

ARMENIA'S BREAK WITH FEAR THROUGH PROACTIVE FOREIGN POLICY

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Editorial By **Khajag Aghazarian**, 25 August 2021

Russia, Turkey and Iran were among the first countries that welcomed Taliban's smooth entry to Kabul as of August 15. These welcoming attitudes however were returned by cautious and even alerting remarks by Taliban, at least for the time being. Turkey and Iran remained optimistic for establishing good relations with the new authorities especially on issues such as the refugees, security and transportation. Russia on the other hand took a different position and showed skepticism towards the new rule in Afghanistan. The latest swift developments in this central Asian state present opportunities and threats to many surrounding countries including the Republic of Armenia. What is the extent of fears and prospects that should be anticipated by the RoA as a result of these developments?

Russia's main concern again is security. President Putin particularly has a long history of animosity with Islamic fundamentalism. The two Chechen wars (1994 – 2009) that devastated northern Caucasus were masterminded and executed by Putin personally. His enemies were Sunni Islamic fundamentalist groups that amassed thousands of foreign fighters to participate in the jihad to establish Islamic state in that region. For Putin Taliban's victorious comeback is a nightmare. This security threat is particularly acute as Russia is going through its weakest state since the fall of Soviet Union in 1991.

On August 23 Russia called for a CSTO meeting to show strength in confronting its perceived new security threat. The outcome was a diplomatic tragedy. While the 6 powerless heads of CSTO member states including Armenia's Pashinyan were virtually meeting, Ukraine had gathered representatives of 44 states for the first International Crimea Platform Summit to protest Russia's occupation of Crimea and demand its immediate withdrawal. Most European countries attended this summit in addition to USA, Australia, Japan and Turkey. Russia yet again recorded a serious diplomatic failure in dealing with these developments.

Taliban's seizure of most of Afghanistan territories by August 15 was partly a result of the strategy that this group used in its territorial expansion during recent months. Taliban reversed the tactic that it had used in 1996 to control the country. It first secured the northern parts where historically it faced disobedience and later armed resistance while holding tight control over its historical stronghold in the south. The Taliban wanted to make sure that the northern districts that are predominantly inhabited by Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen ethnic minorities would not have the chance to organize themselves and resist their rule. Taliban has a wary relationship with these ethnic groups that constitute according to unofficial estimates around 48% of the total population of Afghanistan.

Turkey tried to negotiate with Taliban to secure Kabul International Airport after the withdrawal of all NATO forces. Taliban refused that proposal on several occasions. The Foreign Ministry of Turkey changed its tone regarding this suggestion and since August 20 its announcements were less optimistic and urging. Taliban's position might be due to its preoccupation with the difficult task of

transition of power and re-establishment of its rule, however there are several indications that it might not give Turkey much role in Afghanistan for two main reasons.

First, Taliban is predominantly a domestic Pashtun movement that constitute the ethnic group in that country. Second, Taliban is not a classical Muslim Brotherhood organization like Erdogan's party. Its ideology is rather a combination of Sunni Islamic fundamentalist ideas and local Pashtun tribal codes that are even referred to in settling court cases and local issues. These ethnic and religious differences constitute serious challenges for Turkey's ambitions in Afghanistan. In the near future Taliban will determine its new foreign relations based on its priorities which are mainly domestic and do not go beyond Afghanistan borders, so why would a Taliban Afghanistan entertain Erdogan's expansionist adventure?

During the past years Taliban had been working on improving its relations with neighbouring Iran. Some analysts even claim that the Iranian support of the group was a major factor in its persistence during the last decade until its return to power. It is estimated that Iran hosts two million Afghani refugees and is a major economic partner with its isolated neighbour. After seizing Kabul, Taliban was keen on showing to the world declaration of Shia'a leaders' allegiance to its rule. Iran welcomed this step and the head of the Sunni minority in Iran congratulated Taliban for its "victory". Both sides are showing high level of interest in starting a new constructive relationship.

Iran needs a safe and stable border on the east with Afghanistan and on its northwestern Caucasian borders knowing its multiple security and economic challenges. Moreover, negotiations with the US over its nuclear program might be harder in the coming months after the humiliation of the US in Afghanistan. Iran is trying to amass its 'friends' to be able to overcome these challenges. It had shown increasing interest in supporting the Republic of Armenia in its resistance to the Azeri aggressions. Iran also needs an outlet to Europe through a country such as Armenia. Hence an opportunity for the RoA that if seized would not bother its main regional partners.

Furthermore, RoA can create a margin of diplomatic maneuvers benefitting from the weaknesses of Russia. This margin should not constitute a threat; on the contrary, it should be a space whereby Russia should perceive opportunities and benefits. Russia perceives the developments in Afghanistan as another security concern, but these might constitute an opportunity for RoA to maneuver away from the weakening CSTO alliance and push forward a national foreign policy agenda without ignoring the Russian interests. Armenia should break the fear that it has been legitimately stuck in due to the surrounding hostilities. It is about time for Armenia to have an independent proactive foreign policy rather than follow an isolationist approach driven by fear under the Russian wings. Such a policy will benefit the interests of both RoA as well as Russia.

Comments



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Yes, Armenia should have an independent foreign policy which also takes Russia into account. But when Armenia tried to have a larger natural gas pipeline from Iran, and when Serge Sargsyan tried to sign an association agreement with the EU, Russia blocked both moves. Russia is surely threatening Armenia now with further territorial losses and probably other things as well, such as a rise in natural gas prices. So the question is, how should Armenian respond to continuing Russian threats and pressure, especially given that Armenia is dependent on Russia's natural gas supplies and many other things? What should Armenia say when Putin calls and threatens Armenia, as he surely is doing?