Turkey's possible Afghanistan mission: Opportunities and challenges

By: Rahimullah Farzam

The Taliban's advance continues as US troops and NATO forces withdraw from Afghanistan. Nearly 90 of the country's 388 districts have fallen into the hands of the Taliban since US President Joe Biden announced his withdrawal plan in April.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's dismissal of the country's defense and interior ministers wasn't enough to stop the Taliban's spread and they have captured more than 20 settlements and district centers in the past week.

Biden, who invited Ghani to Washington, D.C. after the central government's forces lost their position against the Taliban, promised that US support for Afghanistan would continue.

While the US and NATO countries are planning to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, the security of Hamid Karzai International Airport in the capital Kabul being maintained by Turkey is on the agenda.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan discussed the issue with his US counterpart at the last NATO summit and announced that they were close to coming to an agreement on this issue.

Expressing that there is a consensus on Afghanistan, Erdogan said: "If they don't want us to leave Afghanistan, if they want [Turkish] support there, then the diplomatic, logistic and financial support that the US will give us will be of great importance".

Ensuring the security of the Kabul airport is an important goal for NATO and Western countries after the withdrawal. Kabul airport is of critical importance as an evacuation point in case of a sudden increase in violence following the full US withdrawal or if the security of the capital is compromised.

Especially Western countries say that if the security of the airport is not ensured, it will not be possible for them to continue their diplomatic missions in Kabul. Australia was the first country to announce that it will be closing its embassy in the country for security reasons. If the security of the airport is not ensured, the number of countries that will close their diplomatic missions in Afghanistan is expected to increase.

Possible opportunities and risks

The possible opportunities and risks that come with Turkey's new mission in Afghanistan will depend on the scope of the mission. According to the preliminary agreement reached with the US, it's inferred that Turkey's responsibility will be limited to ensuring the security of Kabul airport and that Ankara will not participate in military operations, as it hasn't so far. As we've pointed out earlier, Kabul airport is, perhaps, Afghanistan's only gateway to the world. For this reason, the airport is of vital importance for the diplomatic missions in the country to continue their activities following the withdrawal of US and NATO forces. The safe operation of the airport is also very critical for international aid organizations to be able to deliver humanitarian aid to the country. Turkey being the only Muslim country in NATO and the close ties it has with the Afghan government and people are the determining factors in the undertaking of this task.

Turkey's presence in Afghanistan may enable it to further strengthen its cooperation with the country in many areas, from the economy to security.

Although there are allegations that the US is considering transferring the protection of the airport to a private company as an alternative to Turkey, past experiences reveal that this method is not realistic. Therefore, Turkey undertaking such a critical task is of great importance for both Ankara-Washington relations and Ankara-NATO relations. The mission that Turkey will undertake in Afghanistan will not only create an area of ??cooperation with the US but will also strengthen Ankara's position in NATO. In this context, Turkey-US cooperation in Afghanistan could help with overcoming some of the recent disagreements that had a big impact on Ankara-Washington relations. In addition, we mustn't ignore the view that Turkey's presence in Afghanistan would increase Ankara's influence in the region in the long run. Northern Afghanistan shares common borders with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, and the country opens up to a wide territory (including the Turkish world).

The geographical advantage that would come from Turkey's presence in Afghanistan may aid Ankara in developing much closer strategic relations with these countries. Such a rapprochement would be of great benefit to Turkey in terms of the common history and culture, as well as politically and economically.

Especially with the opening of the Nakhchivan-Baku corridor following the developments in Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey's connection with the Turkic world will be further strengthened by its presence in Afghanistan. Turkey has strategic relations with Pakistan as well. Turkey's presence in Afghanistan may help further strengthen its cooperation with Pakistan in many areas.

On the other hand, the geography of Afghanistan has the potential to bring many challenges for Turkey along with the new opportunities it presents.

Since many countries in the region have been involved in the Afghanistan issue for years and each of them is following different strategies that are in line with their own interests, a consensus has yet to be reached on supporting peace and stability in Afghanistan. The strategies of the countries in the region, which have been involved in the Afghanistan issue for years, have some serious differences between each other. For this reason, there will be just as many actors who will object to Turkey's presence in Afghanistan as those who won't speak up.

President Erdogan announced that they were planning on acting jointly with Pakistan in order to support peace in Afghanistan in his press statement following the NATO summit on June 14. Given the close relations between Ankara and Islamabad, Pakistan is not expected to object to Turkey's military presence in Afghanistan. However, the same cannot be said for India, Pakistan's most significant rival in the region.

It's not difficult to foresee that India, who has been waging a proxy war in Afghanistan against Pakistan for years, will oppose the Islamabad-Ankara alliance in this country.

In addition, Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two traditional rivals and influential actors in the region, wouldn't want Turkey to get a new engagement in Afghanistan. The Islamic Republic of Iran has always been closely interested in the issue during its 42-year existence, seeing Afghanistan to be inside its natural sphere of influence. Tehran, which saw the Taliban as a means for Saudi Arabia to gain influence in the region during the 1990s and supported the Northern Alliance against it, cooperated with the Taliban against the presence of another rival in Afghanistan, the US, with the changing conjuncture following the 2000s. Tehran, which currently maintains relations with both the Kabul administration and the Taliban, seeks to, at the least, consolidate its interests and sphere of influence in Afghanistan in the new period.

Russia has always been one of the countries that had certain sensitivities regarding the developments in Afghanistan. Russia is in close communication with both the central government and the Taliban, similar to Iran. Moscow has recently hosted a series of inter-Afghan peace talks. Frequently criticizing the presence of the US and NATO in Afghanistan, Russia wouldn't want Turkey, yet another NATO member, to gain influence in this country. However, Russia, who has a very bad reputation among Afghans due to the negative past experiences of the Soviet Union, has very limited influence and means of gaining influence in Afghanistan compared to the other actors.

The main security concern of China, the rising power of the region, regarding Afghanistan is the cooperation between the Taliban and the Turkistan Islamic Movement operating in the Xinjiang region. Beijing, which has improved its relations with the Taliban thanks to its closeness with Islamabad, has managed to prevent such cooperation so far. In addition, Beijing prefers a stable Afghanistan for the security of the Belt and Road Initiative, in which it has invested billions of dollars. In this context, a Turkey-Pakistan cooperation supported by China due to its closeness to Pakistan may be one of the most realistic scenarios for establishing stability and peace in Afghanistan.

Challenges ahead

The challenges that Turkey will face in Afghanistan do not seem to be limited to the attitudes of the regional actors. Although Turkey has good relations with many local actors, including the Kabul administration, the Taliban is against Ankara's possible mission in Afghanistan.

Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban's Qatar Office spokesperson, said in an interview with Reuters on June 10 that "Turkey was part of NATO forces in the past 20 years, so as such, they should withdraw from Afghanistan on the basis of the Agreement we signed with the US on 29th Feb 2020."

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid took this statement a step further and said that Turkey would not be treated differently from the US if it were to remain in Afghanistan. Speaking to Iranian media, he said: "Turkey is a Muslim, brother country. However, since it's also a NATO member, if it remains in Afghanistan, it would not be any different from the US for us."

The Taliban's main concern over Turkey's new mission in Afghanistan is that Ankara is a NATO member.

The Taliban call the 20-year armed insurgency that they've been staging "jihad against foreign forces." This discourse has a crucial role in gathering followers and legitimizing the armed struggle conducted by the Taliban.

Despite the Doha Agreement that calls for all foreign forces to leave the country, the Taliban have yet to achieve this goal.

Therefore, the Taliban are concerned that the presence of Turkey in Afghanistan as part of NATO would be perceived as NATO not leaving the country. This concern is why almost any comment from the Taliban on Turkey's presence in Afghanistan has emphasized Ankara's NATO membership.

Otherwise, sources close to the Taliban confirm that the organization wouldn't have a problem with Turkey being involved in the Afghanistan peace process as a Muslim country.

Despite its rapid spread in recent days, the Taliban have yet to conquer the city centers of any of the 34 cities in Afghanistan. For this reason, Turkey would not be facing the Taliban during its mission in Kabul for now. However, this doesn't mean that there are no risks involved. It's a big question mark how Turkey would protect Kabul airport, which is nearly intertwined with the city center, without military patrols.

During military patrols, the Taliban can attack foreign forces with remote-controlled bombs and bomb-laden vehicles placed on the side of the street.

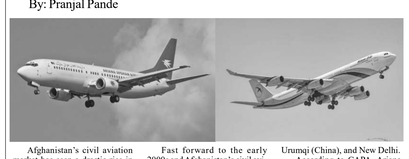
Turkey can contribute to establishing peace

Contrary to popular opinion, the factor that makes Ankara stand out for ensuring the security of Kabul airport is Turkey's close ties with Afghanistan and its people, rather than its military technology. Its ties with local actors, including the central government, as well as its proximity to countries that have influence on the Afghanistan issue such as Pakistan and Qatar puts Turkey in a potential mediator position between the conflicting parties in Afghanistan. Therefore, the mission that Turkey will undertake in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US may contribute to establishing peace in this country.

See P7

Aviation in Afghanistan: Which airlines are the major payers?

By: Pranjal Pande



Afghanistan's civil aviation market has seen a drastic rise in passenger traffic since 2010. The country now caters to over 1 million passengers every year, flying domestically and internationally. So who are the major airlines operating the country, and where do they fly? Let's find out more.

Afghanistan is currently only home to two airlines, privately-owned Kam Air and flag carrier Ariana Afghan Airlines. Both are based out of the capital city of Kabul, putting them head-to-head on several domestic and international routes.

Ariana Afghan Airlines

Ariana is Afghanistan's oldest and most recognizable airline. The carrier was founded back in 1955, flying to destinations globally using a fleet of Douglas DC-3s and –4s. Its route network spanned from Kabul to Delhi, Karachi, Beirut, Tehran, Frankfurt, and many more. In the late 1950s, Pan Am took up a 49% stake in the airline to expand its portfolio.

However, the 1980s saw the airline collide with political tensions and civil war in Afghanistan. With international sanctions and a weak economy, the airline was set back decades in its development and mostly flew domestically in this period.

Fast forward to the early 2000s and Afghanistan's civil aviation industry was once again rebounding. According to CEIC, yearly passengers in Afghanistan jumped from 150,000 in 2000 to a stunning 1.9 million by 2010, aided by strong domestic and international traffic.

Ariana has undoubtedly been at the center of this traffic increase. However, it remains a relatively modest carrier, flying a fleet of five aircraft. This includes one Airbus A310, three 737-400s, and one 737-500. As you may have guessed, these planes aren't young by any measure. According to Planespotters.net, the average fleet age is 27.9 years old, with the sole widebody being 32.3 years old.

Network

As flag carrier, Ariana Afghan flies to several domestic and international destinations. Due to safety concerns, the airline cannot fly to the European Union or the US, limiting its network to mostly to the Middle East and select other Asian destinations.

Domestically, Ariana has a network for five cities from its hub in Kabul. This consists of Zaranj, Kandahar, Herat, Balkh, and Maimana. Internationally, the carrier flies to Dubai, Jeddah, Riyadh, Ankara, Istanbul, Moscow, Urumqi (China), and New Delhi.

According to CAPA, Ariana has long been planning a fleet expansion to renew its aging planes and open up new destinations. While the fleet size was set to grow by seven planes by the end of 2019, this did not materialize and was replaced by a fresh proposal. This included two 767-300s, two A330-200s, and two Dash 8s.

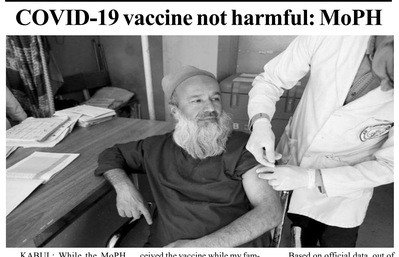
This would've enabled an expansion into Central Asia, Iran, and China, allowing it to take market share from connecting airlines like Emirates and Turkish Airlines. Considering the airline flies less than half a million passengers every year, an expansion has long been required. However, this remains up in the air.

Kam Air

Afghanistan's second airline is Kam Air, the privately held carrier which has quickly become the biggest by any measures. Founded in 2003, just as the civil aviation industry took off, Kam Air has benefitted heavily from the over ten-fold increase in passenger traffic. The carrier has focused on domestic operations, connecting seven cities in total (beating Ariana), and flies to eight international cities.

See P7

COVID-19 vaccine not harmful: MoPH



KABUL: While the MoPH has repeatedly announced that injection of anti-COVID-19 vaccine has no risk to human body but a number of people doubt that the injection most likely cause blood clot in the future, resulting in the gradual death of the injected person.

The MoPH says that for 20 days since the import of 700,000 doses of Chinese vaccines into Afghanistan less than half of this quantity has been administered. This is while the mortality rate due to COVID-19 affection has been increasing day by day.

People are reluctant to inject vaccine and this reluctance has roots in dissemination of wrong and baseless rumors among the public.

Sharif a resident of the capital city said, unfortunately in our country, majority of our people believe in rumor or fear of it.

People are afraid that the vaccinations will cause blood clot that resulting in a premature death among the vaccinated people, he said. "I heard that overage people vaccinated with the virus would die within two years, but I received the vaccine while my family members have not, because they believe in the rumor.

Ruhullah another resident of Kabul said that despite rumors his family members received COVID-19 vaccine. "At the outset we had fever and flu, but we used tablet of Paracetamole and recovered and resumed our daily business."

"I hope all people use the vaccine to be safe against fatal virus," he suggested.

Meanwhile, the MoPH says that anti-COVID-19 vaccine has no risk because it has been approved and confirmed by the World Health Organization (WHO.)

According to the organization report, Chinese conformed vaccine creates 79 percent immunity against the disease.

Deputy spokesman of MoPH Mirwais Alizay said COVID-19 vaccine is an alien element in mankind body and when it is injected the body naturally reacts against it including slight fever, body pain, indisposition, impotence, inflammation of wound but these signs do not worth concern and it's a good news to everybody.

Based on official data, out of 33 million Afghan populations so far over 900,000 people have been injected. MoPH said that out of 700,000 doses of Chinese donated vaccines, its 50% have been consumed and the rest of 350,000 have remained.

Not only in Afghanistan but in some other countries, there are concerns on injection of anti-COVID-19 vaccine and on its possible side affects. Chinese and Indian vaccines have already been approved by the WHO and permitted. Beside coronavirus, at least three cases of black fungus have been recorded in Afghanistan.

Kabul, Samangan and Baghlan provinces, all three cases had a COVID-19 background.

Although so far further cases have not been identified but acting MoPH Wahid Majroh had warned that affection to black fungus has been increasing among COVID-19 patients.

According to official data, over 125900 people have been affected with COVID-19 in Afghanistan. **Shukria Kohistani**