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THE POTENTIAL OF SELECTED CENTRAL ASIAN STATES TO PROVIDE SECURITY IN CRISES

INTRODUCTION

On 29 February 2020, President Donald Trump's administration signed an agreement with the Taliban. According to its provisions, US troops were to leave the territory of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan by 1 May 2021 (Holland, 2021). Logistical obstacles forced Trump's successor, Joe Biden, to revise the end date of the mission. The new US leader announced that the US army would have left Afghanistan no later than 11 September 2021 (Garrison, 2021). The Americans' failure to meet the declared deadline became one of the reasons why the militants launched an offensive (Greenfield, 2021). President Ashraf Ghani's low authority and the lack of American control over internal processes led to the breakdown of the Afghan state and military structures, which enabled the Taliban to win quickly. The fighters entered Kabul as early as 15 August. This fact accelerated the evacuation date. Despite requests from NATO member states, President Biden did not agree to keep the date of 11 September because of Taliban threats to carry out terrorist attacks. The last US troops left Afghanistan on 31 August 2021. The evacuation has devolved into a chaotic escape, with the US military abandoning tens of millions of dollars' worth of aircraft, armoured vehicles and advanced defence systems (Brook, 2021).

This article aims to introduce the actions of selected Central Asian states – which have a direct border with Afghanistan, i.e. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – to ensure security after the change of power in Kabul. Familiarisation with the subject matter made it possible to pose the following research questions: 1) Do the selected Central Asian states show predestination to pursue an independent policy towards the Afghan problem? 2) Has the Taliban's seizure of control of the country been reflected in the strengthening of the position of China, the United States and Russia in the region? 3) Do the policymakers of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan pursue a rational policy towards the Taliban? The collected materials in the form of official government communiqués and press releases provided the key to analyzing the selected actions of state bodies in the situation of increasing threat, tracing the attempts to expand cooperation with subjects of international law understood as states and international organizations. While highlighting the issues of maintaining internal order, it was impossible to omit the issue of the military potential of the state, influencing the

security strategy planning process. The main research methods used while creating the article were: synthesis through causal association, analogy, induction and deduction.

INTERNAL CAPACITY TO MAINTAIN SECURITY

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are peripheral players in international relations with limited capabilities. One of the bodies responsible for internal security is the army. The army has the task of protecting external borders. Efficient control of the border zone in authoritarian systems weighs against the ability to strictly control the infiltration of those promoting ideas that threaten the stability of the *status quo*. For the states under consideration, this is of critical importance in stopping the infiltration of radicals into their territory. The threat of such cases intensively increased after the takeover of neighbouring Afghanistan by the Taliban group, which made it necessary to have taken the measures to seal the threatened border sections.

The Tajik-Afghan border is 1206 kilometres long. The break-up of the Soviet Union did not lead Dushanbe to assume the burden of patrolling the southern border section of independent Tajikistan from 1992 to 2005, the border line was guarded by the Border Troops Group of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Tajikistan (Летов, 2007). The maintenance of such solutions was due to the weakness of the government of President Emomali Rahmon and the slow reconstruction of state structures after the 1992–1997 civil war. An example testifying to the comfort of such a state of affairs was the fact that until the mission of the Border Troops Group of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Tajikistan ended, no local border guards were appointed. This did not happen until 2005. This structure was incorporated into the State Committee for National Security of the Republic of Tajikistan (Закон Республики Таджикистан, 2005). The Tajik side does not provide information on the number of border troops, which makes it difficult to examine their actual role in protecting the border. The main burden of this task falls on the Armed Forces of the Republic of Tajikistan, which has about 9,000 soldiers and officers and mainly equipment inherited from the Soviet Army. Small human resources, poor training and outdated equipment have contributed to the classification of the armed forces of the country in question as to the 10th worst army in the world (Гордеев, 2021).

All this affects the lack of ability to control the southern border section. The fact that more than 1,100 kilometres of the 1,206 kilometres of the border with Afghanistan run along the natural barrier of the Panj River should also make it easier. However, this does not translate into reality. The ineffective protection of sections where the average altitude is 300–400 metres above sea level is linked to the lack of an adequate number of transport and combat vehicles, which increase the mobility of the border service branch and provide support to repel attacks by small sabotage groups. Tajikistan has a total of 100 pieces of this type of armament, of which 23 are BMP-1 and BMP-2 tracked infantry fighting machines, 23 pieces of BTR series armoured personnel carriers and 10 BRDM-2Ms (*The Military...*, 2021: 206).

After the collapse of the USSR, the Land Forces of the Army of the Republic of Tajikistan made small purchases of armoured vehicles. It is known that Dushanbe ac-

quired 13 units of Chinese NORINCO VP11 patrol vehicles, whose production started in 2014, and 8 Dajiang CS/VN 3 light tactical armoured vehicles produced in series since 2012 (*CS/VN3...*, 2018; *United Arab...*, 2014). The acquisition of 21 machines played the role of a modernisation injection – when delivered, 30% of the combat machines were less than 10 years old. Lack of funds to purchase more forced Dushanbe to ask allies to provide older-type vehicles. Hence, Beijing donated 6 WZ-523 armoured personnel carriers presented in 1984 and 5 YW-513 H units constructed in the early 1960s (O'Malley, 2000). The Russians, on the other hand, gifted Tajikistan with 12 up-graded BRDM-2Ms in 2021 (*Армия Таджикистана...*, 2021). This has contributed to an increase in the amount of equipment in its possession by almost 25%. On the other hand, it reduced the ratio of modern machinery from 30% to 20%.

Commensurate shortages are also recorded in the armoured forces. According to available data, the country has 7 T-62 medium tanks, serial production of which was terminated by the Soviet arms industry in 1975, and 33 T-72 tanks, of which only 3 underwent modernisation after the collapse of the State of the Radium (*The Military...*, 2021: 206). The concentration of 40 tanks allows the formation of only 3 companies, which cannot form a strong strike ring, while their dispersal along the entire length of the border would lead to the complete neutralization of the small potential at their disposal.

Conducting an effective patrol mission in the high mountainous areas located in the Nagorno-Badakhsh Autonomous Region requires the use of air power. As of today, Tajikistan has only 19 helicopters. The basis of the Tajik air force is the Mi-8 helicopters produced since 1965 and the Mi-24 machines introduced into service in 1972. All of the aforementioned models, due to their age – almost 50 years – are worn out and do not represent a high level of combat readiness (*The Military...*, 2021: 106). Their panacea could be the modernisation of Russian plants, but the authorities in Dushanbe do not have the funds to finance this project. At the same time, they do not see the prospect of overhauling these ageing structures. As Tajikistan's main military ally, the Russian Federation is making limited efforts to provide older machines in the form of donations. The most recent donation of its equipment took place in 2007, when 4 Czechoslovak Aero L-39 Albatros combat training aircraft, which were the main training aircraft in the Warsaw Pact member states, were handed over to Tajikistan (*В Душанбе приземлились...*, 2007). This model was produced between 1971 and 1999. It is known that the Russian Federation did not purchase these aircraft after 1991, so the transferred aircraft cannot be less than 30 years old. The sparse and outdated air fleet does not have the combat capability to conduct massive operations in the event of an escalation of the conflict, which means that Tajikistan's airspace without Russian support could be controlled by the enemy from the first day of the war. Admittedly, Tajikistan has air defence systems – 18 S-75 Dvina sets, 16 S-125 Pechora sets and 28 ZSU-23-4 Shilka units. However, it is not possible to assess their potential due to the lack of data on their technical condition. (Храмчихин, 2016).

The Turkmen-Afghan border is 744 km long and runs mainly through desert areas, generating logistical difficulties in controlling it. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was not reinforced, making barbed wire fences, extremely easy to breach, and the only protection against illegal crossing. President Gurbangly Berdimuhamedov,

aware of the insufficient protection of the state border, immediately in July 2021 directed regular army troops to the southern section (*Туркменистан перебрасывает...*, 2021). The redirection of Turkmenistan Armed Forces troops alone has done little to increase the level of security due to the ills within the army itself.

Although the army has abundant equipment and has a size of 37,000 it presents a low combat value (*The Military Balance*, 2017). This is due to several reasons. Firstly, Turkmenistan inherited from the USSR 680 T-72 tanks in various modernisation variants, 1034 BMP series vehicles and 870 BTR armoured personnel carriers, 88 BM-21 Grad and 60 BM-27 Hurricane missile systems, 40 units of 9K33 Osa automated anti-aircraft systems and 48 Soviet ZSU-23-4 Shilka self-propelled anti-aircraft guns. The aviation machines inherited from the Soviet Army include 24 MiG-29 multirole fighters, 31 Su-25 attack aircraft, 6 Mi-8 multirole helicopters and 10 Mi-24 attack helicopters (*The Military Balance*, 2018: 208). Having such an amount of equipment would enable Turkmenistan to transform itself into a Central Asian regional leader, but the failure to allocate adequate resources for maintenance has resulted in the retirement of most of the weapons in question.

Secondly, since the beginning of the 21st century, Ashgabat has been carrying out the most successful process of modernising its armaments, but this has taken the form of chaotic purchases from different manufacturers. The first example of inconsistent modernisation was vehicle purchases. According to confirmed data, Turkmenistan has 115 modern combat vehicles: 31 Korean-made Kia KLTV 141, 28 Turkish-made BMS Kipri, 15 Austrian-made PMV Survivor II, 14 Israeli-made StormRider, 11 TITAN DC and 8 Nimr Ajban from the UAE manufacturer, 8 Arab-made Al Shibl 2. There are stated cases of possession of American Polaris MRZR D4 and Polaris Dagor A1 and Israeli CombatGuard, but their number is unknown (*Парад в Аухабаде...*, 2021). The lack of equipment unification generates obstacles to maintenance work, availability of spare parts and compatibility of equipment in operational conditions. The second example is the aircraft fleet replacement process. Ashgabat purchased 22 aircraft from the Italians: 6 Aermacchi M-346 training and combat aircraft, 2 Alenia C-27 Spartan transport aircraft, 7 AgustaWestland AW 109 multirole helicopters and 7 AW 139 helicopters. The French company Airbus Helicopter supplied 2 EC 145 Eurocopters and 2 AS365 Dauphin Eurocopters. In addition, 5 Austrian-made Diamond DA42 reconnaissance aircraft and 6 Brazilian Embraer EMB 314 Super Tucano light attack aircraft were purchased (*Туркменистан закупил...*, 2018; *Turkmen Tucanos...*, 2021). The geographical remoteness of the place of production from the place of operation especially in the case of machines from Brazil leads to the unprofitability of returning them to professional workshops for maintenance and repair.

Thirdly, modern equipment is of no value in a situation where military personnel are poorly trained. Soldiers during their basic military service have little or no contact with weapons. They function as a free labour force for state-owned enterprises (*Полуголодные солдаты...*, 2006). The purchased foreign aircraft are mainly operated by contract pilots from the countries from which the newly purchased aircraft originate. This is confirmed by the incident of 18 March 2022, when a Turkmen aircraft M-346 Master crashed on the territory of Italy. An Italian and an Englishman were at the controls of the machine (*В Италии...*, 2021). Keeping the soldier and officer corps

poorly trained neutralises the chance of a possible mutiny by the military. However, this translates into wasted potential and low combat value, so the army cannot be used to efficiently secure the border with Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan is best placed to provide security, as its land border with Afghanistan is the shortest of the countries in question, at 137 km. This is facilitated by the fact that it rests along its entire length on a natural barrier in the form of the Amu-daria watercourse (*The Great Encyclopaedic...*, 2006: 52). Since the 1990s, the Uzbek side has been developing the border infrastructure – the second line of live barbed wire fence has been erected and minefields have been deployed (Bivens, 2001). To tighten the control of people crossing the border, it was not decided to open new crossings – since the collapse of the USSR, only one on the Afghan-Uzbek Friendship Bridge has been in operation.

The ability to control so effectively stems from having the strongest and best-trained army in the region. Historically, the location of the General Staff of the Turkistan Military District in Tashkent during the Soviet era has contributed to this. Thus, Uzbekistan inherited an infrastructure in the form of military bases, universities, and experienced officer cadres (Море: Феськов, Калашников, 2013).

According to official data, the Army of Uzbekistan inherited 340 tanks from the USSR. Half of them are T-62 tanks. In addition, they have 100 T-64 and 70 T-72 tanks. Despite their advanced age, they are maintained in a state of full combat readiness through constant maintenance and repairs. The fleet of infantry fighting machines is supported by 450 BMP-series vehicles and 120 BMD-series combat landing machines. Uzbekistan also acquired 300 BTR-series vehicles after the Soviet Army, 200 of which are BTR-80s. As in Turkmenistan, launch rocket systems remain on Uzbek territory: 60 BM-21 Grad and 48 BM-27 Hurgan systems (*The Military Balance*, 2010: 373).

The first president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, unlike his counterparts in Ashgabat and Dushanbe, was aware from the beginning of the independence period of the need to modernise his military equipment. Hence, in the 1990s, the president tried to establish cooperation with the United States of America on this issue, but Washington was not interested in selling its equipment at discount prices. This led Uzbekistan to rely on limited military cooperation with Russia to modernise its equipment, at the same time joining the Partnership for Peace in 1994 mainly because of its interest in benefiting from the training offered by the US Army (Казанцев, 2012).

The US intervention in Afghanistan helped in the acquisition of modern armaments. Uzbekistan became involved in the activities of the anti-terrorist coalition by providing allied troops with an airport at the Karshi-Chanabad base. In this situation, the US, wishing to express its gratitude, decided to sell 50 units of the modern Cougar combat vehicle at a lower price (Храмчихин, 2016). Their effectiveness and reliability during operational tasks on the border led to the purchase of more units. Between 2001 and 2014, Uzbekistan acquired 80 of these vehicles (*The Military Balance*, 2016). At the turn of 2014/2015, Washington proceeded to reduce the contingent in Afghanistan. The lack of cost-effectiveness in transporting equipment thousands of miles led the Americans to donate another 328 combat vehicles to Tashkent (*США подарили...*, 2016). The donation and previous purchases have made a powerful contribution to the modernisation of the Uzbek Army – there are now 408 modern US-made vehicles in stock, which are used to protect the southern border.

The modernisation drive involving combat vehicles has not been reflected in the air force. The machines inherited from the Soviet Army remain in varying technical conditions. Officially, there are 72 combat aircraft on the inventory list, but 26 of these Su-17s have no combat capability. Another 11 Su-27s and 18 MiG-29s are in storage. This means that Uzbekistan has only 17 combat aircraft. Given the size of the country – 447,000 square kilometres – one combat aircraft is needed for 26,300 square kilometres, which does not give any chance of blocking its airspace. Admittedly, the country has 400 9K31 Strela and 50 ZSU 23-4 Shilka air defence systems, but this is insufficient to provide air security to the Tashkent vilayet, let alone the entire country. The army also has stored Soviet S-75 Dvina and S-125 Seagull anti-aircraft missile systems, but their technical condition excludes them from potential use.

The helicopter fleet is also based on Soviet-made machines. The Uzbek army has 130 helicopters at its disposal, including 52 Mi-8s, 29 Mi-24s, 26 Mi-6s, 4 Mi-35s, 2 Mi-22s and 1 Mi-26 (*The Military Balance*, 2020: 216). The over 40-year-old age of these machines allows them to be called flying museums unsuitable for longer patrol missions along the border. The need to at least partially modernise the fleet prompted the Uzbek authorities in 2016 to purchase 8 multi-role French AS 332 Super Puma and light Aerospatiale AS 350 Ecureuil helicopters (*Ўзбекистан приобрел...*, 2016). These machines have been in production since the early 1980s, but the continuity of assembly has been maintained after some upgrades. This transaction provided 8 relatively modern helicopters, but catching up with the past decades requires further purchases. This was confirmed by the events of August 2021, when 22 Afghan military aircraft and 24 helicopters with refugees on board crossed the Uzbek air border (*Границы с Узбекистаном...*, 2021). The lack of operable craft forced the Uzbeks to intercept them only after they landed.

The universal task of the security service in all three countries is to control the activities of opposition circles. The threat of radicalism causes them to also invigilate religious organisations and their members (Bodio, Bogdanowicz, 2001: 501–502). The seizure of power by the Taliban has had an impact on the activation of the services.

In Turkmenistan, two bodies are responsible for internal security: The Ministry of National Security of Turkmenistan and the Security Service of the President of Turkmenistan. The activities of these two institutions are intended to prevent and neutralise any signs of disobedience to the all-powerful president. The suppression of opposition within the country draws attention to potential external threats. The authorities fear an influx of fundamentalist preachers from Afghanistan who, in recent years, due to the chronic economic crisis, have found an audience in a society that has never shown any strong attachment to religion. The army has also shown a keen interest and the Security Service of Turkmenistan has been obliged to hold meetings with troops on the subject of patriotic attitudes, and briefings have been held for people living in the border areas, during which they were ordered to inform the local authorities of the appearance of any non-Turkmen. Citizens practising a nomadic lifestyle in the Karakum desert, which stretches along the border with Afghanistan, were subjected to scrupulous checks. To prevent chance encounters, they were ordered to move to inhabited oases (*Власти Туркменистана...*, 2021).

The Tajik Security Service is consolidating its attention on the question of the development of radicalism. Officially, after 2000, President Emomali Rahmon neutralised the Islamic Renaissance Movement of Tajikistan and liquidated all political parties declaring in their programme a commitment to Islamic values. The unfavourable conditions led to these organisations going underground – hindering their real control by the security service. The international situation in the form of the rise of the Islamic State and the establishment of contacts with them strengthened radical organisations in Tajikistan, which was confirmed by the attempt to overthrow Rahmon in 2015. The defeat of the rebels triggered a wave of arrests of activists from all opposition circles.

The Taliban takeover creates new opportunities for the activities of the Islamic Renaissance Movement of Tajikistan. Afghanistan again, as in the 1990s, may become a place for the deployment of militant bases. Ethnic Tajiks living in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan may replace in the organisation's structures their compatriots who are in prison. The infiltration of these people should not be a complicated process, as in the southern section the effectiveness of border protection remains low. Concerns increased when around 200 militants of Tajik origin fighting in the ranks of the Taliban appeared near the city of Shahribuzurg (Ахмади, Рахматзода, 2021). The scenario of an armed confrontation becomes likely in a situation where Dushanbe does not seek an agreement with the Taliban.

Emomali Rahmon decided that the best solution would be to take pre-emptive action. He ordered the Tajikistan Security Service to implement a policy of intimidation, obliging the population to report the appearance of any non-Taliban in the area. The second action became an intensification of repression against Muslim Brotherhood activists and the Salafi movement remaining at large (*Ibidem*). This is perceived by the public as an attempt to further eliminate religion from socio-political life. The collision of the presidential course with social demands strengthens the internal front of support for the militants, which forces a continuous expansion of the security apparatus structures, as a result of which the president is becoming increasingly dependent on the structures of the force.

Uzbekistan, like Tajikistan, has been grappling with the issue of radicalism since the fall of the Soviet Union. Like Rahmon, the first president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, pursued an oppressive policy towards religious groups, which generated the radicalisation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. As a precautionary measure, even before the change of power in Afghanistan, Tashkent initiated a dialogue with the Taliban. Declaring its readiness to continue economic cooperation. This position was based on the desire to exclude the possibility of a resurgence of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan with the support of the Taliban.

The failure to raise discussions on political issues shows Tashkent's caution and careful monitoring of the Taliban's actions. Maintaining a state of suspicion necessitates a constant readiness to effectively repel any attempt to interfere in internal affairs. Uzbekistan does not fear provocation on its direct border with Afghanistan due to its well-developed barrier infrastructure, while it is concerned about the eastern section of its border with Tajikistan. Dushanbe's limited resources combined with strained relations carry the risk of ideas and people infiltrating precisely through the border

running through the Ferghana Basin, which is why the Uzbek authorities have focused on strengthening this section.

In terms of the official position on Islam, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has abandoned the policy of intimidation because it is counterproductive. This has not prevented the strengthening of the surveillance of the community living in the Ferghana Basin, where there is the most favourable breeding ground for radical ideas to flourish. On the other hand, unlike the first president, Islam Karimov, it sends a message of changing the perception of the Ferganians from potential terrorists to legitimate citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The experiment of giving confidence credit is working – after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, no resurgence of terrorist groups has been observed in the Ferghana Basin. At the same time, the president has extended liberalisation measures to the role of religion in the political and social life of the state. The first concession became the restoration of the possibility for girls to cover their heads in schools (*Школьницам разрешено...*, 2021). The gesture of abolishing the ban in place since the Stalinist era was received positively by both radical and moderate Muslims. By taking into account the needs of society in terms of making their religion public, the president neutralises the phenomenon of new recruits joining the ranks of militants.

COOPERATION WITH SELECTED STATES AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Turkmenistan, adhering to the policy of neutrality, from the beginning was not interested in expanding cooperation in military matters with any state or organisation (Seyfettin, 2021). The most convenient way out became the resumption of dialogue with the Taliban. The July meeting in Ashgabat and the August meeting in Qatar in 2021 established the possible relations that were to prevail after the change of leadership in Afghanistan (*“Талибан” соообщил...*, 2021). Ashgabat proposed arranging relations along the lines of those that prevailed in the 1990s when Turkmenistan was the main supplier of construction materials, energy and fuel to Afghanistan (Фахим, 2012). In return, the Taliban guarantee to secure the TAPI gas pipeline, railway and a power line running through their territory to Pakistan (Теке, 2021).

Despite good contacts, Turkmenistan fears provocation. An example of this was the nervous reaction to the Taliban occupation of border towns in July 2021 (*Туркменистан перебрассывает...*, 2021). It was caused by the fact that the Turkmenistan Army could not cope with containing small provocations carried out since 2017 by rebel Taliban units that joined the so-called Islamic State (Панниер, 2020). Disregarding parallel negotiations, Berdimuhamedov sent troops equipped with heavy artillery to the border. The mere arrival of the troops did not raise the combat potential due to poor training. Awareness of this state of affairs forced the search for external allies. Readiness for support has been expressed by the Russian Federation, whose troops are seen around the Turkmen cities of Serhetabad and Kojtendag in 2019 (*Ibidem*). This bears the character of unofficial cooperation due to mutual benefits – Turkmenistan does not have to admit inefficiencies in providing security, while Moscow rebuilds its influence lost af-

ter the collapse of the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding its reliance on Kremlin support, Turkmenistan continues to strive to maintain its neutrality. Concerning the Afghan problem, this manifests itself in a tendency to support Uzbekistan's vision because of a similar vision of arranging relations with the new power in Kabul and involving external players as little as possible in the process.

Tajikistan's security, due to the weakness of its own army, relies on the 8,000-strong 201st Russian base in Tajikistan (Иванов, 2021). According to the provisions of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation status, Russia is obliged to provide assistance to a member state in the event of an armed attack. President Rahmon, suggesting these guarantees, downplayed the scenario of the Taliban taking power. It was only the appearance at the border of a 200-man detachment under the command of Muhammad Sharipov, a man wanted on bail in Tajikistan for attempting to overthrow the prevailing order, that prompted Dushanbe to seek CSTO assistance (Ахмади, Юсуфзода, 2021).

Knowing of Moscow's recognition of the Taliban government, Rahmon demanded real steps to increase Tajikistan's security. The Russians, responding to this appeal, strengthened the combat potential of the 201st base, reinforced the presence of their border troops on the most threatened section in the Gorno-Bakhshan Autonomous Region, and transferred ammunition supplies and upgraded BRDM vehicles to the Tajiks (*Россия усилила...*, 2021; *Россия передала...*, 2021). Additionally, they took deterrence measures. On 30 August 2021, together with the Tajikistan Army, they conducted exercises involving 1,500 troops (*Россия проводит...*, 2021).

The Russians' efforts did not fully convince Dushanbe – Rahmon needed an ally that would fully side with him and not negotiate behind their backs. Hence the attempt to seek support at the combined CSTO and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit on 17 September 2021 (*Саммиты ОДКБ и ШОС...*, 2021). The combined summit reinforced Tajikistan's belief that it is the only member state to present a confrontational attitude toward the Taliban rule. Hence the efforts to expand cooperation on security issues with the US. Just three weeks after the summit, on 5 October, the US handed Tajikistan 20 vehicles for patrolling the border (*США передали Таджикистану...*, 2021). The Russian Federation's response was subdued. The Kremlin only proposed holding another exercise on 23–24 October, with more than 4,000 troops participating (Позняков, 2021). The calm response was dictated by the knowledge that Washington is interested in cooperating on the Afghan issue with the strongest player in the region, namely Uzbekistan.

Uzbek foreign policy since the early days of independence has been characterised predominantly by a desire to build bilateral relations rather than within organisations. Having the best-trained army in the face of developments in Afghanistan influenced the emergence of offers of cooperation from the major military powers.

The first to appear were the Americans, proposing behind the scenes to reopen their base on Uzbek territory. Such a possibility was rejected by Minister Kamilov in his declaration of 14 October (*Размещение в Узбекистане...*, 2021). The Russians read this as an impulse to make an oppressive offer. Figuring that the Uzbeks, by rejecting the American proposal, had no alternative, they made military aid conditional on joining the Collective Security Treaty. Blackmail turned out to be the worst solution,

as on 22 October, during a meeting, Uzbekistan and Russia signed a new agreement on security issues, but with the proviso that they were not interested in rejoining the CSTO (*Узбекистан не планирует...*, 2021).

The rejection of the two countries' offers did not include the issue of purchasing military equipment and exchanging experience through training. The Republic of Uzbekistan remains interested in American armaments, but is taking steps to develop its own production potential. Based on a Soviet machine gun, the NSW created a remote-controlled armament station for light armoured vehicles (*В Узбекистане создали...*, 2021). The need to strengthen the protection of the eastern border requires more vehicles. This was answered by the launch in November 2021 of the serial production of its Tarlon armoured vehicle – resembling Turkish vehicles based on American technology (*Стартвало серийное...*, 2021). The Russians, unable to offer vehicles at the same technological level as the Americans, are trying to maintain their presence in the form of training. This was confirmed by joint military exercises in early August 2021 (*На полигоне Термез...*, 2021).

A departure from the rule of avoiding partnership within the framework of international organisations became the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Uzbekistan, while holding the presidency of this organisation, engaged in developing a common concept of approach to the Afghan problem. During the forum, President Mirziyoyev presented a view on the need to involve Afghanistan in regional economic processes, which was supported by Moscow and Beijing (*Шавкат Мирзиёев призвал...*, 2021).

Tashkent, recognising that the Russians and Chinese are competing with each other over who subjugates Uzbekistan, is trying to build a regional security alliance. Interest in such an idea can be seen in the leaders of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, who, like the president of Uzbekistan, seek to limit American, Chinese and Russian influence in the region. Uzbek-Kazakh cooperation is developing more extensively in this field, manifesting itself in real initiatives in the form of conducting special forces exercises “Kalkan-2021” and training near the border with Afghanistan “Partnership-2021” without the participation of the troops of the Russian Federation (Kussainova, Yusupov, 2021; Abdülkerimov, Ekberova, 2021).

The seizure of power by the Taliban did not come as a surprise to any of the Central Asian states. Only the Tajik authorities did not engage in a clandestine dialogue, which enabled Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to arrange their mutual relations with Afghanistan precisely. Officially, there is no threat from the Taliban, but policymakers in these two countries do not fully believe the assurances of the government in Kabul and are preparing for different scenarios.

Finding an answer to the first research question, do the selected Central Asian states show predestination to pursue an independent policy towards the Afghan problem, required an examination of the military potential that forms the basis for maintaining independence from global and regional powers in circumstances that threaten the maintenance of intra-state security.

Table 1

Comparison of the military potential of the three Central Asian states

A number of:	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Soldiers	9,000	37,000	48,000
Tanks	40	680	340
Combat vehicles	100	1,149	1,278
Planes	19	108	155 (210)*
Air defence kits	62	88	400

* Including non-combat worthy stockpiled items.

Source: *The Military Balance*, 2020.

Extracting information from the table above, the Turkmenistan Army owns the most modern equipment in terms of aircraft and helicopters. It also leads in terms of the number of tanks – 680, but there are problems with verifying the actual number of machines capable of undertaking combat operations. It is known, however, that Uzbekistan carries out continuous maintenance and repairs to maintain its 340 tanks.

The army of Uzbekistan is the most numerous in terms of soldiers. It has the largest number of modern American vehicles manufactured after 2000 – 408. The Republic of Uzbekistan's fleet of aircraft and helicopters accounts for 155 combat aircraft – more than Turkmenistan and Tajikistan combined. On top of this, they keep 55 older aircraft in storage, which can be put into combat readiness after appropriate repair work. Tashkent's crushing superiority is also evident in the number of air defence sets. Dushanbe and Ashgabat together claim 150 units, while Uzbekistan alone owns 400 systems.

To conclude, only Uzbekistan has an army capable of opposing the Taliban. The effectiveness of the Uzbek army in fighting terrorists was proven during the so-called Batkenai crises in 1999 and 2000 when they smashed the fundamentalists' units without external support. A factor contributing to the better organisation of the Uzbek army than that of Tajikistan or Turkmenistan is the fact that it does not consist only of conscript soldiers – contract soldiers are employed who, thanks to constant communication with the armed forces, present a high level of combat readiness.

An orderly army gives Uzbekistan the predisposition to pursue an independent policy concerning the Afghan problem. It should not be forgotten that this independence is being built with the support of the major powers which, while competing for influence in the Central Asian region, accept and support Uzbekistan in keeping its distance, seeing in this an opportunity to maintain a balance of influence. The other two states have no such comfort.

In answering the second question, whether the Taliban's seizure of control of the country has been reflected in the strengthening of China's, the United States and Russia's positions in the region, the Russian Federation's greatest successes should be noted. Russia has strengthened its military presence in Tajikistan, re-established its bases on Turkmen territory, and increased military cooperation with Uzbekistan.

The US has not so much expanded its military cooperation with Tashkent but is trying to return it to the pre-2005 level – returning to the baseline from the beginning of the anti-terrorist coalition. An opportunity to consolidate influence in the region is to offer Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan purchases of manufactured military equipment,

but the Americans would have to make price reductions. In the case of Tajikistan, due to the country's financial difficulties, equipment donations remain the only support mechanism. China has tried not to engage with the countries in question on the Afghan problem, which has neither strengthened nor weakened its position.

In answering the third research question: do the policymakers of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan pursue a rational policy towards the Taliban?, it should be noted that both the presidents of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have recognised the rule of the Taliban. Ashgabat's policy has a pragmatic dimension. Berdimuhamedov wants calm on the border and to ensure that the vital interests of the state are protected in the form of the continuity of the transfer of raw materials through Afghanistan. Tashkent's objectives are more ambitious. Just as in the 1990s the first president, Islam Karimov, sought to raise his country's international profile through involvement in solving the Afghan problem, and his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has taken a similar path. There is a fundamental difference in the approach of the two leaders – Mirziyoyev is trying to build up good relations with the Taliban government, which was not possible in the 1990s. There is no doubt that the second president of Uzbekistan is more understanding than his predecessor of certain phenomena taking place inside Afghanistan, which must be accepted to ensure the security of his own country.

The policy of President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan is incomprehensible. Tajikistan, as the weakest state in terms of military potential, should pursue a friendly policy towards the Taliban, not a confrontational one. The possessive basis is reflected in the sensibility of the largest infrastructure project in independent Tajikistan, namely the completion of the Rogun hydroelectric power station. It was intended that the energy produced there would be transported via the CASA-100 network to Pakistan via Afghan territory. The continuing tension closes this route for Tajik energy, generating a decrease in the profitability of the Rogun Hydroelectric Plant reaching its full assumed production capacity.

In conclusion, the change of power in Afghanistan has made the leaders of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan aware of the internal weakness of the state to repel external threats. This may become a good starting point to begin building a more effective security strategy and paying more attention to the state of the army. Uzbekistan, meanwhile, has become aware of the need to deepen cooperation with its neighbours, not only economically but also politically.

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to introduce the activities of selected Central Asian countries – having a direct border with Afghanistan, i.e. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – to ensure security after the change of power in Kabul. Familiarisation with the subject matter made it possible to pose the following research questions: 1) Do the selected Central Asian states show predestination to pursue an independent policy towards the Afghan problem? 2) Has the Taliban's seizure of control of the country been reflected in the strengthening of the position of China, the United States and Russia in the region? 3) Has the Taliban's seizure of control of the country been reflected in the strengthening of the position of China, the United States and Russia in the region?? The collected materials in the form of official government communiqués and press releases provided the key to analyzing the selected actions of state bodies in the situation of increasing threat, tracing the attempts to expand cooperation with subjects of international law

understood as states and international organizations. While highlighting the issues of maintaining internal order, it was impossible to omit the issue of the military potential of the state, influencing the security strategy planning process. The main research methods used while creating the article were: synthesis through causal association, analogy, induction and deduction.

Keywords: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, the Taliban, security

POTENCJAŁ WYBRANYCH PAŃSTW AZJI ŚRODKOWEJ DO ZAPEWNIENIA BEZPIECZEŃSTWA W SYTUACJACH KRYZYSOWYCH

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przybliżenie działań wybranych państw Azji Centralnej – posiadających bezpośrednią granicę z Afganistanem tzn. Turkmenistan, Tadżykistan i Uzbekistan – dla zapewnienia bezpieczeństwa po zmianie władzy w Kabulu. Zapoznanie się z tematyką umożliwiło postawienie następujących pytań badawczych: 1) Czy wybrane państwa Azji Centralnej wykazują predestynację do prowadzenia niezależnej polityki wobec problemu afgańskiego? 2) Czy przejęcie kontroli nad krajem przez Taliban znalazło swoje odzwierciedlenie w umocnieniu pozycji Chin, Stanów Zjednoczonych i Rosji w regionie? 3) Czy decydenci polityczni Turkmenistanu, Tadżykistanu i Uzbekistanu prowadzą racjonalną politykę wobec talibów? Zebrane materiały w postaci oficjalnych komunikatów rządowych i informacji prasowych zapewniły klucz do przeanalizowania wyselekcjonowanych działań organów państwowych w sytuacji wzrostu zagrożenia, prześledzenia prób poszerzenia współpracy z podmiotami prawa międzynarodowego rozumianymi jako państwa i organizacje międzynarodowe. Naświetlając kwestie utrzymania porządku wewnętrznego, niemożliwe było pominięcie zagadnienia potencjału militarnego państwa, wpływającego na proces planowania strategii bezpieczeństwa. Głównymi metodami badawczymi wykorzystanymi podczas tworzenia artykułu były: synteza poprzez kojarzenie przyczynowe, analogia, indukcja i dedukcja.

Słowa kluczowe: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, talibowie, bezpieczeństwo