

# Uzbekistan's Mediator Role in the Afghan Peace Process as a Neighboring and Small State

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## Abstract

Various international actors have attempted to establish peace in Afghanistan in the last two decades. This article addresses the mediator role of Uzbekistan, one of these actors, which had become visible especially in the last stages of the Afghan peace process. The foreign policy adopted by Uzbekistan until the peace treaty signed in Doha is compatible with the cases where mediation is used in international politics. In particular, the mediation motivations of states to solve crises in their neighbors have significant similarities with the main reasons behind the mediation efforts of Uzbekistan, as a neighboring country to Afghanistan. This article categorizes these motives under three headings as economic, security, and international prestige. The difficulties and opportunities that Tashkent faced in the Afghan peace process also resemble the limitations and advantages of small states in international mediation. Although the small state status did not always provide Uzbekistan a chance to achieve the desired results, it allowed gaining the trust of the parties because of its peaceful and non-threatening position. Tashkent has contributed to the process by establishing a dialogue with the conflicting sides individually, proposing the use of its territory for the negotiations, maintaining close cooperation with other third parties, and hosting international meetings.

**Keywords:** Mediation, Small States, Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan, Afghan Peace Process

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# Özbekistan'ın Komşu ve Küçük Bir Devlet Olarak Afganistan Barış Sürecindeki Rolü

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## Özet

Afganistan'da barışın tesis edilmesi için son yirmi yılda çeşitli uluslararası aktörlerin girişimleri olmuştur. Bu makale, bu aktörlerden biri olan Özbekistan'ın Afganistan barış sürecinin özellikle son dönemlerinde belirginleşen arabulucu rolünü ele almaktadır. Nitekim Doha'da imzalanan barış antlaşmasına kadar Özbekistan'ın benimsediği dış politika, uluslararası arabuluculuğun kullanıldığı durumlarla uygunluk göstermektedir. Özellikle devletlerin komşularındaki krizleri çözme konusundaki arabuluculuk motivasyonlarıyla, Afganistan'a komşu bir ülke olarak Özbekistan'ın arabuluculuk çabalarının ardındaki temel nedenler önemli benzerlikler taşımaktadır. Çalışmada bu gerekçeler ekonomik, güvenlik ve uluslararası prestij arayışı şeklinde üç başlık altında toplanmaktadır. Taşkent'in Afganistan barış sürecinde karşılaştığı zorluklar ve fırsatlar da küçük devletlerin uluslararası arabuluculuktaki sınırlılıkları ve avantajlarına benzemektedir. Küçük devlet statüsü, Özbekistan'a her zaman istediği sonuçları elde etme şansı vermesede barışçıl ve tehdit içermeyen konumuyla tarafların güvenini kazanabilmesini sağlamıştır. Taşkent, sürece genel olarak çatışan taraflarla ayrı ayrı diyalog kurma, topraklarının görüşmeler için kullanılmasını teklif etme, diğer üçüncü taraflarla yakın işbirliğini sürdürme ve uluslararası toplantılara ev sahipliği yapma gibi katkılar sunmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arabuluculuk, Küçük Devletler, Özbekistan Dış Politikası, Afganistan Barış Süreci

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## **1. Introduction**

Afghanistan lies in a significant strategic location connecting Eurasia and South Asia region, has witnessed continuous bloody conflicts and foreign interventions for the last 40 years. Since October 2001, the United States (US) has also fruitlessly tried to impose its political and military control on Afghanistan through military intervention. However, its military operations and other efforts have yielded no conclusive victory so far. The US government has found itself trapped in this endless conflict with mounting human and economic costs. Thus, under Donald Trump administration it has finally decided to initiate direct peace talks with the Taliban. These negotiations between the US and the Taliban finalized with the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” (The US Department of State, 2020) on February 29, 2020. After the signing ceremony of the US-Taliban peace deal in Doha, the capital city of Qatar, representatives of both the US and the Taliban specifically thanked the Uzbek government for its efforts (UzA, 2020).

It was a quite remarkable detail for those who did not follow closely the peace initiatives for Afghanistan. From the outset, Uzbek leaders have carefully engaged with the security developments in its southern neighbor. For instance, the former president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov pointed out the potential negative effects of clashes on the Tajik-Afghan border and called for taking necessary steps, primarily peaceful ones for the solution of the conflict at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (The UN, 1993). Twenty-four years later, in 2017, this time the new Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev<sup>1</sup> emphasized the importance of stability in Afghanistan for the regional and global security at the same platform (PMRUUN, 2017).

Both presidents hosted important international peace conferences on Afghanistan in Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan, in 1999 and 2018 respectively, along with numerous bilateral and multilateral meetings. In the second Tashkent conference, Mirziyoyev equaled the security of Afghanistan to his country’s security and proposed a road map to the diplomats of participating countries for reaching the peace (MFA of Uzbekistan, 2018a). Uzbekistan’s position on the Afghan peace process had been evaluated as “broker” (Chaudet, 2019: 7), “intermediary” (Hashimova, 2019), and “alternative moderator” (Putz, 2019) since the last conference. This article also tries to analyze the mediation efforts of Uzbekistan in this process as a neighboring country and a small state.

The literature on small states is comprehensive in the discipline of International Relations (IR). The small states can also be called as weak states or small powers.<sup>2</sup> Military capacity, size of the territory, population, and economic power (East, 1973: 557) have been used as defining criteria of a country’s status as a small, middle, and great power. The perception of other states about the status of the relevant actor is also another determining factor (Baba and Önsoy, 2016: 4). There are also theoretical debates about foreign policy behavior of the small states in IR literature (Waltz, 1979; Elman, 1995: 172; Goetschel, 1998: 25-26; Wivel, 2005: 395; Browning, 2006: 669-670; Tür and Salık, 2017). However, this article does not scrutinize the details of both the determination method of a country’s status and the theoretical approaches towards the foreign policy behavior of small states. It simply takes Uzbekistan as a small state and attempts to clarify limitations and mostly the advantages of this status in the Afghan peace process.

The article consists of four parts. Initially, it provides a conceptual framework about the definition and practical dimension of mediation in international politics. It also discusses the motivational factors of neighboring countries for assuming a mediator role and the capabilities of small states in mediation separately. Secondly, it assesses international peace initiatives for Afghanistan in the last two decades and the contributions of Uzbekistan to these attempts. Afterward, it examines the reasons behind Uzbekistan’s active role in the Afghan peace negotiations. In sum, this case study analysis aims to reveal the motivations and endeavors of Uzbekistan in the Afghan peace process as a neighboring small state from the perspective of mediation in international politics.

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<sup>1</sup> He took over the presidency a few months later after the death of former president Islam Karimov on September 2, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> This article prefers to use the term “small state” as it is widely accepted and used in the literature.

## **2. The Definition and Practical Dimension of Mediation in International Politics**

The resolution of a dispute between different actors like persons, business firms, and their personnel, and countries usually requires the conduct of mediation. Various fields of social sciences hence have different perspectives for the mediation process. This differentiation led to the emergence of a wide range of definitions about the concept (Greig, 2005: 250). In international politics, mediation means voluntarily solving a conflictual problem by the assistance of a third party in line with the consents of the parties. It takes place in the middle of two kinds of approaches to conflict resolution. Some proposals are offered to both sides in mediation, so it is not the same with the good offices and conciliation. Besides it varies from other binding methods like arbitration and adjudication (Raymond and Kegley, 1985: 34) because mediation is generally a diplomatic mean to find a peaceful solution to the disputes, so it is non-binding for the parties (Jan, 2008: 4).

The mediation does not occur and gets success by the mediator's own free will but under some conditions. If the crisis deepens and both sides comprehend that there is no winner in the current issue, they could look with favor on mediation (Zartman, 2013: 16). Additionally, when the parties realize that a preferable settlement will not be acquired without a mediator, they decide to accept mediation which also includes an honorable saving from the dispute (Kleiboer, 1996: 380). The length and the violence level of a conflict, which possibly brought to the deadlock, also increase the acknowledgment of mediation (Greig, 2005: 251). In a sense, mediation emerges through the parties' widening of their struggle with the existing dispute. Two-sided trouble is converted into a tripartite interplay in this way. This rising in the number of actors can engender positive alterations on the resolution of conflict and thus pave the way for an accord (Bercovitch, 1992: 4-5).

The non-violence dimension of mediation differentiates it from other third-party interventions because there is no need for using force and the aim is not the rescue of one of the conflicting sides. The creation of an opportunity for communication and changing of disputants' negative views about one another are the initial goals of mediation. In this process, mediators negotiate the issues with parties separately or simultaneously and offer their proposals for reconciliation (Zartman and Touval, 1985: 31-32). In addition to this, they try to manage the controversies about the interpretation of an agreement and conduct relations with the leading regional and external actors. The rising expectations may create some crises, which should also be mollified by the mediators (Cousens, 2008: 66-67).

All these strategies of mediators are classified based on their interference level to the case by different scholars. For example, Kressel and Pruitt (1985: 188-192) make references to the reflexive, contextual, and substantive interventions in the mediation process. Kleiboer (1996: 379-383) mentions four proto-theories of international mediation as power brokerage, political problem solving, re-establishing social relationships, and domination. Bercovitch and Houston (2000: 175) classify mediation levels as communication-facilitation, procedural and directive strategies. The lowest level of intervention is seen in communication-facilitation strategies because the mediator only transmits the messages of both sides, paves the way for collaborative work but there is no effective control. Procedural strategies may include the enlightenment of the public or close interest to the different dimensions of the process. Lastly, directive strategies mean more influential checks over the negotiations and try to change the course of events via serious warnings. In this case study, the mediator practices of Uzbekistan in the Afghan peace process are more similar to the low-level type of interference like the communication-facilitation strategies.

Finally, in international politics, the type of conflictual sides and the kind of mediators differentiate in various cases. The dispute can be between different states or between governments and some disobedient groups. The mediators can also be neighboring states, great powers or small and medium-sized states, representatives of international organizations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and popular figures who are also known for their efforts in international conflicts (Vukovic, 2014: 63). All these actors can play a successful mediator role, but states are the primary actors in mediation. When they feel a real threat to international peace and regional stability, they decide to mediate an intractable conflict. States differ from individuals and international organizations or institutions by having greater tangible resources. They have also means for mobilizing these resources and a mandate to use them via their leaders (Bercovitch, 2004). Nevertheless, generally, international mediation has been performed by more than one actor such as a variety of third-party state and non-state actors since the end of the Cold

War (Iji and Fuchinoue, 2009: 137). Even though Uzbekistan as a neighboring small state has made many attempts on its own, it is/was also a part of multiparty mediation for the Afghan peace process.

### **3. The Reasons for Neighboring Countries' Undertaking Mediator Role**

All third parties have humanitarian sensibilities for the resolution of international conflict, but they become different in the sense of interests, priorities, and commitments. While states naturally focus on their national interests, international organizations and NGOs want to indicate their efficiencies as a reconciler. If some mediator states have a common interest with the international organizations and other states, they work together with them easily in a peace process (Iji and Fuchinoue, 2009: 157-158). On the other hand, states make the calculations of their strategic benefits before assuming a mediator role in a crisis. The potential gains can be getting the honor of a peacemaker and ensuring a desirable result for itself by changing negative conditions or supporting the current situation. Other expectations of states as becoming a mediator are to increase their effectiveness, resources, and power (Mellin, 2013: 80). The neighboring states have additional motivations for going into a mediation process because of sharing the same frontier.

The closeness of some countries to the conflictual areas makes them vulnerable to the negative effects of this instability so they need to take some steps for resolving the issue (Gleditsch and Ward, 2001: 739). Stephen M. Walt (1987: 5) also draws attention to geographic proximity as a determinant factor for the level of threat along with offensive capabilities and perceived intentions. The neighboring countries frequently worry about the impacts of the actual crisis on their conflicts and their restricted capabilities to overcome this problem (Lee and Abdelrahman, 2016: 357). If they are a kind of small or medium-sized powers at the same time, this spill-over effect can be more influential. Uzbekistan has also both fragile internal dynamics and the status of neighboring small state in the face of a bloody power struggle in Afghanistan.

The civil wars especially affect the whole region through the illegal arms trade, commercial deterioration, new terrorist networks, and refugee influx (Mail, et. al., 2011: 100). This instability hurts the investments and generally neighboring nations have to allocate more resources for the refugees (Murdoch and Sandler, 2002: 92). All these factors encourage them to tackle the problem and reduce costs by undertaking a mediator role. On the one hand, the states via a successful mediation desire to have a voice on the forthcoming regional issues and prevent the increasing influence of their rivals (Zartman, 2013: 15). Although states want to deal with problems, which create security and economic threats for them, in their neighbors, most of the time they have not enough capacity for accomplishing this objective by themselves (Lee, 2011: 40). Therefore, the great powers<sup>3</sup> can be seen as the most convenient actors to the mediation (Kleiboer, 1996: 380). However, the small states have also some strengths and advantages alongside their weaknesses and limitations for being a potential mediator like Uzbekistan's position in the Afghan peace process.

### **4. The Mediation Capabilities of Small States**

Regardless of the states' power capacities, there are several conditions for the acceptance of an actor as the mediator. Firstly, it is substantially related to their reputation, skills, and the parties' assessment of them (Kolb, 1985: 11). Secondly, the political and economic ties between a potential mediator and conflictual sides also facilitate the launching of mediation (Mellin, 2013: 83). Finally, one of the disputants' confidence in the ability of a potential mediator to persuade the other party to enter a negotiation increases the chances of the mediator (Kleiboer, 1996: 380). All in all, the major powers can have more qualifications than small states when considering these criteria, but which do not directly imply the requirement of a powerful state for a successful mediation.

The motivations of small states being a mediator resemble the other actors that protecting themselves from the negative effects of conflict, distancing the foreign players from the region, and unwillingness to take sides between one of the disputants (Zartman, 2013: 16). They try to foreground the international principles beneficial for their interests. Additionally, mediation enables small and medium-sized states to increase their effectiveness and respectability. The undertaking role of the mediator hence has become

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<sup>3</sup> For the case of a great power mediation see also Özkan and Baba (2015).

a foreign policy instrument in unsteady regions (Zartman, 2013: 21-22). Meanwhile, international institutions frequently become the ideal platforms for raising their voice (Wivel, 2005: 395).

According to a widespread view in the Cold War period, the tactics of small states' leaders had been shaped "within the limits set by inter-great-power relations" (Fox, 1959: 183). Although they got rid of these restrictions to some extent, they suffer from the lack of resources to settle a regional dispute which is harmful for their interests (Barakat, 2014: 10). But by and large, the limited power of small states and so impossibility of using force for them build trust on the conflictual sides and increase their acceptance as a mediator. From the perspective of a more powerful party of the dispute, a face-saving way can be found by the small state without any damage to its prestige. The weaker party also expects an emphatic behavior from this mediator because of their similar status. The great powers use coercion in some mediating cases hence could cause anger and disappointment, but the small states benefit from being convincing and having a positive perception (Slim, 1992: 207).

Some previous examples demonstrate that compelling proposed solutions of the large nations could not find a permanent settlement to the deadlocked crises. On the contrary, weaker mediators are more influential because of their distinctive characteristics like accuracy, reliability, non-threatening posture and not having complex plans (Coleman, 2012: 55-73). Additionally, in conducting the process of mediation, small states can be more confidential due to their success in keeping the negotiations hidden (Lieberfeld, 1995: 204). They use peaceful and facilitating means for getting successful outcomes from the negotiations such as providing the preconditions of conciliation, evaluating the dangers, information gathering, and taking proactive steps if necessary (Lee and Abdelrahman, 2016: 359). In a nutshell, Uzbekistan, for the mediator role in the Afghan peace process, has also motivations as a neighboring country and some capabilities and disadvantages as a small state.

### **5. The International Peace Initiatives for Afghanistan and Uzbek Foreign Policy**

The Taliban rule was ended by the US-led coalition forces due to its affinity with the Al-Qaeda, which had been held responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks. And then an interim government headed by Hamid Karzai was formed in Afghanistan at the end of the same year (Jones, 2009: 142). However, the Taliban continued to fight with the coalition troops and the new Afghan government.<sup>4</sup> The crisis deepened year by year and there was no winner. This kind of deadlocks usually requires mediation by third parties for the conflict resolution (Zartman, 2013: 16; Kleiboer, 1996: 380; Greig, 2005: 251-252; Bercovitch, 1992: 4-5).

Although there are various actors as a candidate for the mediator role (Vukovic, 2014: 63), states differ from other ones by mobilizing the capability of tangible resources (Bercovitch, 2014). Nevertheless, international organizations and other non-state actors have also performed international mediation for the last few decades (Iji and Fuchinoue, 2009: 137). Similarly, so many actors like NGOs, neighboring countries, European states, and the Gulf monarchies tried to lead up a series of peace initiatives for bringing stability in Afghanistan (Miller and Blake, 2019: 1). The Kabul Process, the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-Afghanistan Contact Group, and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan were the principal multiparty attempts for finding a solution to the conflict. Uzbekistan has also been a part of all these processes and tried to contribute to peace-seeking efforts for Afghanistan (Singh, 2018).

Before the American intervention, Afghanistan was a civil war-torn country. From the very beginning, Uzbekistan has also stressed that the Afghan conflict cannot be resolved by military means alone and emphasized the need to involve all neighboring countries and concerned parties in a peaceful solution to the Afghan problem. Accordingly, Tashkent launched the "6+2" (China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as the United States and Russia) peace initiative. It was also endorsed by the UN. Thus, the "6+2" communication group was formed. From 1999 to 2001, the group held several meetings and the representatives of conflicting parties, including the Taliban, also attended to some of them. In 1999, The Tashkent Declaration on Fundamental Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan was adopted. The UN Security Council also endorsed the

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Brown University (2020) data, nearly 157.000 Afghanis are died in the conflict since 2001. More than 43.000 of those killed are civilians.

declaration in which the main emphasis was cutting the arms supply to the sides in the conflict. However, the sudden terrorist attacks of 9/11 put an end to the effectiveness and sustainability of this peace mechanism (O'zA, 2018; Meher, 2018; UN: 1999).

Nevertheless, Uzbekistan maintained its peace-seeking policies for Afghanistan. It put forward a "6+3" peace mechanism, similar to the "6+2" initiative to stabilize and bring peace to Afghanistan at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008. The renewed initiative included NATO, along with six of Afghanistan's neighbors and the US and Russia. Despite the lack of international attention, the initiative was repeated and discussed again at the 67th session of the UN General Assembly in 2012 by Uzbek foreign minister Abdulaziz Kamilov. The "6+3" did not generate enough interest this time around and remained unimplemented (Tolipov, 2012: 12). This attempt demonstrates that the small states benefit from international institutions to share their ideas (Wivel, 2005: 295) but they sometimes could not get these plans approved.

Meanwhile, US president Barack Obama was planning to withdraw its troops incrementally from Afghanistan (Landler, 2017). Some attempts to launch a dialogue with the Taliban for achieving security and stability between 2012 and 2015 were failed due to various reasons. The Afghan government and the Taliban formally met in Pakistan for the first time under the observation of American and Chinese officials in July 2015. Yet there was no progress in irregular negotiations between two parties. Thus, after the US presidential elections, the Taliban proposed new peace talks to the Trump administration directly in February 2017. On the other hand, in April 2017, diplomats from China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan came together in Moscow for the revitalization of the dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban. Washington officially declared their willingness for negotiations with the Taliban in October 2017 (Qazi, 2018). While these developments were happening, the new president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev announced the renewed position of his country on the issue of achieving peace in Afghanistan at the 72<sup>nd</sup> session of the UN General Assembly in 2017.

Mirziyoyev stressed that there should be a direct dialogue between the Afghan government and other domestic political actors. According to the Uzbek president, the parties should not have prerequisites for the negotiations which also should be conducted by Afghans themselves through the observation of the UN. Additionally, he also announced Uzbekistan's support to the US' call for the neighbors of Afghanistan to back the peace process (PMRUUN, 2017). In this sense, Uzbekistan and other republics of Central Asia established a new mechanism, Central Asia + Afghanistan (C5+1) after a meeting in Ashgabat with Afghan officials in December 2017. The authorized bodies of the UN for the issue also promoted the new C5+1 format in which the goal was to discuss the regional issues especially the ones originated from Afghanistan (The Tashkent Times, 2017). Before scrutinizing other peace-building endeavors of Uzbekistan in the subsequent years, it would be meaningful to analyze the reasons and motivations behind Tashkent's enthusiasm for achieving and maintaining security and stability in Afghanistan.

## **6. The Motivations of Uzbekistan for Undertaking Active Role in the Afghan Peace Process**

As mentioned above that the geographic proximity to the unstable regions raises the threat perceptions of states (Gleditsch and Ward, 2001: 739; Walt, 1987: 5). This assumption is also a case for Uzbekistan. As a neighboring country, Uzbekistan has been affected by Afghanistan-originated problems like drug trafficking, organized crime, illegal arms trade, and the refugee crisis. Though, in this article, Uzbekistan's motivations are categorized under three dimensions: economic, security, and international prestige. Economically, after the U.S.-led intervention, Uzbekistan began to play a significant role in the reconstruction efforts of this country. Particularly, it has been a major foreign supplier of electricity to Afghanistan. For instance, it exported approximately 1654,1 million kWh electricity to its neighbor in 2016. This number, a year later, increased to 2009,1 million kWh, and reached 2592,4 million kWh in 2018 (NSIAIRA, 2019: 176).

Moreover, Uzbekistan became the first country in history to build a railway in Afghanistan. Uzbek experts completed the construction of a 75-kilometer, \$165 million railway project connecting the Hairatan border checkpoint and the northern city of Afghanistan, Mazar-e-Sharif in 2011. The railway can transport more than 9 million tons of cargo a year, thus contributed to the further development of cooperation between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan (Railway Technology, 2020). In July 2009, the

friendly economic cooperation between the two countries quickly expanded in other spheres. The first official launch of the fiber-optic underground internet network connecting Uzbekistan and Afghanistan took place in Hairatan port. With the commissioning of the fiber-optic network, the cost of internet access in Afghanistan, especially in the northern regions, has fallen by up to 80% (UzDaily, 2019).

As a result of this connectivity, the bilateral trade expanded mainly in favor of Uzbekistan. In other words, more than 90 percent of bilateral trade was accounted for Uzbekistan's exports to Afghanistan. According to official data, between 2002 and 2009, bilateral trade between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan increased almost nine-fold. In 2009 alone, the total trade volume between the two countries (mainly trade of fuel, glass, steel, machinery, and industrial equipment) was 877 million dollars. That was about a quarter of Afghanistan's trade with the outside world in 2009 (Fazendeiro, 2010: 8). The trade turnover between the two countries in 2010 reached the highest level in the history of Uzbek-Afghan relations, reaching 1 billion 88 million US dollars (CSOIRA, 2013: 243).

In the first quarter of 2010, a distribution center of the General Motors Uzbekistan, a joint Uzbek-American car manufacturer, was opened in Mazar-e-Sharif. Tashkent hosted the first joint meeting of the Uzbek-Afghan working commission on trade, transport, and energy in 2015 (MFA of Uzbekistan, 2018b). Thanks to these economic ties, Afghanistan became the 5th largest export market of Uzbekistan by the year 2016. According to the Minister of Foreign Trade of the Republic of Uzbekistan Jamshid Khodjaev, the trade turnover between the parties amounted to \$617 million but Uzbekistan accounts for less than 10 percent of Afghanistan's \$6.5 billion-a-year imports (Shonazarov, 2018).

The official visit of the government delegation led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan Abdulaziz Kamilov to Kabul in January 2017 developed a "road map" that will increase trade turnover between the two countries to \$1.5 billion in the coming years (Azizov, 2017). In the context of this goal, the presidents of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan met five times in a short period and paved the way for the visit of the president of Afghanistan Muhammad Ashraf Ghani to Uzbekistan in December 2017. During the visit, many dimensions of the bilateral relations were discussed, the last situation for peace and stability in Afghanistan was evaluated, and the contracts, worth over \$500 million, were signed in a range of fields (Embassy of Uzbekistan in India, 2017). If the peace is ensured in Afghanistan, according to the first deputy chairman of the Uzbek Senate Sadik Safaev, the geopolitical and geo-economic situation in Central Asia will change dramatically, and the Trans-Afghan corridor will be opened and Uzbekistan will be able to connect to the nearest seaport in 2-3 days, instead of the current 22 days (BBC O'zbek, 2018).

Despite these positive steps and expectations, in recent times the volume of exports and imports between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan has substantially decreased. The reason for this decline has not been the breakdown in the relations between two countries but the rise of destabilizing developments in Afghanistan (Kurilkin, 2017). With the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014, the situation has further deteriorated and the threat to security in the region has begun to grow. The clashes broke out on the one hand between affiliated groups of the Daesh and Taliban, and on the other hand between Afghan government forces and these groups in some parts of the country. Under these circumstances, some areas came under the control of the Daesh and the Taliban (Omonkulov, 2016: 689; Rojin, 2015).

The lack of central government authority in a country affects directly commercial activities and foreign investments. (Mial, et.al. 2011: 100; Murdoch and Sandler, 2002: 92). Besides economic losses, the bordering nations are concerned with the political instability in their neighbors because of possible negative effects on the sensitive issues inside the country (Lee and Abdelrahman, 2016: 357). Tashkent has also perceived Afghan conflict as one of the serious external threats to its national security and stability since the 1990s. The active presence of home-grown Uzbek groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Afghanistan makes this threat more real and dangerous in the eyes of Uzbek officials.

The IMU is labeled as a terrorist organization by the Uzbek government at home. It was alleged by the Karimov regime that the group carried out cross-border attacks and illegal activities since the years of Taliban power in Afghanistan. The IMU was held responsible for the simultaneous bombings in the capital city of Uzbekistan, Tashkent both in 1999 and 2004 (Brattvoll, 2016). The IMU was officially



established in 1998 by Juma Namangani and Tohir Yo'ldosh who came from Namangan city, the north of Fergana Valley. It is argued that the IMU was using the Afghan land as a launchpad for its operations against the Central Asian states, especially the Karimov regime, and became one of the most influential militant organizations of the region through its close contacts with Al-Qaeda and Taliban (Sanderson, et.al. 2010: 5-7). Throughout the US-led occupation in Afghanistan, the IMU took sides with these groups and fought against the coalition forces (Cronin, et.al. 2004: 38). It is believed that the main goal of IMU has always been the toppling of the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan (Pannier, 2019a: 79). However, with the overthrow of the Taliban, it had to move its forces and camps to the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Brattvoll, 2016).

The IMU leader Namangani was killed in November 2001 (Traynor, 2001) and Yoldosh died in October 2009 after the US drone attacks in August (CNN, 2009). The new leader and many militants of the IMU were also killed likewise (Walsh-Khan, 2012). In addition to this, the Pakistani government increased its crackdown against the organization so the IMU came back to northern Afghanistan (Brattvoll, 2016). The IMU symbolically save its title but disintegrated to a large extent. The members have also begun to attend the ranks of different groups (Pannier, 2019b). On the other hand, the IMU was trying to attract new fighters from Uzbekistan (Stein, 2012: 80). In the golden years of the Daesh, the IMU leader Usmon Ghazi and other militants announced their allegiance to this group on August 6, 2015. In a short video, they pledged loyalty to the Daesh and explained that hereinafter they would describe themselves as the Daesh fighters from the Khorasan region (Sharipzhan, 2015).

The Taliban did not react positively to this alliance between the IMU and the Daesh and took action against the IMU after the Ghazi's critical discourses towards the Taliban. Indeed, it had severely attacked Ghazi and other IMU militants; thereby the group was isolated dramatically. These were seemingly good news for the Uzbek government (Zenn, 2016). However, the Daesh has tried to sustain its influence in the region under the name of the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP) since 2015. Khorasan references to Central Asia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and partly Iran and India. The ISKP has been active in Afghan lands and so it is perceived as a threat by the neighboring countries (Chaudet, 2019: 1). There has been no reliable news about the IMU for a while. The remnant militants of the organization possibly joined to the ISKP.

According to Wahid Muzhdah, a security analyst from Afghanistan, the Taliban has no aggressive plan against other states instead it tries to increase its weight inside the country hence the IMU had to affiliate itself with the Daesh. He also argued that Uzbekistan has intended to benefit from the Taliban to neutralize these terror threats (Brattvoll, 2016). Although there could be no direct threat to the security of Uzbekistan, the permanent stability in Afghanistan is always beneficial for Tashkent. However, an effective struggle with this kind of threat could only be succeeded after lasting peace is secured inside Afghanistan. The Uzbek government also sought to play an active role as a trustworthy broker between Kabul and the Taliban (Chaudet, 2019: 7). This was the second dimension of Uzbekistan's desire for assuming an active role in resolving the Afghan conflict.

The third motivation of Uzbekistan for being a part of the Afghan peace process has been the president Mirziyoyev's efforts of strengthening his legitimacy internally, winning international support and prestige, improving Uzbekistan's international image, attracting foreign investment to his country. Michael Kugelman, a senior associate from Woodrow Wilson Center, claims that Mirziyoyev administration saw the peace initiatives in Afghanistan as an opportunity for presenting itself as a reliable and peaceful actor (Saifullah, 2018). The reason was that the negative image of the Karimov regime in the eyes of the West due to human rights practices (Reuters, 2018a). The requirement of foreign direct investments for lessening the economic problems compelled Mirziyoyev to strive for changing the perceptions about Uzbekistan (Reuters, 2018b). This motivation of Uzbekistan shows that the states can undertake the mediator role for gaining respectability as a peacemaker and increase its economic power (Mellin, 2013: 80).

The regional aspect of seeking international prestige has directed Uzbekistan's foreign policy priorities towards its neighbors. This foreign policy orientation could be called as "neighborhood first policy" (Singh, 2018). Uzbekistan had some problems in bilateral relations especially with Tajikistan but the president Mirziyoyev gave economic ties prominence and tried to reduce tensions (Hamidzad and

Ponzio, 2019). The new president of Uzbekistan made many visits to the Central Asian countries and held meetings with other leaders in a range of international platforms. This new foreign policy understanding came to fruition and led to the emergence of an atmosphere of regional cooperation (Koparkar, 2018). On the other hand, this approach had also aroused interest in Washington and the Trump administration regarded Uzbekistan as a potential partner for large geopolitical calculations of the US like the balancing of China in the region (Sembler, 2019). Therefore, Tashkent was also encouraged by Washington to be a part of the Afghan peace process (Stone, 2019). Trying to solve a standoff via mediation as a foreign policy instrument allows the small states to increase their effectiveness and respectability. (Zartman, 2013: 21-22). Uzbekistan was also willing to have a voice on the regional issues, so it assumed a kind of mediator role.

### **7. From the Second Tashkent Declaration to the Doha Deal: Uzbekistan's Mediator Role in Afghan Peace Process**

If numerous actors have similar interests for the resolution of a conflict, the peace process can be conducted effectively (Iji and Fuchinoue, 2009: 157-158). Uzbekistan has also desired to act in concert with the international community for Afghanistan, thus hosted an international conference on March 26-27, 2018, nineteen years later from the first Tashkent Declaration which was accepted by the 6+2 group. The representatives of the UN and the EU, the presidents of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, and the foreign ministers or high-level diplomats from many countries like China, France, Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the US attended to the summit (MFA of Uzbekistan, 2018c).

The two previous meetings laid the groundwork for the Tashkent Conference. The first one was held in Samarkand, the historical city of Uzbekistan on November 10-11, 2017, and titled as "Central Asia: One Past and A Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity". Here, in his speech, the president of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev associated the economic prosperity of Central Asia with the realization of peace in Afghanistan. One month later the second one was organized in Ashgabat and the above-mentioned C5+1 platform was created. After these meetings, the president Mirziyoyev accelerated his initiatives. Uzbek and Afghan governments made a joint presentation in the UN Security Council session about their plan for a peace conference on January 19, 2018 (MFA of Uzbekistan, 2018d).

The "Declaration of Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan: Peace Process, Security Cooperation & Regional Connectivity" was adopted at the end of the conference. It consists of twenty-four articles and in general terms emphasizes peace and national reconciliation in Afghanistan, the fight against transnational terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime, and the development of regional economic cooperation. The main theme of the declaration is to ensure stability in Afghanistan through building peace and providing security. It calls for the launching of direct talks between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. It assures the support of the international community to the process and claims that there will not be any losing side at the end. Finally, according to the declaration, the expected peace agreement should contain an article that accepts the Taliban as a legitimate actor in return for giving up violence, severing ties with all kinds of transnational terrorist networks, and respecting the Afghan Constitution (MFA of Uzbekistan, 2018c).

As in the conference declaration, the primary objective of mediation is to provide an environment of confidence and dialogue (Zartman and Touval, 1985: 31-32). However, the weakness of the conference was the absence of the Taliban which has taken at least 45 percent of Afghanistan's territory under its control and threatening the remaining parts of the country (Roggio and Gutowski, 2017; Sharifi and Adamou, 2018). Nevertheless, the foreign and local media earlier reported, citing the US officials, that some groups in the Taliban movement were interested in a peace conference (Xalq So'zi, 2018; NBC News, 2018). The Uzbek Foreign Ministry also acknowledged its engaging in a dialogue with some officials of the Taliban. In June, the Taliban and Kabul separately announced a short-term ceasefire for the Eid al-Fitr (Ramadan Feast) of 2018. Tashkent welcomed this decision and declared its preparedness to provide all necessary conditions for direct negotiations between both sides in the territory of Uzbekistan (MFA of Uzbekistan, 2018e). Uzbek government continued to make statements on the issue at different times. For example, in October 2018, Ismatulla Irgashev, the special representative of the

president Mirziyoyev for Afghanistan, explained that his country had been talking with the Taliban according to the request of the Afghan government (TOLO News, 2018).

The most salient meeting to date between Uzbekistan and the Taliban was held in Doha on March 4, 2019. Mullah Baradar Akhund, the head of the political office of the Taliban, expressed their appreciation to the foreign minister Abdulaziz Kamilov for the initiatives of Uzbekistan since the Tashkent conference. The Taliban official added that the economic investments of Uzbekistan will also form a basis for the political reconciliation process in Afghanistan (MFA of Uzbekistan, 2019a). Two days later, Abdulaziz Kamilov discussed the peace process and cooperation with the Afghan delegation led by Hamdullah Mohib, national security advisor of the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani (MFA of Uzbekistan, 2019b).

These successive meetings of Uzbek officials with both sides and conveying their messages to each other showed the intermediary role of Tashkent (Hashimova, 2019). The acceptance of international actors as a mediator is related to the perceptions of conflictual parties towards them (Kolb, 1985: 11). The impossibility of using force for the small states in mediation also increases the trust towards them (Slim, 1992: 207). Uzbekistan, as a small state, featured the peaceful means like the cooperation of two countries and stability, socio-economic welfare, and development of Afghanistan in its negotiations with both sides. It is known that this kind of relations is also significant for the beginning of mediation (Mellin, 2013: 83).

The mediation efforts of Uzbekistan proceeded on the last day of March 2019. Viktor Mahmudov, national security adviser of Mirziyoyev, and Abdulaziz Kamilov visited Kabul. They met Ashraf Ghani and discussed economic relations between the two countries and the ongoing peace process. During the meeting, the Uzbek officials proposed Samarkand as a neutral meeting place for the negotiations between the central government and the Taliban. The president Ghani thanked for the proposal and stressed on the significance of Samarkand for both nations as a common cultural heritage (OWSPIRA, 2019). Meanwhile, Washington and the Taliban began direct talks around two issues that were related to the US withdrawal and the Taliban's halting its attacks (Putz, 2019). Two of the third parties to the Afghan peace process, one of them is a great power, the US, and the other one a small state, Uzbekistan also came together at certain times.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special representative for Afghanistan, visited Uzbekistan on April 12, 2019, and discussed the details of the negotiation process in a meeting with the president Mirziyoyev. On the same day, Khalilzad extended his thanks to the Uzbek officials from his social media account for their endeavors in the Afghan peace process (Arian News, 2019). Uzbekistan's position on the Afghan peace process is more clarified in the three-staged plan put forward by Irgashev. Initially, the international military forces should be evacuated from the country step-by-step to prevent a power gap in Afghanistan. Secondly, the essential guarantee mechanisms at the implementation stage of a possible deal should be made clear. Finally, after an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the international community should strongly contribute to the reconstruction of the country (Irgashev, 2019).

The mediators' lowest level of intervention can be seen in the communication-facilitation strategies, including the transfer of messages, and providing a convenient place for the talks (Bercovitch and Houston, 2000: 175). Uzbekistan until that day had adopted this less effective role but the statement of Irgashev revealed its enthusiasm to move the upper stage. The next step, the formal reception of a delegation led by Mullah Baradar Akhund from the Taliban political office in Doha, was the most controversial action of Tashkent in the Afghan peace process.

Uzbek officials met with their guests at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on August 8, 2019. The main agenda was again the peace process in Afghanistan. Mullah Baradar highlighted the contribution of Uzbekistan for the re-orientation of the international community's interest towards Afghanistan. He also declared the support of the Taliban to the Uzbek government's proposal for hosting the subsequent negotiations (MFA of Uzbekistan, 2018f). During a few days program, the representatives of the Taliban also visited the historical places such as Samarkand. However, Uzbekistan's move was criticized by the Afghan government. In its statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan appreciated all international efforts for the Afghan peace process. Nevertheless, it also stated that this kind of meetings

does not facilitate the negotiations and asked the third parties to respect the official representative of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (OTAMFAIRA, 2019). After that reaction, Uzbekistan slowed down its steps. It also reminded us of the potential weaknesses and limitations of the neighboring and small states in the mediation (Lee, 2011: 40; Barakat, 2014: 10).

Despite the official warning from Afghanistan, US president Trump was also planning to invite the Taliban to Camp David. The aim was to get a quick deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which had not been a part of the latest peace negotiations (Baker, et.al., 2019). However, he changed his mind on September 9, 2019, due to the killing of an American soldier in Kabul. Trump condemned this attack and canceled the Camp David plan. The Taliban was the main suspect of the explosion because it had resumed its offensive acts against the US military forces simultaneously with the peace talks. Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson of the Taliban, criticized the decision to end negotiations which had been held nine rounds in total until that time (BBC, 2019).

Two months later the silence in the peace process was broken with the president Trump's statement that they were talking with the Taliban (Kimball and Macias, 2019). Soon afterward, the first official meeting between the Taliban and the US delegation headed by the special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad was held in Doha on December 7, 2019 (Aljazeera, 2019). Following this dialogue, the US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo came together with his counterparts from the five Central Asian countries in Tashkent on February 3, 2020 (Central Asia News, 2020a). Pompeo explained the goal of his country in the peace process as saving both the US and the region from the negative effects of terrorism. He also emphasized the significance of enhancing economic ties with Afghanistan. In particular, he promised that the US would grant \$1 million for increasing commercial relations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. He also thanked Mirziyoyev for the close cooperation on the Afghan peace negotiations (Wong, 2020). As mentioned above, mediators try to coordinate peace-finding policies with the leading regional and external actors (Cousens, 2008: 66-67). Uzbekistan also maintained its diplomatic communication with the global powers and regional actors.

All these bilateral and multilateral talks concluded with a deal. The US and the Taliban, with the participation and supports of many global and regional players, including Uzbekistan, signed the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan" in Doha on February 29, 2020. This accord gave real hope for the achievement of peace in Afghanistan (The US Department of State, 2020; BBC, 2020). According to the agreement, the Taliban is obliged to terminate violence, to accept a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, not to allow extremist groups to launch terrorist attacks against the US or other country from Taliban-controlled areas, and to accept direct dialogue with the current Afghan government (Qazi, 2020).

In return, the US agreed to reduce the number of military personnel from 14,000 to 8,600 initially, and then a full withdrawal within 14 months provided that the Taliban keeps its commitments. The US also indicated that economic sanctions imposed on the Taliban would be lifted by August 27, 2020 (The Guardian, 2020). In March, the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani approved the plan to release 1,500 Taliban prisoners as part of the peace deal (Mashal, 2020). Moreover, the Afghan government announced the formation of a 21-member negotiation team for the peace talks on March 27, 2020 (Aljazeera, 2020).

Even though Washington and other third parties have contributed to the peace process, the exclusive role of Tashkent was openly expressed by both the representatives of the US and the Taliban at the meeting. While Zalmay Khalilzad reiterated the significance of the Tashkent Conference as a turning point for the peace negotiations, Mullah Baradar expressed sincere gratitude to Kamilov for all endeavors of Uzbekistan regarding stability, security, and socio-economic development of Afghanistan (UzA, 2020). The Afghan president Ashraf Ghani also thanked his counterpart for his constructive role in this peace process. Although the great powers can be seen as more competent for the mediation (Kleiboer, 1996: 380), in many cases, the small states make also outstanding contributions. The typical features of them raised their reliability like unthreatening attitude towards the conflicting sides (Coleman, 2012: 70-71), keeping some details hidden (Lieberfield, 1995: 204), and paving the way for getting positive results (Lee and Abdelrahman, 2016: 359). Uzbekistan also, through the peace process,

came to the forefront as a peaceful actor, did not reveal any details without parties' consent, and exerted applaudable performance to provide the required environment for direct talks.

### **8. Conclusion**

The internal conflict in Afghanistan required the involvement of third parties since the late 1990s. The international organizations, the great and regional powers, and other players have been a pioneer or a part of the peace initiatives for the Afghan crisis. Uzbekistan is also one of these actors as a neighboring country of Afghanistan. It is worth noting that Uzbekistan as a sincere and reliable neighbor has abstained from interference militarily to the conflict in Afghanistan, and has always demonstrated the willingness to deliver humanitarian, economic, and peaceful assistance.

Uzbekistan's interest in the developments in Afghanistan and undertaking an active role in the peace process has been causally related to its security and economic development. The presence of Uzbek militants in Afghanistan was perceived as a significant threat to the government in Tashkent. Additionally, the economic relations between the two countries have been deteriorated due to the activities of armed opposition groups in the border regions. In the last three years, one of the motivational factors encouraging Uzbekistan to tackle the instability in Afghanistan is to seek to increase the international prestige of the country and create a new image that differentiates the president Mirziyoyev from Karimov in the eyes of the international community.

Uzbekistan took part in many attempts since the first Tashkent conference on Afghanistan in 1999. It offered its solutions in these platforms but its small state status and thereby lack of enough capabilities were obstacles to get international support and materialize these initiatives as seen in the "6+3" proposal. Nevertheless, the non-threatening and peaceful approach towards not only the Afghan government but also the Taliban increased the reliability of Uzbekistan as a small state. Therefore, Tashkent has effectively positioned itself as a reliable mediator in the Afghan peace process and intensified its efforts to talk to and bring all the participants of the conflict to the negotiation table.

Despite the peace deal between the US and the Taliban, some factors complicate the peace process in Afghanistan. Particularly, bilateral, multilateral, global, and regional relations between Russia, the US-led Western powers, and China have deteriorated significantly in the last years, resembling the Cold War, and may negatively affect this process. The global Coronavirus pandemic may divert international attention and limit the implementation of the peace deal. Additionally, some external and local political actors, terrorist groups, and the fractions within the Taliban can also sabotage the peace process. However, it seems that Uzbekistan will continue to pursue an active and open foreign policy designed to develop and strengthen friendly and mutually beneficial relations with Afghan actors and try to achieve permanent peace in this country to ensure security and sustainable development in Central Asia.

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