

Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation Between Afghanistan and Central Asian Countries

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Abstract—This article is devoted to analyzing cultural and humanitarian cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia. The authors consider the importance of such cooperation because solving the Afghan problem by military methods is considered unpromising. The historical, ethnic and cultural roots of the Afghan people have much in common with the peoples of neighboring countries, and this should certainly be used to resolve the Afghan problem. Cultural and humanitarian cooperation between Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia has good prospects for further development, in which all of these countries are interested.

Keywords—Afghanistan; Central Asia; cultural and humanitarian cooperation; bilateral relations; geopolitics; soft power

I. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical location of Afghanistan is in the heart of Eurasia, and that is why a lot of states take an interest in Afghanistan. The country is located on the ancient routes of migration and conquests, which predetermined the ethnic and cultural differences of the peoples inhabiting Afghanistan. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has a relatively large area that is approximately equal to the area of France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark combined, possesses natural gas, oil, coal reserves, but despite this, Afghanistan is one of the most economically backward and politically unstable countries in the world.

The war in Afghanistan in 1979-1989 plunged the country into a situation of instability. In 2015, the war in the country started again. The parties of the conflict are Afghanistan, the United States of America and NATO forces from the one side; militants from various radical groups from the other side. Military operations are ongoing and have

resulted in the loss of lives. Moreover, the situation in Afghanistan is sharply deteriorating and causing great concern. On April 12, 2019, the Taliban announced the start of a military offensive in Afghanistan. There are acts of terrorism in the country: on May 5, a suicide bomber in a mined car was blown up near the police department in the province of Baghlan in northern Afghanistan; on May 8, a powerful explosion thundered in the center of Kabul [1].

The situation in Afghanistan has a direct impact on stability in the Central Asian region. The greatest danger is that the militants of the Islamic State are redeploying from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan, since the country has a favorable environment for creating new hotbeds of terrorism and religious extremism. This threatens the security not only of Central Asia and Eurasia, but also of the whole world, since the danger of new terrorist acts is sharply increasing. Another significant factor contributing to the deterioration of the military-political situation is the unceasing growth of the drug production and distribution in Afghanistan, which accounts for more than 90% of world opium production.

In this context, all Central Asian states continue to express their strong interest in the stability and prosperity of this country. In recent years, the cooperation between Central Asian states and Afghanistan has significantly increased.

The new geopolitics of Central Asia combines modern regional aspects: firstly, the factor of the countries' geographic proximity to Afghanistan, which, with regard to the beginning of the military operation in 2015, has acquired particular importance; secondly, the Central Asian states were identified as a "bridgehead" for fighting terrorism in Afghanistan [2].

The problems of Afghanistan are becoming an important factor, which in the future will play an important role in the security of the Central Asian region.

Solving the Afghan problem by military methods is considered unpromising [3], although they are currently used. Afghanistan is a unique, multi-ethnic country. The problem of Afghanistan is unprecedented. The historical, ethnic and cultural roots of the Afghan people have much in common with the peoples of neighboring countries, and this should certainly be used to resolve the Afghan problem [4].

In this regard, the Central Asian republics, three of which have a common border with Afghanistan (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), and the other two are in close proximity (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) with Afghanistan, are interested in the development of cultural and humanitarian cooperation with the Islamic Republic, whose population wants a peaceful settlement of the conflict so that the country could develop. Next, we will consider in more detail the main aspects of cultural and humanitarian cooperation between Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia.

II. THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

The diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan were established on February 12, 1992. In addition, on April 15, 2004, an agreement on the foundations of relations and cooperation was signed between the two states.

Over the past few years, bilateral cooperation between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan has been generally characterized by positive development dynamics. Contacts at the highest and governmental levels were intensified, inter-parliamentary and business ties were being strengthened.

Among the other countries of Central Asia Kazakhstan is the largest donor for Afghanistan. According to the Foreign Ministry, Kazakhstan provided Afghanistan with approximately \$75 million in assistance. The amount includes the training of Afghan citizens in Kazakhstani universities, the delivery of food, clothing, essential goods and the construction of infrastructure facilities.

“Since 2009, at the initiative of the head of state, the state educational program Kazakhstan-Afghanistan is being implemented to train thousands of Afghan students in educational institutions of our country. The government allocated \$50 million. About 750 Afghans, including police and border guards, are currently studying in Kazakhstan” [5] — reported by the Foreign Ministry, noting that the last group of one hundred students were recruited in 2016.

Kazakhstan also helps Afghanistan with food and essential goods. In total, Kazakhstan sent 5 thousand tons of wheat, 1.3 thousand tons of milk powder, 11 thousand tons of rice, 60 tons of buckwheat and 160 thousand liters of vegetable oil into the country.

As for financial assistance, in July 2008, Kazakhstan transferred \$2.38 million to the account of the Afghan Ministry of Finance: \$160 thousand for the construction of a

school in Samangan province, \$570 thousand for a hospital in Bamyan province and \$1.65 thousand for the repair of the asphalt road. In addition, in 2014, the Government of Kazakhstan financed the construction of four bridges and the strengthening of the river Aibak banks in Samangan province. The total cost is \$1.5 million. Currently, the Afghan side is implementing these projects.

Kazakhstan is convinced that the Afghan problem can be solved based on three approaches: the interdependence of security and development; a regional approach to ensuring security and development; and the adoption of the coordinated regional development strategy in order to increase the level of international humanitarian assistance from the UN and other donors [6].

In the field of education there was an agreement between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan [7], according to which Kazakhstan from 2010 to 2014 hosted 1 thousand citizens of Afghanistan for training: 700 people studied in higher educational institutions and 300 people — in technical and vocational education organizations. At the same time, training in the technical and vocational education organizations of the Republic of Kazakhstan was carried out by professions and specialties, which were annually determined by the Afghan side, considering the opinions and capabilities of the Kazakh side.

According to the Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan, the agreement will be prolonged, the parties are agreeing on the text of a separate Protocol on this issue.

One of the articles contains a table (“Table I”) with data on the training of students from Afghanistan in Kazakhstani higher educational institutions.

TABLE I. STUDENTS FROM AFGHANISTAN IN KAZAKHSTANI HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Academic year	Enrolled	Total number of students	Graduated
2007-2008	3	9	-
2008-2009	2	4	3
2009-2010	2	4	-
2010-2011	1	6	1
2011-2012	112	119	-
2012-2013	96	222	2
2013-2014	91	314	1
2014-2015	81	369	4
2015-2016	77	402	65
2016-2017	71	378	28

^a Source: IA REGNUM.

A sharp increase in the number of Afghan students is observed just a year after the signing of the agreement [8].

In March 2019, the meeting between the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan Beibut Atamkulov and the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Mohammad Farhad Azimi took place. The parties discussed the current state and prospects of Kazakh-Afghan cooperation in the political, trade, economic and humanitarian spheres. The important role of Afghan students

who have studied civilian occupations in Kazakhstani universities and who are contributing to the peaceful construction of Afghanistan now, was noted. In this regard, the Afghan side expressed a request to increase the number of educational grants. In the period from 2010 to 2021 more than 1 thousand citizens of Afghanistan will be trained in Kazakhstani universities [9].

Thus, cooperation between Afghanistan and Kazakhstan in the cultural and humanitarian sphere is actively developing and has good prospects. What is important, both parties are interested in it.

III. THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

The diplomatic relations between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan were established on November 12, 1999. The Embassy of Afghanistan in Kyrgyzstan started functioning in 2002, while the Embassy of Kyrgyzstan in Afghanistan began its activities in Kabul only in May 2013. For several years, the embassy of Kyrgyzstan in Kabul worked without an Ambassador. And only in 2019, Miroslav Niyazov was appointed as the new Ambassador [10].

Due to the unstable situation, Afghan students often seek to study abroad. Kyrgyzstan is a country in which students from Afghanistan come to study. For instance, American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan offers scholarships for female students from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Almost all Afghani respondents provided positive response on higher education in Kyrgyz universities. There are a lot of prospects for the expansion of cooperation between Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan in the higher education area by attracting more students from Afghanistan to the state. Finally, it would be desirable if the government stimulated the establishment of more institutions of higher education with English language instruction [11].

However, the relations between Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan are not developing as actively as the relations between Afghanistan and other Central Asian republics, and in this regard, the prospects for the development of cultural and humanitarian cooperation are very vague. Currently, Kyrgyzstan is experiencing problems with the economy, there is also a very difficult environmental situation in the country, some areas are not suitable for permanent residence.

IV. THE REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN

The diplomatic relations between Tajikistan and Afghanistan were established in 1992. There are all prerequisites for the development of good-neighborly relations between the two states: a common border (1,344 km), a single historical past and cultural values, traditions, customs, a single religion and a common language [12].

According to the Protocol signed on July 15, 1992, in a month the parties intended to form a Joint Commission on Economic, Scientific, Technical and Cultural Cooperation.

In recent years, relations in the cultural sphere have been successfully developing, and this is natural, because the peoples of both republics have a common history, they own the material and cultural values created in these countries. Outstanding poets and thinkers, such as Abu Ali ibn Sino, Hakim Sanai, Nasir Khusrav Kubadiyani and many others, are equally highly revered in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The citizens of both countries love songs by Sarahang, Sorbon, Ahmad Zahir and other modern Afghan singers and musicians. Afghan people always wait for the tour of Tajik artists. Meetings of cultural and art workers, screenings of Afghan films, tours of creative groups, various exhibitions have become regular now. In November 2006, Dushanbe held the Culture Week of Afghanistan, during which various exhibitions and concerts of art groups of Afghanistan were organized. The Tajik audience got acquainted with the theatrical performances carried out in recent years in this country.

Bilateral cooperation is also developing in the fields of education and science. Tajikistan has good opportunities for training mid-level specialists and highly qualified specialists from Afghanistan in many specialties. Such interaction was established in the Soviet period and in fact it does not stop. Many Afghan students are enrolled in Tajik universities of medical, polytechnic and agricultural profiles. In the past, specialists from Tajikistan taught at Afghan universities, and the question of using this experience is being considered now.

The Protocol on cooperation between the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Academy of Sciences of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was signed, in accordance with which Afghan scientists undergo an internship at academic institutions in Tajikistan.

In June 2018, a meeting between the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon and the Chief Executive Officer of Afghanistan Abdullah Abdullah was held. The President of Tajikistan stated that Tajikistan is ready to prepare specialists for Afghanistan in the fields of energy, health, agriculture, irrigation, construction and architecture, technology and other areas [13].

Thus, it should be noted that both countries are striving to actively develop cultural and humanitarian cooperation, for which there are a number of prerequisites, the main of which is a community of culture and a common historical past.

V. THE REPUBLIC OF TURKMENISTAN

The protocol on the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkmenistan and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was signed on February 21, 1992. Over the past decade, the development of bilateral relations between the two countries has gained a systemic, long-term, constructive character.

In addition to developing relations in the political, economic, cultural and commercial spheres, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan has also signed an Agreement on Cooperation in the sphere of higher education.

The agreement was signed by the both countries' Foreign Ministers on March 7, 2002 in Ashgabat.

Article 4 of the Agreement states: "In order to educate specialists, the Turkmen side accepts 100 Afghan students every year for studying at Turkmenistan Higher Education and Professional Institutions during the period of the validity of this agreement." [14]

On February 21, 2019, exactly 27 years after the establishment of diplomatic relations, the two countries signed the Treaty on Strategic Cooperation. In addition, the following documents were signed at the intergovernmental level: agreements on customs cooperation and air traffic, on the place of international railway crossing at the common state border, memorandums of understanding in the oil and gas sector and on the volume of Turkmen electricity supplied to the Afghan province of Herat.

In 2017, during the meeting with the Chief Executive Officer of Afghanistan Abdullah Abdullah the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov noted the readiness of Turkmenistan to train Afghan students [15].

However, it should be noted that cooperation between the two states in the cultural and humanitarian sphere is not very active. Perhaps this is due to the economic crisis that is going through Turkmenistan.

VI. THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan and Afghanistan established diplomatic relations in 1992. Bilateral cooperation began to develop dynamically since 2016. In January 2017, the first round of political consultations between the two countries' foreign ministries took place in Tashkent. Since 2017, in the background of Uzbekistan's new foreign policy strategy, the dynamics of Uzbek-Afghan relations have changed.

Uzbekistan has always been guided by the principle that has evolved over many centuries: "The neighbor is calm – you are calm". Uzbekistan seeks to develop relations and cooperation only on a bilateral basis, on the principle of non-participation in various military-political blocs directed against Afghanistan. Establishing a long-term peace in Afghanistan is strategically important for Uzbekistan to ensure regional security [4].

As part of the revitalization of the regional policy of Uzbekistan in Central Asia, when the goal was set to create a belt of good-neighborliness around Uzbekistan, to improve relations between the countries of the region, neighboring countries, Afghanistan became one of the country's foreign policy objectives. There are several tracks on which the two neighboring countries began to interact. The first track is political relations. The second track is economic cooperation.

The third track is humanitarian interaction. A striking example of this is the Agreement on the training Afghan youth in Uzbekistan. A training center has been established in Termez, Surkhandarya region. And you can be sure that cooperation in the humanitarian and educational sphere between the two countries will not only continue, but also

expand as a result of the gradual withdrawal of Afghanistan from the situation of war [16].

In 2017, an agreement between the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan was signed [17].

Termez Pedagogical College was the first in Uzbekistan launched a program aimed at promoting the development of Afghanistan through education. The college in Termez is located about 10 kilometers from the Uzbek-Afghan border. A campus for 150 students has already been built, and work is currently underway to build a second campus for 300 students. In addition to teachers, Uzbekistan also plans to train technical specialists, especially those who involved in areas related to ongoing projects, the purpose of which is to bring the two countries closer together.

Thus, bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, particularly in the cultural and humanitarian sphere, are actively developing. Uzbekistan pays great attention to this area, as the country is interested in the safe development of the Central Asian region.

VII. CONCLUSION

The geopolitical location of Afghanistan places it among the key countries ensuring the stability of the military-political situation in the entire Central Asian region. The solution of the Afghan problem by military methods is considered unpromising. Ethnic and cultural roots of the Afghan people have much in common with the peoples of neighboring countries, which should certainly be used to resolve the Afghan problem. In this regard, the Central Asian republics are interested in the development of cultural and humanitarian cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Cooperation in the cultural and humanitarian sphere is developing most actively between Afghanistan and such Central Asian countries as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, since Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have a common border with Uzbekistan, and all three countries have sufficient resources and conditions for implementing this kind of cooperation. As for Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, cultural and humanitarian cooperation with these countries is developing less actively, due to the presence of unresolved internal problems in these two states, mainly economic ones. Nevertheless, cultural and humanitarian cooperation between Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia has good prospects for further development, in which all of these countries are interested.

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