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Washington's New Approach to Afghanistan

Washington may seek to use the Taliban* as a tool in its regional competitions against other actors.



In the recent US presidential election, and Donald Trump's election campaign programs and campaign personnel, there was no clear and relevant policy plan for Afghanistan. However, the issue of Afghanistan became somewhat prominent compared to the previous elections.

Meanwhile, Trump's interest in the re-appearance of the US in Bagram could lead to pressure on the Taliban to either return the remaining US weapons or accept the presence of the US in the Bagram security base

Important variables such as attacking America's enemies, destroying ISIS*, hitting Al-Qaeda*, ending attacks on the United States, preventing the development of terrorism and access to weapons of mass destruction, expanding America's strategic relations with India,

and putting pressure on Iran, Russia, and China were important in Trump's approach to Afghanistan.

The approach of the executive and intellectual elites of the Trump team in the past year expressed various criticisms of the Taliban*, and opposition to sending financial aid to this country.

The secretaries of state, defense, national security advisor, and CIA director, and Republicans have been staunch critics of the Taliban* or have considered the Haqqani network to be the devil or consider Taliban* Afghanistan as a direct threat to the national security interests of the United States and its allies.

Other Republicans have increased their opposition to the Taliban* in other institutions or by presenting a new anti-Taliban bill and meeting with the opposition. Some have also called for US financial and arms support for the opposition movements in Afghanistan.

But Trump's behavioral personality is risk-taking and ready to accept the consequences of some actions. Trump had previously praised the Taliban* as "smart" and "tough," so he is also willing to engage with the Taliban.

Fighting terrorism and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorist groups such as ISIS-K* and Al-Qaeda* is effective in preserving America's strategic interests in the region in the American perspective.

With the election of Donald Trump as the new US president, Taliban* officials called for realistic steps and opening a new chapter in relations, and removing the group's name from the US list of terrorist organizations.

From the Taliban's perspective, the US policy of force, sanctions, and isolation has also exacerbated the problems and is one of the main reasons for the current economic-humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Also, the West tries to weaken Afghanistan through economic sanctions and puts in question the independence of this country.

The visit of Amir Khan Muttaqi, the head of the Taliban's foreign ministry, to Oman was an attempt to lobby the country to open up relations between the Taliban and the United States.

The Taliban* hope to reach a deal with Trump on their demands for "gaining legitimacy and international recognition," a complete lifting of sanctions, and the release of assets.

The first American delegation, led by Zalmay Khalilzad, visited Kabul on March 20, 2025, after the fall of the Ashraf Ghani government. In addition to numerous meetings with senior Taliban officials, the Taliban secured the release of an American citizen, George Gulzman, an American prisoner.

Through this visit, and in line with indirect negotiations mediated by Arab actors, the US succeeded in releasing one of its citizens imprisoned in Afghanistan. The Taliban viewed this move as a sign of the Taliban's readiness for equal engagement and saw the developments as constructive steps to pave the way for progress in bilateral relations.

Before the delegation visited Kabul, the Taliban* removed anti-American slogans from the wall of the US embassy in Kabul.

Then the US State Department removed the name of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani network and the Taliban's interior minister, along with his close associates, from the country's most wanted list.

Zalmay Khalilzad's return to the US-Afghanistan interaction scene and the new approach are a significant turning point and progress in the Taliban-Washington relationship. However, Sirajuddin Haqqani is considered the most powerful internal Taliban* leader after Haibatullah Akhundzada and his most important rival. By receiving concessions from the US in contrast to Haibatullah's situation, Haqqani can even implement the changes desired by the US in the Taliban*. Washington is also seeking to reduce the power of the Kandahar faction in the government with this move.

Also, while the US National Intelligence Service mentioned Afghanistan six times and the Afghan Taliban eight times in its annual report last year, it did not mention possible threats from Afghanistan this year.

It seems that the US government is seeking to cooperate with the Taliban's political leaders in Kabul instead of Kandahar.

Some sources believe that since late February, three departments of the US embassy in Afghanistan have been active, and the Taliban have asked the American delegation to reopen their embassy in Kabul and to be present in Washington.

If the Taliban* move towards an agreement and greater interaction with the US, we will witness intelligence cooperation and, as a result, financial assistance or a greater American presence in Afghanistan, or in the Bagram base, whether in political, security, intelligence, or military terms.

Washington's financial support is also important to the economy of Afghanistan. Therefore, the continuation of aid may be conditioned on a series of demands from the Taliban and the actions of this group, such as the Bagram base. In this case, it is unlikely that the US will insist on the formation of an inclusive government.

Trump has repeatedly warned about the fate of the strategic Bagram base, American weapons in the hands of the Taliban, and the risk of China dominating Afghanistan. Trump is

concerned about the presence of Iran and Russia and the formation of Chinese hegemony in Afghanistan. It seems that taking back equipment from the Taliban or Bagram Air Base and restoring geopolitical influence in Afghanistan is still on the agenda.

In addition, Washington estimates that Afghanistan has at least \$1 trillion in mineral wealth and, in an interactive approach, can prevent the presence of rival actors in this area.

Meanwhile, Trump's interest in the re-appearance of the US in Bagram could lead to pressure on the Taliban to either return the remaining US weapons or accept the presence of the US in the Bagram security base.

Although Akhundzada recently mentioned the option of war between the US and the Taliban in the event of an interventionist approach, it seems that the main issue is a win-win game and aligning the interests of the Taliban and the US.

Although the Taliban believes that the countries of the world should not feel threatened by Afghanistan. However, one of the main concerns of the US is the increasing threat of ISIS* Khorasan in Afghanistan. In the meantime, a new and interactive approach, step by step, between the Taliban and Washington can reduce the dangers of ISIS-K* against US interests.

Outlook

The realities in Afghanistan and the limitations of US influence in this country will create new challenges for US policy. It seems that Afghanistan will not be a priority of US foreign policy, and "regime change" or extensive arms support for Taliban opponents will not be on the agenda.

Therefore, in the short term, the policy of greater engagement with the Taliban and the formation of a new round of talks, negotiations, and pressure in the direction of US interests will probably continue.

In this approach, by intensifying diplomatic, political, and security activities, the Taliban can be pushed towards greater alignment with the West in line with the strategic goals of pressure on Russia, China, and Iran. The three countries have had cautious relations with the Taliban in the past three years. The closer US proximity to the Taliban* could affect their multidimensional interests. Also, Washington may seek to use the Taliban* as a tool in its regional competitions against other actors.

**organizations banned in Russia*

Samyar Rostami, April 01, 2025

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