



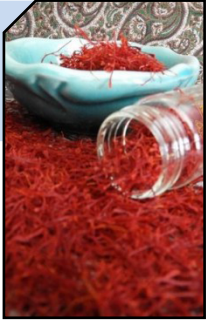
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Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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Khalilzad, Miller Met Taliban Leaders, Discussed Doha Agreement

Taliban's political office in Doha says the group's political deputy and head of political office Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and head of the group's negotiation team met with US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad and US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller on Saturday.

"The importance of the agreement, full and good implementation of it was discussed during the meeting. Especially, the IEA mentioned the issue of the release of its remaining detainees and the removal of the Blacklist, which are the text and important items of the agreement," Naiem Wardak, the spokesman of Taliban political office in Doha said. ... **P3**



Afghan Sikhs call for peace following mass migration

Only 250 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus have remained in Afghanistan following the evacuation of hundreds of their community members from cities across the country last year.

The vulnerable minority stated that they had the highest migration rate of all groups in Afghanistan and lost a huge number of Sikhs and Hindus to violence in the last five years of President Ashraf Ghani's tenure.

Chairman of the Sikh and Hindu Council, Ram Sarn said that around 500 Sikhs and Hindus left Afghanistan following the deadly attack on their Gurdwara, or temple, in Shor Bazar of Kabul city last year.

About 200 worshippers were reported to have been in the building at the time of the attack which lasted about an hour. Twenty-five Sikh worshippers, including one child, were killed in the March attack. "People left Afghanistan to protect their families. If a real government comes and the human rights of citizens like us are not violated, they will return to Afghanistan," Ram said. ... **P2**

Afghanistan launches polio vaccination targeting 9.9 million children



The Afghan Public Health Ministry launched a nationwide campaign on Sunday to give polio vaccination dose to 9.9 million children under the age of five, the

ministry said in a statement. The five-day drive was launched as 56 polio cases were detected in Afghanistan in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic and

ongoing insurgency and conflicts have been hindering the efforts to stamp out the infectious disease in the mountainous country as millions of children from areas

inaccessible to vaccination teams might miss the ongoing vaccination drive.

Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan are the only two countries in the world that polio cases are reported every year, according to the statement.

However, Afghanistan's coronavirus tally crossed 54000 with registration of 81 new positive cases in the past 24 hours, the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) said on Sunday.

The nationwide tally reached 54,062 after 14 new cases were detected in Nangarhar, 13 in Herat, 11 in Laghman, 10 in Kunduz, nine in Kunar, seven in Takhar, six in Baghlan, five in Kabul, two in Khost and one each in Kandahar, Balkh, Badakhshan and Kapisa provinces.

MoPH in a statement said 1584 people underwent Covid-19 tests since yesterday and the virus was detected in 81 people.

The period saw more than 400 patients recovering from the disease, taking the total recoveries to 45,868, while four people died of the infection, pushing the death toll to 2,343, the statement said.

Rashid Khan Joins Afghan Cricket Team in UAE

Afghan cricket star Rashid Khan has joined Afghanistan's national team in the United Arab Emirates to prepare for the One Day International (ODI) series that will kick off on January 21. The Afghan team won an unofficial match with the Ireland in Abu-Dhabi on Friday to prepare for the series, the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) confirmed.

The Afghan team has been training in the UAE for matches scheduled for January 21, 24 and 26.

The matches will be played at Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed ... **P2**



Gunmen Kill 2 Female Judges in Kabul

Gunmen opened fire on a vehicle in Kabul around 830am on Sunday, Kabul police reported, and two female judges of the Supreme Court were killed and two other people--the driver and another female--were wounded in the attack, according to the Presidential Palace.

The police are investigating the incident, said local officials.

Previously, a security forces source said that preliminary findings indicated that those wounded were a driver and a female employee of the Ministry of Education.

President Ashraf Ghani condemned the attack on the female judges in Kabul, saying that "attacks by the Taliban and other terrorist groups against defenseless people are against Islamic teaching and against the spirit of peace."

President Ghani, addressing the Taliban, in a statement said that "terror and crime and violence are



not the solutions to the problem, and the current crisis and the war prolongs the country's issues." "Two female judges were killed, and two others were wounded in the attack," the statement said. The Taliban "must show their will for peace by accepting a permanent ceasefire," Ghani said.

"Another appalling targeted attack on civilians in Kabul, killing two eminent women judges and injuring others. We condemn this and all attacks on civilians and call for an urgent investigation into those responsible. Deepest condolences and sympathy to all affected," said Alison Blake, British ... **P2**

Rashid Khan...

Cricket Stadium, ACB said. The series was scheduled to begin on January 18 but will now instead start three days later following a request by the ACB. Cricket Ireland agreed to the delay which was in part caused by the Covid-19 quarantine regulations.

Gunmen Kill 2...

Ambassador in Kabul. Chargé d'Affaires Ross Wilson said the US condemns today's (yesterday) killing of female supreme court judges, adding: "The Taliban should understand that such actions for which it bears responsibility outrage the world and must cease if peace is to come to Afghanistan." However, no group including the Taliban has claimed responsibility for the attack yet.

Afghan Sikhs...

Meanwhile, challenges such as land grabbing, poverty, and harassment have forced the remaining community to settle in one of their religious sites in Kabul. Sikhs and Hindus have urged the warring parties to stop the war and bring peace to Afghanistan. "A durable peace must come. We have witnessed 40 years of war – it is enough. The situation has worsened. If the situation continues this way the remaining Sardars (Sikhs) will leave Afghanistan," said Sundar Singh district representative of the community.

By Marvin G. Weinbaum and Shanthie Mariet D'Souza

What If the Afghan Peace Process Fails?

Prospects for a lasting, comprehensive agreement to end the Afghan conflict, never very bright, seem increasingly dim. Only after many months of wrangling over preliminary issues are the opposing delegations in Doha now at the point of addressing the multitude of tough decisions required to shape a new political order. It augurs badly for negotiations that the Taliban, whether out of confidence in its strong bargaining position or from core convictions, have thus far shown no inclination to compromise on any issues of real substance. Against a background of mounting violence, in refusing to entertain a ceasefire the Taliban have also shown themselves to be in no hurry to end the nation's bloodletting.

Most disconcerting, the talks have confirmed the wide gap between the opposing sides in their visions of a future Afghan state and society. The Taliban's participation in peace talks in Doha seems not so much intended to chart Afghanistan's future as aimed at keeping the U.S. in the February 2020 agreement that committed it to removing all troops from Afghanistan by the end of this April. With American as well as allied foreign forces gone, the Taliban could well be on a path to political ascendance, if not by bullying at a negotiating table then on the battlefield.

While mindful of the looming obstacles, most Afghans along with much of the international community continue to place their faith in the eventual success of the current peace process. Understanding military victory over the Taliban to be unachievable and repelled by the idea of unending warfare, they have placed their faith in diplomacy. The hope is that the Taliban, conscious of the difficulties in achieving an outright military victory, will be ready to sign a political deal once the group has extracted enough concessions. Ultimately, the Taliban are conceived of as a transactional actor. That ideology rather than pragmatism might dominate Taliban thinking is conveniently dismissed.

Hardly surprisingly, then, little attention is given to what might follow should the current peace talks prove fruitless. Negotiations could very well drag on unproductively for many more months, even extend to years, and at any point in time collapse entirely.



Despite the agonizingly slow progress, both sides for their separate reasons appear for now hesitant to quit the negotiations.

But Taliban reluctance could quickly vanish should a Biden administration declare its intention to retain a residual counterterrorism troop presence in the country beyond April. A Taliban spokesman has publicly stated that anything less than a full U.S. withdrawal is a dealbreaker. And with the level of violence in the country continuing to rise, the Kabul government may soon find it politically too costly to remain in the talks. Regardless of the reason, should negotiations break down, the reactions among a disillusioned Afghan public, a disunited political elite, and sorely disappointed international community could well determine the future of the Ashraf Ghani government and of Afghanistan's Islamic Republic.

In the wake of failed peace negotiations, the government can be expected to express its confidence in the country's ability to soldier on. It would insist that the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces (ANSDF) are capable of defending the state, even in the face of almost certain increased Taliban attacks of

greater scope and intensity. Afghan forces have for some time conducted ground operations independently and have slowly grown an air force instrumental in keeping major population centers out of the hands of militants. But even with uninterrupted American financial assistance to the ANSDF, the departure of most or all foreign troops and private contractors, and especially the loss of U.S. tactical air support, will test the Afghan military's mettle and morale. It could serve as a strong accelerant to an already high rate of military desertions that then leads to an unraveling of the Afghan security forces. The transfer by deserters of their equipment and training to various militias countrywide could ignite a messy, more destructive civil war.

The collapse of peace talks may result in furthering disunity among Afghan political elites. Divided along ethnic and regional lines, they have had separate ideas on how and toward what end peace talks should be conducted. Several of the leading militia-wielding powerbrokers can be expected to renew threats to mount their own military offensives against the Taliban. Among opposition politicians, many will assign blame for the breakdown of negotiations ...

P3

By: Vanda Felbab-Brown

In Afghanistan, different priorities mean vastly different policies

The incoming Biden administration will need to quickly grapple with fundamental decisions about its Afghanistan policy. As I wrote separately, the choices it makes will depend on which decision making framework it will adopt and on the priority it gives to different policy objectives in Afghanistan: a) a maximalist counterterrorism insurance posture; b) preservation of existing gains; or c) U.S. geostrategic objectives regarding China, and Russia, countering pandemics, and addressing global warming. Each of these objectives has vastly different policy implications for the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and the U.S. posture toward various Afghan actors, including the Taliban and the Afghan government.

The Biden administration can prioritize counterterrorism goals in Afghanistan, specifically countering al-Qaida and the Islamic State in Khorasan. This prioritization translates into two policy options: a maximum-insurance counterterrorism policy, or a normalized counterterrorism policy (more on the latter when I discuss geostrategic objectives). The maximum-insurance

counterterrorism policy centers on keeping a limited U.S. counterterrorism contingent in Afghanistan for a very long time, at least until a peace deal is struck. This approach assumes that despite the commitments the Taliban made in Doha in February 2020, the Taliban cannot be trusted to deny al-Qaida and other terrorist actors the capacity to attack U.S. and allied targets. The United States thus seeks to maintain a quick-strike force in Afghanistan. Such a counterterrorism posture in turn requires that the Taliban relinquish its core objective of ejecting foreign troops from Afghanistan and subject itself to the vulnerability that the U.S. counterterrorism force could hit Taliban targets. The Taliban is extremely unlikely to concede to that, especially if the United States does not guarantee that it will accept a prominent role for the Taliban in the Afghan government, but rather seeks to minimize it.

Maintaining a counterterrorism-only force in Afghanistan would require the United States to stand by as the Taliban pounced on Afghan provincial capitals and took ever-more Afghan territory. The

Taliban is unlikely to halt military action and agree to a permanent, comprehensive ceasefire, since its bargaining position in negotiations with the Afghan government and in many side negotiations with Afghan powerbrokers is directly a function of its military strength. The Afghan government, for its part, would not tolerate the collapse of its territorial control and would demand military assistance from the United States beyond funding its forces. Most of Afghan security forces remain dependent on U.S. and NATO forces, even for defensive operations.

More likely, the United States would have to pursue such a maximum-insurance counterterrorism policy without an agreement from the Taliban. Yet within some months after May 2021 — by which time United States agreed to have withdrawn all of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in its deal with the Taliban — the Taliban would likely start shelling U.S. bases, perhaps with Iran's assistance, and the United States would find itself on the cusp of a renewed war with the Taliban. The ground realities resemble Iraq's — where pro-Iran Al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias regularly shell U.S. bases to drive the United

States out — more so than Syria's, where U.S. bases are in the territory of Kurdish allies and Russia has not yet decided to push the United States out of Syria. Prior to the Doha Agreement, Taliban regularly fired mortars at U.S. bases, and an armed actor in Afghanistan — likely the Islamic State in Khorasan — has now repeatedly fired truck-mounted missiles at U.S. targets.

Thus, the United States would have to maintain a counterterrorism foothold even as surrounding territories fell to the Taliban. If the U.S. wanted to slow the Taliban's advance, it would need to increase troops beyond the 2,500 the Trump administration leaves in Afghanistan on January 19. However, restarting military actions against the Taliban and maintaining a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan also reduces incentives for the Taliban to uphold, however minimally, its Doha counterterrorism commitments. The Taliban has not severed its complex (including intermarriage) links with al-Qaida. But maintaining an open-ended U.S. counterterrorism force in Afghanistan could discourage the Taliban even from seeking to prevent al-Qaida terrorist actions emanating from Afghanistan — a less expansive but more important counterterrorism objective. Moreover, although the Taliban currently battles with the Islamic State in Khorasan, the Taliban could seek a détente with the group.

PRIORITIZING "PRESERVING GAINS IN AFGHANISTAN"

Alternatively, the Biden administration could prioritize preserving the gains of the two past decades in Afghanistan, including the existing Afghan constitution, democracy, and human rights, including of minorities and women. In essence, this policy still seeks to defeat the Taliban — if not on the battlefield alone, then at the negotiating table. It can be prosecuted through two different means, both strongly welcomed by the Afghan government.

First, the United States could again dramatically increase U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and absorb the geopolitical, foreign policy, and domestic costs of doing so. But since 150,000 U.S. and NATO forces failed to defeat a then-much weaker Taliban a decade ago, there is little prospect a smaller U.S. and allied force would defeat a much stronger Taliban now. Nor has governance in Afghanistan improved enough to deprive the Taliban of popular support.

Alternatively, the United States could attempt to adopt a limited, but an open-ended, military presence that persists until the Taliban agrees to a peace deal that the United States and the Afghan government like. This would mean minimal changes to Afghanistan's political dispensation and a token presence of ...

P3

Afghanistan's saffron ranked number 1 in world

Afghanistan saffron, winning three Golden Stars, has been ranked as number one in the world by the International Taste Institute. The Institute wrote on its webpage that Afghanistan's saffron process-related work got better and ranked No.1 among dozens of countries. Afghanistan's saffron is famous all over the world and has won many

international awards because of its quality. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Afghanistan produced 12 metric tons of saffron during the ongoing year — a 10 percent surge over last year. Saffron is cultivated in Herat, Faryab and Balkh provinces of the country.



In Afghanistan,...

Taliban in the Afghan government.

The "preserving gains" approach hinges on the hope that once the United States discards the May deadline for its military withdrawal, the Taliban will — for some reason — give up its strategic objectives and ignore its internal cohesion imperatives. That's unlikely. For several years, the Taliban has been intensely pounding Afghan security forces and weakening them. The latter are continually, if slowly, losing battlefield and psychological ground. At best, this policy thus slows down the degradation of Afghan security forces and the rate of Taliban's military gains. This is a repeat of the "hoping and praying" approach from 2015-2017, that somehow something will change on the battlefield and the Taliban will suddenly start making enough strategic mistakes to destroy itself.

Under this policy, the Taliban may walk away from negotiations for years to come. Meanwhile, this prioritization inflates the negotiating demands of the Afghan government. As long as the United States stays until a "good" peace deal is reached, the Afghan government bears few costs if negotiations collapse or drag on, and may easily prefer either. With Washington propping up the government, there are few incentives to make significant concessions to the Taliban or other Afghan powerbrokers rocking the government with their parochial ploys.

Even if negotiations don't collapse, the Taliban may resort to shelling U.S. bases, or the United States may start hitting Taliban targets and drive it back to negotiations with reduced demands. Like in the maximalist counterterrorism policy, the United States thus slips back into open-ended fighting. Again, the Taliban loses incentives to uphold at least some of its counterterrorism commitments.

More broadly, an open-ended military deployment will raise tensions between the U.S. and regional powers — China, Russia, and Iran — none of which wants a sustained U.S. military presence in Afghanistan (even though they welcome the U.S. distracted and bogged down). Nor do they want intensified civil war as a result of the United States simply washing its hands of Afghanistan. Nor do they want a return to a 1990s-type Taliban rule. What they do want is a coalition government in which the Taliban is constrained; at the same time, each has made its peace with the Taliban. If the possibility of an extended U.S. presence becomes real, those powers could intensify assistance to the Taliban or assorted Afghan militias, or pressure Pakistan to deny the United States access to Afghanistan. That, in turn — Pakistan's denial of U.S. access to its and ground lines of communication — would make U.S. and NATO deployments in Afghanistan struck. We don't want a situation where Washington must subordinate the rest of its relationship with Pakistan to maintaining the access, even as Pakistan is not doing more to get the Taliban to reduce violence against Afghan and, eventually again, U.S. forces.

What If the...

on obstructions deliberately created by the president and his political allies. The uneasy truce between Ghani and his veteran rival Abdullah Abdullah is likely to dissolve. Some politicians may follow the lead of former insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in reaching out to the Taliban to explore how their interests could be protected under an interim government or restored emirate.

Grassroots pressure on Kabul to continue to press for peace will probably mount. As happened in the 1990s, large numbers of war-weary Afghans, faced with the prospect of an unending conflict, may be prepared to settle for almost any outcome promising to bring an end to fighting. Other Afghans, fearing expanding violence and the looming possibility of Taliban rule, will lay plans to flee the country. A rapidly deteriorating or collapsed economy as in the 1990s could mean that millions of employed Afghans would lose their ability to earn a living. Without a modern economy, the most skilled and educated would be among the first wave of refugees. Foreign aid donors and international aid agencies and NGOs would find it increasingly difficult to maintain their programs and in leaving add to the severity of an economic contraction and people's hardships.

In an Afghanistan under Taliban sway, respect for popular will as expressed through democratic institutions would have no place. The republic's elected officials and representative institutions would be replaced by a righteous leader and a council of clerics seeking guidance exclusively from Islamic principles. Tolerance of media and other freedoms of expression would similarly disappear, as is presaged by the recent targeted killings of many

journalists and public figures. Predictably, the strict cultural prohibitions enforced during the 1990s would be reinstated. Women's educational rights and other impressive achievements marking the last 19 years could be enjoyed only at the sufferance of local mullahs and their interpretation of Shariah. The Taliban's often repeated promises to create an inclusive Islamic society may suggest a new openness but only to those willing to accept its terms.

With the prospect of a Taliban-dominated regime in Kabul, groups and individuals having ties to the republican government would have reason to fear for their personal safety. The Taliban have made known their intention to hold accountable those who have helped sustain the Ghani government. Shiite Hazaras and other minority communities, remembering the ethnic cleansing in the 1990s, are particularly apprehensive. Hazara as well as many Tajik and Uzbek commanders could be expected to block Taliban advances into areas under their control, making difficult any future Taliban attempts to consolidate power nationally. A chaotic Afghanistan filled with contested and ungoverned space could become hospitable ground for the operations of terrorist groups like al-Qaida and Islamic State-Khorasan, or regional groups.

A near consensus among regional states on the desirability of a political solution for Afghanistan can be expected to dissolve together with faded peace prospects. The neighboring countries are likely to move toward reviving the hedging strategies that in the 1990s embroiled them in the Afghan conflict through proxies. Pakistan's involvement with its favored

Taliban factions may become more transparent. Some like Russia and Iran, anxious to block the export of Taliban influence beyond Afghanistan's borders, may look to strengthen ties to past ethnic proxies or try to buy off the Taliban with promises of assistance. With foreign troops exited and a Kabul government hard-pressed, India may be less hesitant to provide military assistance. Worsening Sino-Indian relations and the strengthening of the China-Pakistan nexus could turn Afghanistan into a battleground where India is pitted against China and Pakistan.

Most Afghans will have difficulty recovering from a failed peace process in which they and their government have invested so much hope. Faced with escalating insurgent violence, the future of the Islamic republic may hang in doubt unless the government can start rebuilding confidence in its ability to deliver basic security and improved governance. Recognizing the critical juncture for the country, its politically powerful figures must also begin to put aside their differences. Additionally, Afghans need reason to believe that there exist alternatives to negotiating a grand bargain with the Taliban, such as creating the material incentives for a gradual process of politically reintegrating Taliban field commanders and fighters with the state. Even then, Afghanistan cannot expect to succeed without regional and international powers recommitting to the country's stability. As unpromising as these developments presently appear, they may be all that stands in the way of the profound social, economic, and political consequences of a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan or a more disastrous civil war.

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Khalilzad, Miller...

"The IEA emphasised that, in general, the lake of total implementation of the

agreement, and, especially, not taking serious measures about above mentioned two articles, which should have

been acted on to the large extent, can affect the ongoing process of negotiations," he added.

UN chief welcomes decision to hold Palestinian polls

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has welcomed a decision by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to hold presidential and legislative elections for the first time in 14 years.

"The holding of elections in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza will be a crucial step towards Palestinian unity," Stephane Dujarric, a spokesperson for Guterres, said in a statement.

The UN chief said he hoped that the planned parliamentary elections in May, and presidential vote in July, would "contribute to restarting a process towards a negotiated two-state solution based on the pre-1967 lines, and in accordance with relevant UN resolutions,

bilateral agreements and international law".

He said the UN stood ready to support all efforts on the part of Palestinians to be able to exercise their full democratic rights, going on to call on the Palestinian authorities "to facilitate, strengthen and support women's political participation throughout the electoral cycle".

On Friday, Abbas issued a decree to set the dates for holding the Palestinian general elections.

The last Palestinian presidential election was held in 2005, which brought Abbas to the Palestinian Authority, while the parliamentary polls which were held in 2006 gave the Hamas group the majority in parliament.



A look at the world

G7 summit to take place in UK's Cornwall in June

The UK will host the June 11-13 G7 Summit in the resort town of Carbis Bay at the Cornwall Peninsula, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Office said in a message published Sunday.

The meeting of the leaders of the UK, Germany, Italy, Canada, the US, France, Japan and the EU will also be joined by the leaders of Australia, India and South Korea. The participants will discuss



common issues, such as coronavirus pandemic, climate change, free access of the population to freed trade, benefits of technological and scientific progress.

"The Prime Minister's ambition is to use the G7 to intensify cooperation between the world's democratic and technologically advanced nations. To that end, he has invited leaders from Australia, India and South Korea to attend as guest countries to deepen the expertise and experience around the table. Between them the 10 leaders represent over 60% of the people living in democracies around the world," the Prime Minister's Office said.

This meeting will become the first in almost two years following the previous summit in France's Biarritz on August 24-26, 2019. Last year, the G7 did not convene due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The authorities expect the summit to bring Cornwall a profit of \$68 million due to tourist influx in the future.

Iraq grants \$20B projects to Chinese companies



Iraq has given construction projects worth \$20 billion in the southern province of al-Muthanna to a consortium of Chinese companies, an Iraqi official said on Sunday.

"The projects include the construction of a power station and a factory for floors and porcelain with a production capacity of 32,000 m2 per day, and a factory for ceramic walls and façades with a capacity of 36,000 m2 per day," Adel Al-Yasiri, the head of the al-Muthanna Investment Authority, said in a statement.

He added that an initial approval has been granted to establish the projects.

"The first phase of the projects amounts to \$2 billion where two sites have been prepared near the Samawah refinery for the companies to complete the remaining procedures," he said.

Other projects include the construction of a sanitary ware factory with a capacity of 360 m3 per day, a ceramic factory for accessories with a capacity of 108,000 m2 per month, and a factory for papers and 125 million cardboards per month.

NASA test fires engines for Moon mission carrier missile

NASA specialists carried out test firing of the Space Launch System (SLS) carrier missile engines Saturday. The event was livestreamed on the NASA website.

Four engines, installed on a special stand inside the NASA testing facility, worked simultaneously for about one minute. The firing was expected to last about eight minutes.

Despite the setback, NASA director Jim



Bridenstine did not consider the test firing a failure, adding that the Agency specialists will determine the reason behind the unplanned behavior and will be able to eliminate it.

SLS project manager John Honeycutt disclosed that the automatic system was triggered, shutting the engines down. According to Honeycutt, it is too early to tell whether it was a failure of equipment, sensors or software.

In 2019, NASA announced the Artemis moon program, which will include three stages: an unmanned orbiter that will return back to Earth, a manned orbiter and a landing mission, which NASA expects to take place by 2024.

Bridenstine speculated that, considering the Saturday event, the schedule could be reviewed. According to the official, everything depends on what caused the unplanned operation and how difficult it will be to solve the problem.



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