central Asia, while providing relative stability and security on the southern borders of Central Asia.

Now, unfortunately, the situation had changed radically; the northern provinces, inhabited mainly by non-Pashtuns, are gradually turning into a springboard for the Taliban, who are essentially an exclusively Pashtun movement. Unfortunately, there was every reason to predict a deterioration of the situation, both in the security sphere and in the socio-political conditions.

What risk is there, in the view of the government of Tajikistan, of extremist elements such as the ISIS offshoot in Afghanistan, or a revived Al Qaeda, threatening the restoration of stability there, and the safety of neighbouring countries. Did other key players in the region, such as Russia and China, share these concerns? How much policy coordination between the regional countries was there to confront the threat?

Without doubt various terrorist groups are making attempts to turn Afghanistan into a springboard for their expansion in Central Asia and beyond. As we had already witnessed, ISIS-K was already making itself felt. One of the challenges facing the international community was to help the Afghan authorities stop these plans and neutralise the terrorist threat.

The Taliban's rise to power had aggravated some regional geopolitical developments. Evidently the Taliban were breaking their previous promises to form an interim government with the broad participation of other political forces in the country, and were preparing to establish an Islamic Emirate.

As a precaution, Tajikistan had to strengthen its border with Afghanistan and create the necessary border infrastructure along its entire length. These security concerns were shared by the countries of the region. Joint military exercises had been held involving Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, the Russian Federation and China.

The visit by the Pakistani Foreign Minister on 25 August indicated that cooperation with Islamabad seemed to be a priority. Pakistan had of course strongly supported the Taliban in the past. Its relations with the new regime in Kabul would require careful handling. What common ground existed between Tajikistan and Pakistan specifically?

In recent years, cooperation between the countries had been developing intensively. President Rahmon had visited Pakistan on 2-3 June. The two sides had exchanged views on deepening bilateral cooperation in diverse areas, including political, economic and trade, investment, energy, security and defence, culture, education and regional connectivity. The Prime Minister of Pakistan was now expected to pay a return visit to Tajikistan. Based on Tajikistan's own national experience in peace-building and strengthening national unity, President Rahmon felt his country had a contribution to make to ensuring security in the region, and to further sustainable development in its neighbour Pakistan. Tajikistan was committed to restoring peace, stability and security in neighbouring Afghanistan as soon as possible, and believed that the United Nations should play a key role in achieving this.

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+44 (0) 7950 944 010

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