



ISSRA SEMINAR - 1

POST-SEMINAR REPORT

CURRENT SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN: GLOBAL AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES, A WAY FORWARD FOR PAKISTAN

9 September 2021

INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS (ISSRA)
NATIONAL DEFENCE UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD



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CONCEPT NOTE

The situation in Afghanistan has evolved fast during the last few months and is likely to develop further. Several countries of the world have their national perspectives in line with their respective national interests. Stakeholders within Afghanistan including the Taliban have their own views and plans on different aspects of governance and security.

The events in Afghanistan affect Pakistan the most among all countries of the region. It is imperative to study the evolving situation in the context of perspectives of all relevant states and strategize a way forward for Pakistan to secure our national interests.

GROUP PHOTOGRAPH OF PARTICIPANTS





PRESIDENT NDU'S REMARKS

Afghanistan has always been a significant state owing to the strategic location and historical relevance in the global affairs. If we analyze history, the conquerors have always been attracted to the region and have used the Afghan land to expand their influence. In the recent era of bipolar world, it was used by the US against the expansion of communism. Likewise, in the contemporary world due to proximity with the rising China, the Afghan land has again become relevant in the geo-political equations. Afghanistan has paid huge price for this relevance in the geo-political and geo-strategic contestations. However, the people of Afghanistan have always resented hard against the foreign occupations hence making Afghanistan “the graveyard of empires”.

If we objectively analyse why nobody has been able to rule the Afghan land the answer lies in the very nature of the people, culture and values of the country. All ethnic groups in Afghanistan follow their culture with pride and are averse to imposition of foreign culture. They have very strong family system that is very much intact and have their own judicial system that is delivering. The invaders have never tried to understand their culture - instead they applied force to rule them therefore, always faced setbacks.

The South Asian region in recent times has become epicenter of the New Great Power Politics from the perspective of containment of China and Indo-Pacific contestation. China is trying to uplift the region economically through ‘Constructive Engagements’ for its smooth rise, whereas, the status quo powers are trying to maintain ‘Controlled Chaos’ in the region in order to impede China’s growth. In this regard, the significance of Afghanistan owing to its location adjacent to China cannot be denied. The decision of the US pulling out of Afghanistan without any visible gains has raised many questions. In this context, ISSRA Seminar 1 is a timely initiative to discuss the current developments and explore the perspectives of the key stakeholders in the contemporary environment.



DG ISSRA'S REMARKS

It is a privilege for me to open this seminar of immense significance from two angles. One, because of the relevance of the topic; second, it is first of the ISSRA Seminar Series, which we have commenced. The idea behind this initiative is to develop the professional capacity of the intellectual pool of ISSRA (National Defence University). Furthermore, it is to produce knowledge on national security issues to contribute to national security discourse and share that knowledge with the right offices.

The seminar topic is one of the most important, significant and relevant topics across the world and particularly in the region. To further contextualize it, we need to see where Afghanistan stands today. The country is located at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and China. Since 2007 after joining SAARC, it has become part of South Asia. South Asia geographically and politically ends at Afghanistan; West Asia and Central Asia also end at Afghanistan. The western tip of China's border also ends at Afghanistan. The geographic centrality of Afghanistan either paves the way for interconnectedness for the region of Asia or else it can put a lock as it has for so many decades, which continue to change, and the keys also continue to change. Pakistan and Afghanistan are interlaced geographically and with a much closer view have intertwined reality.

The constants and variables of Pakistan and Afghanistan are shared, due to which we cannot remain separated from all that is happening. When there are similarities and shared attributes then there are convergences as well as divergences. There is a need to manage and shape the environment. As on the global front, the departure of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, the proverbial Global War on Terror (GWOT), its strategic tone and operational texture have faded away, which can eventually whither away with time. Moreover, the US does not possess blind power to drive the unipolar global order anymore. As we are living in an era of multipolarity today, such a period also brings great dangers as both great wars of the 20th century were at the helm of multipolar world order.

At the regional level, the countries of the region have their national interests aligned with their perspectives and pursuits related to Afghanistan. Conversely, such an environment, directly and indirectly, affects the national security of Pakistan. Afghanistan faces serious challenges, as the environment is evolving at a fast pace. Unfortunately, in the days ahead a lot of turbulence can be foresighted inside Afghanistan which may lead to the biggest humanitarian crisis. ISSRA being a comprehensive national security think-tank is the right platform to deal with the subject.

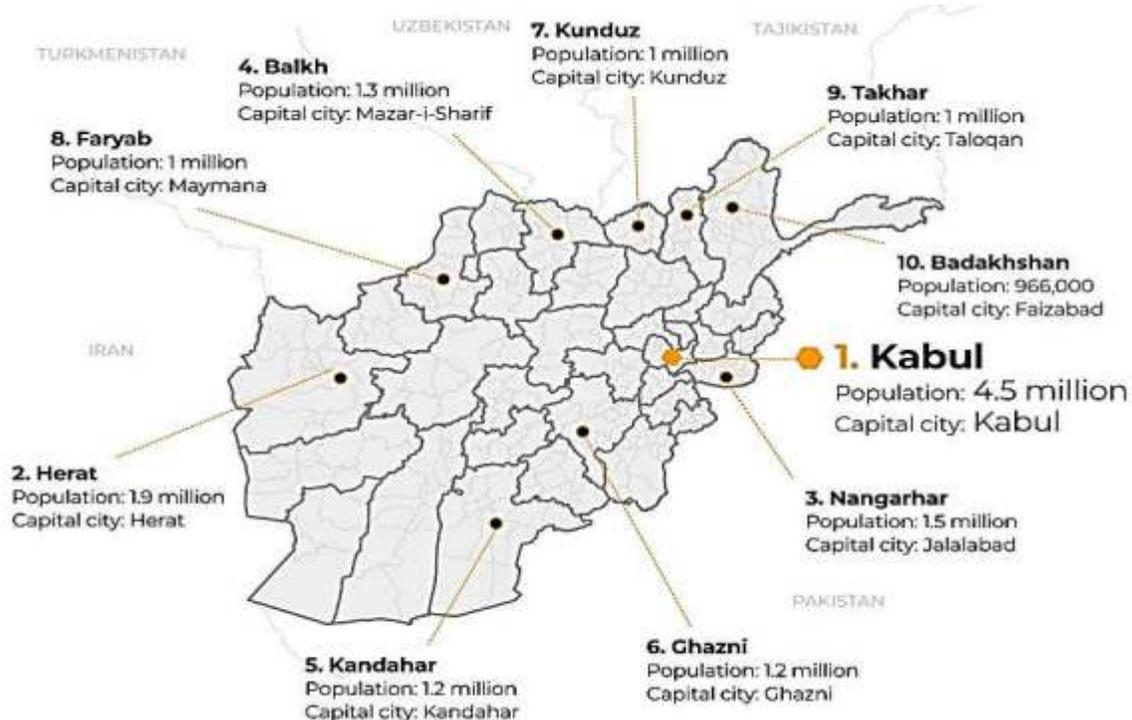
Strategic Environment and Current Situation in Afghanistan

By: Brigadier Muhammad Tariq Niaz

Geography and Demography of Afghanistan

The total area of Afghanistan is 652,860 square kilometres with a population of 39 million out of which 25.4% are urban and 74.4% are rural.¹ In addition, there are 1.44 million registered refugees in Pakistan.² Afghanistan has 34 provinces and 421 districts with a literacy rate of 38%. The ten largest provinces of Afghanistan are Kabul (4.5 million population), Herat (1.9 million), Nangarhar (1.5 million), Balkh (1.3 million), Kandahar (1.2 million), Ghazni (1.2 million), Kunduz (1 million), Faryab (1 million), Takhar (1 million) and Badakhshan with a population of 966,000.³

Figure 1.1: Ten Largest Provinces of Afghanistan



(Source: Al Jazeera TV)

Afghanistan shares a 5844-kilometer border with six countries including Pakistan, China, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The largest border is shared between Pakistan and Afghanistan having a length of 2612 kilometres followed by 1333 kilometres with Tajikistan, 921 kilometres with Iran, 744 kilometres with Turkmenistan, 143 kilometres with Uzbekistan, and 91 kilometres with China.⁴

¹ Klaus Kaestle, "Guide to the Countries of the World :: Nations Online Project," Your Guide to the World :: Nations Online Project, accessed November 4, 2021, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/afghanistan.htm>.

² "Operational Data Portal." Country - Pakistan (Islamic Republic of). Accessed November 4, 2021. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/pak>.

³ Haddad, Mohammed, and Alia Chughtai. "10 Maps to Understand Afghanistan." Infographic News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 15, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/12/10-maps-to-understand-afghanistan-interactive>.

⁴ Central Intelligence Agency. Central Intelligence Agency. Accessed November 4, 2021. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/afghanistan/>.

Figure 1.2: Borders of Afghanistan



(Source: MoFA/Survey of Pakistan)

Afghan Society

Ethnically, Afghan society is comprised of 42% Pashtun residing in southern and eastern Afghanistan, 27% Tajik in northeast and western part, 9% Hazaras in central and 9% Uzbeks in northern Afghanistan, 4% Aimaq in central and western highlands, 3% Turkmen at the northern border, 2% Baloch in southern Afghanistan and 4% other groups comprising Pahai, Pamiri, Kyrgyz, Arabs, Gujar, Moghol, Ormur, Wakhi, Dards, Sikhs, and Hindus.⁵

Figure 1.3: Ethnicity and Geographical Distribution – Afghanistan

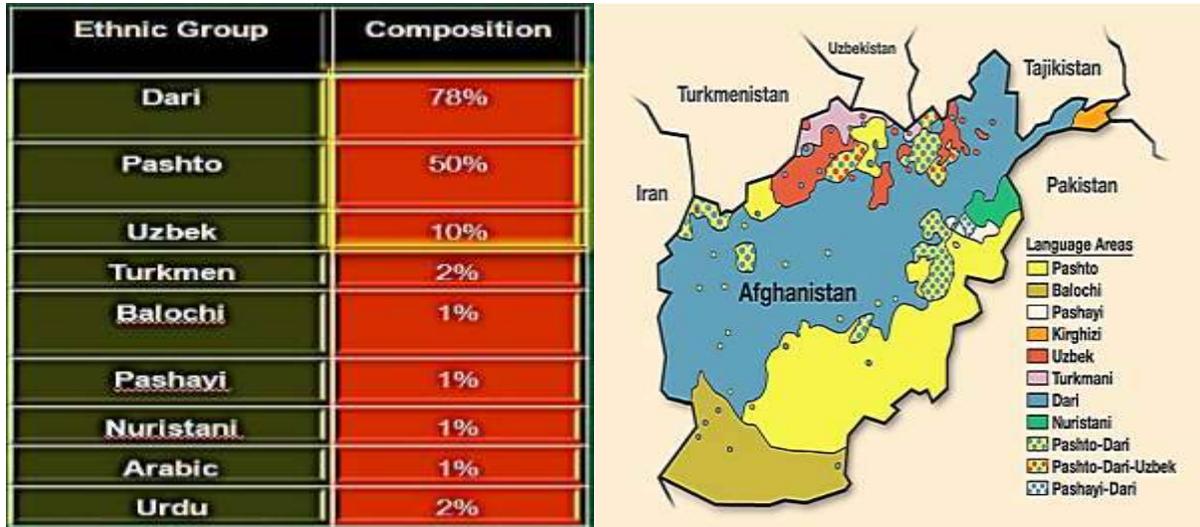


(Source: CIA World Factbook)

⁵ "Afghanistan." Central Intelligence Agency. Central Intelligence Agency. Accessed November 4, 2021. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/afghanistan/>.

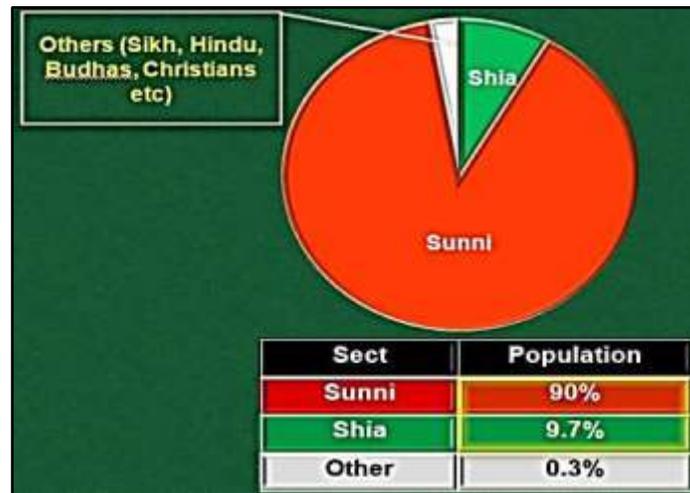
Linguistically, 80% of people speak Dari including other Persian variants, 47% speak Pashto, 11% Uzbek, 2% Turkmen, 5% English, 2% Urdu followed by Balochi, Pashavi, Nuristani, and Arabic. About 90% of the population of Afghanistan is Sunni, 9.7% is Shia and 0.3% belongs to other religions.⁶

Figure 1.4: Languages in Afghanistan



(Source: CIA World Factbook)

Figure 1.5: Sects in Afghanistan



(Source: CIA World Factbook)

History of Afghanistan

It is not difficult to conquer Afghanistan. It is difficult to keep it.
 (Amir Abdur Rahman, 1880-1901)

The land currently known as Afghanistan has witnessed a series of external invasions, internal turmoil, political unrest, and civil wars. The region had remained the hub of Great Power Politics given its strategically important geography, lying at the centre of the world’s most critical trade routes

⁶ Religion, Cultural. “Afghan Culture.” Cultural Atlas. culturalatlas.sbs.com, September 16, 2021. <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/afghan-culture>.

connecting southern and eastern Asia to Europe and the Middle East.⁷ Primarily, it is a tribal society and state control is restricted to major cities only. However, Afghanistan proved to be a forbidden land for the external invading forces, traditionally and proverbially known as the 'Graveyard of Empires'. During the 17th century, Afghanistan was divided into three major segments: north, west, and east. The north was ruled by Khanate of Bukhara, west by the Iranian Safavids, and east by Mughals of northern India, whereas, Kandahar was a buffer zone between the Mughals and Safavids. In the 18th century, Shah Mahmud became the new Persian Shah after defeating the Safavids. Afterward, Ahmed Shah Abdali (Ahmed Shah Durrani) united all the Pashtun tribes and became the founder of the Afghan nation.⁸

The 19th century is marked as an era of great power contestation known as the 'Great Game' for the dominance of Central Asia and Afghanistan. Emir Dost Mohammad Khan, the founder of the Barakzai dynasty, ruled Kabul during that period. The last quarter of the 20th century saw devastating consequences of civil war followed by a military invasion by the Soviet Union (1979-89). The violent clashes between the communist Afghan regime and ideologically motivated insurgents (known as Taliban) led to the overthrow of the government and marked the beginning of the first Taliban rule (1996-2001) in Afghanistan.⁹ Post-9/11, the US invaded Afghanistan in the year 2001, which led to the end of the Taliban rule.

Strategic Environment and Recent Developments

With love, you could persuade an Afghan to go to hell, but with force, you could not even take him to heaven.
(Anonymous)

US military evacuation from Bagram airfield will go down as a landmark event in history and the way it was executed in haste and probably without much deliberation and prudence. Within days and without much resistance, the whole of Afghanistan fell to the Taliban including the country's capital, Kabul. 307,000 US-trained Afghan forces could not put up any worthwhile resistance. Panjshir Valley, the last contested place, also fell to the Taliban, and a caretaker government was announced in Afghanistan on September 7, 2021.¹⁰ However, the widespread controversy spread primarily by Indians related to the involvement of Pakistan in the Panjshir takeover polluted the environment.

In the backdrop of this situation, space for India and others to use Afghan land against Pakistan is likely to be curtailed. As there is uncertainty/ambiguity, therefore, it is difficult to project the future. Pakistan is likely to be scapegoated by the west and India; hence, there is a need to counter the war of narratives. Although the Taliban have assured Pakistan that it will not face any threat from Afghanistan, only time will bear the testimony of this claim.

There is perpetual political instability in Afghanistan; therefore, Black Swan events are likely to occur, a tool for spoilers who do not want peace and stability in Afghanistan. Economic vulnerability, dependency on foreign aid, internal strife, and drug activities are the challenges for the newly established Afghan government. Furthermore, there is an ongoing power contestation due to strategic location and societal fault lines that have resulted in social polarization and ethnic differences. In this context, unemployed youth can be used by the spoilers of peace in the region. The freezing of funds and assets of Afghanistan by IMF and World Bank on the behest of the US has further complicated the situation for the newly formed Taliban regime. In this situation, Pakistan's overall efforts have been

⁷ Ali, Mohammad. "Afghanistan." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., September 14, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan>.

⁸ Klaus Kaestle, "Guide to the Countries of the World: Nations Online Project." Your Guide to the World: Nations Online Project, September 16, 2021. <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/History/Afghanistan-history.htm>.

⁹ Ali, Mohammad. "Afghanistan." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., September 14, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan>.

¹⁰ Hashimi, Hoshang Hashimi. "News." *Today's latest from Al Jazeera*. aljazeera, August 4, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/>.

appreciated by the international community. Pakistan helped evacuate personnel of 29 countries from Afghanistan (including embassy staff of the US and allies). The Taliban-led Afghan government has huge challenges of image deficit, governance, economy, and security.

The situation in Afghanistan remains dicey and difficult to project. The onus lies on global and regional players to help the Afghan government overcome the challenges it faces. The new Afghan government has to display a lot of political and diplomatic sagacity while dealing with the international community and various domestic stakeholders.



Perspective of Taliban About Afghanistan

By: Marium Akhtar

After nearly two decades of war with the loss of more than 100,000 Afghan lives, over 6,000 American soldiers, and expenditure of more than \$2 trillion, the swiftness of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan shocked the world. US defence officials reportedly expected Afghanistan's capital to fall in 90 days;¹¹ however, it took less than ten days with little resistance from the Afghan government and the Afghan National Army. After coming to power, the Taliban have taken a holistic stance over all facets of the state, including governance, diplomacy, security, socio-economics, and trade. They have their perspective about the new regime in Afghanistan.

Inclusive Government

As the Taliban desired to form an inclusive government, they involved members of former governments in discussions and encouraged them to join the new Afghan administration.¹² After intensive consultations, the new caretaker Afghanistan government has been announced; and presently, the Taliban are seeking international acceptance to get worldwide legitimacy, support, and aid to cement their rule.

General Amnesty

The Taliban have maintained that they have forgiven all who fought against them, including government officials, police personnel, and armed forces.¹³ They have reassured foreign governments and international organizations that their embassies, offices, and personnel are safe in Afghanistan. Taliban have extended an invitation to those who had left the country saying they are invited back and can resume their jobs; Afghanistan needs their talent. The new Afghan government proclaims that their overall aim is to maintain law and order in Afghanistan and remain faithful to what they have been fighting for to serve the Afghan people and serve Islam.¹⁴

Human Rights

In various interviews after taking over Kabul, the Taliban have urged Afghan people to remain peaceful and not to be fearful of the new administration. Regarding women's rights and privileges, the new caretaker Afghan government has assured that the Islamic Emirate does not want women to be victims and will protect their rights and dignity. They can continue to work but are not guaranteed cabinet or other senior positions. However, women protestors demanding political participation along with other rights were dissipated by gunshots on September 7, 2021, in Kabul. The new Afghan administration asked the protestors to be patient and wait for the system to establish and organizations to function.

Narcotics

Taliban leaders seeking international approval have told farmers to stop cultivating opium and have assured the world that they will end the narcotics industry in Afghanistan. They are urging

¹¹ Macias, Amanda Macias, Natasha Turak, and Abigail Ng. "Intelligence Failure of the Highest Order' - How Afghanistan Fell to the Taliban so Quickly." CNBC. CNBC, August 18, 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/16/how-afghanistan-fell-to-the-taliban-so-quickly.html>.

¹² News, TOLO. "Taliban: Discussions Continue on Inclusive Govt." TOLONews. TOLONews, August 29, 2021. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-174424>.

¹³ "Taliban Announce 'General Amnesty' for Government Officials." The Express Tribune. The Express Tribune, August 17, 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2316018/taliban-announce-general-amnesty-for-govt-officials-statement>.

¹⁴ Staff, Al Jazeera. "Taliban Says Formation of New Afghan Gov't in Its Final Stages." Taliban News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 31, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/31/taliban-formation-of-new-afghanistan-government-final-stages>.

international assistance in this regard so that they can promote alternative crops for the future. Regarding the economic situation, which is bleak now, the Taliban have issued various statements saying that Afghanistan primarily focuses on financial support from China as they would fight for an economic comeback.

Media

The new caretaker government in Afghanistan is convinced that media in Afghanistan may function if they adhere to Islamic values, impartiality, and national interest. However, journalists have fear and insecurity as death threats and assassinations of Afghan journalists have taken place in the past few months.

Education

The new Afghan government urges women attending universities to wear an abaya robe and niqab covering most of their faces. Educational institutions have been told to segregate classes by gender, or at least divide by a curtain. Female students should only be taught by other women or old men of good character.

Humanitarian Assistance

The Taliban-led Afghan government has assured the UN about the security of aid workers and access to relief goods. They have urged for international humanitarian assistance to manage the effects of a collapsing economy. According to Zabiullah Mujahid, "the war has ended, and Afghanistan is now getting out of the crisis. It is now time for peace and reconstruction. We need the people to support us."¹⁵

Security

Regarding the security perspective of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, they are ambitious to provide comprehensive security to their people. They have taken a principle stance not to allow anyone to destroy peace in the region while using Afghan soil. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the new Deputy Prime Minister of Afghanistan, said: "If we are able to provide security, we will overcome other problems, and from here, the wheel of progress and advancement will begin."¹⁶ Panjshir, the last pocket of resistance, fell to the Taliban on September 7, 2021. Iran condemned the capture of Panjshir and demanded a probe. Indian media alleged that the attacks were carried out by a Pakistan Air Force jet to support the Taliban. However, Pakistan and the Taliban both rejected the claims of foreign interference in the Panjshir Valley takeover.

Terrorism

Afghanistan, now, faces security threats, notably from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), a group affiliated with ISIS that claimed responsibility for deadly suicide bombings on Kabul airport recently. The Taliban-led Afghan government is determined to defeat ISKP as they have already stated that "we fought with the world empty-handed and came this far. We can get rid of such a group,

¹⁵ Afp, Zabihullah Mujahid. "Afghanistan Has Right to Be Recognised': Taliban Spokesman Urges Int'l Community to Reopen Embassies in Kabul." DAWN.COM. DAWN, September 6, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1644832>.

¹⁶ NEWS AGENCIES, AL JAZEERA. "Afghanistan: Mullah Baradar Promises 'Inclusive' Government." Taliban News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, September 4, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/4/afghanistan-mullah-baradar-promises-an-inclusive-government>.

as we have in the past.”¹⁷ Regarding Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), they have pledged that no one will be allowed to use Afghan soil against other countries. They also urged the Pakistan government to act against TTP. However, if TTP considers the Afghan Taliban as their leaders, “they will have to listen to them, whether they like it or not.”¹⁸

Diplomatic Stance

As it seems, the Taliban have a new and improved diplomatic demeanour. They have assured Pakistan that Afghan soil will not be used against Pakistan in any manner.¹⁹ Therefore, optimism exists in the diplomatic relations of Afghanistan and Pakistan for cooperation and collaboration. High-level meetings are likely to take place between both countries for consultations about the future of Afghanistan. In an interview with BBC Urdu, the Taliban spokesperson assured that the new Afghan government does not have the policy to raise arms against any country; however, they have the right to raise their voice for Muslims anywhere in the world, including Kashmir.²⁰

Afghanistan, now, needs international assistance to avoid the emerging humanitarian crisis in the country. The new Afghan government regards China as a major partner, which provides an extraordinary economic opportunity for them. The Chinese government is also ready to invest and rebuild Afghanistan.²¹ The Afghan government is equally welcoming BRI (CPEC) projects leading to Central Asian markets. Afghanistan has rich copper mines to be utilized for future development through Chinese investment. They are fully cognizant of China’s importance in the region, an opportunity to connect markets across the world.

Afghanistan’s relations with Moscow are mainly political and economic. Russia continues to interact with the newly established Afghan government to resolve the issues and create a peaceful environment in the region necessary for international peace and security. Afghanistan and Iran are gradually improving their bilateral relations after the withdrawal of US-led coalition forces. As for India is concerned, the situation is quite sceptical. Generally, the Taliban want to have friendly relations with the EU, the US, and India. Their political office in Doha is in close contact with different foreign countries as they have already stated that “we want to have good relations with the US and the world. We welcome good diplomatic relations with them all.”²²

Trade and Connectivity

The Taliban-led Afghan government is interested in China’s Belt and Road Initiative. They believe that the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan is the key economic advantage and provides an opportunity to access regional and global markets. Zabiullah Mujahid, in an interview, expressed that “China is our most important partner and represents a fundamental and extraordinary opportunity for us because it is ready to invest [in] and rebuild our country.”²³ For Beijing, a stable and cooperative

¹⁷ Staff, Al Jazeera. “Taliban Says Formation of New Afghan Gov’t in Its Final Stages.” Taliban News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 31, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/31/taliban-formation-of-new-afghanistan-government-final-stages>.

¹⁸ TNT, Monitoring Desk. “TTP A Matter Pakistan Must Take up, Not Afghanistan ...” The News Today. TNT, August 29, 2021. <https://thenewstoday.com.pk/ttp-a-matter-pakistan-must-take-up-not-afghanistan-taliban-spokesman/>.

¹⁹ “Afghan Govt Formation Delayed.” The News. Apf, September 4, 2021. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/887729-afghan-govt-formation-delayed>, 4 Sep, 2021.

²⁰ Khare, Vineet. “Afghanistan: Taliban Says It Will ‘Raise Voice for Kashmir Muslims.’” BBC News. BBC, September 3, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-58419719>.

²¹ Henley, Jon. “Afghanistan: Taliban Expected to Announce New Government.” The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, September 2, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/02/afghanistan-taliban-expected-to-announce-new-government>.

²² Al Jazeera, NEWS AGENCIES. “‘Victory Belongs to Us All’: Taliban Celebrates US Defeat.” Taliban News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 31, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/31/afghanistan-now-a-free-and-sovereign-nation-says-taliban>.

²³ Jiangta, Shi. “Taliban to Support Belt and Road Plan of ‘Trustworthy Friend’ China.” South China Morning Post. SCMP, September 3, 2021. <https://amp.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3147520/taliban-actively-support-belt-and-road-plan-trustworthy-friend>.

administration in Kabul would pave way for the expansion of its BRI into Afghanistan and through the Central Asian republics.

The Taliban, despite internal challenges, have a strong possibility of forming a sustainable government owing to their current socio-political demeanour. The future of Afghanistan depends upon how they deliver their promises. There exists a fatigue syndrome as people in Afghanistan are tired of the decades-long conflict. They want peace, and it seems like the Taliban-led Afghan government will provide them with a congenial socio-economic environment to live peacefully. On the question of recognition, the Taliban must earn the world's trust, while the international community must act following ground realities and deal with the newly established government for the stability of Afghanistan and beyond.



Perspective of Other Stakeholders in Afghanistan

By: Fatima Saleem

The situation in Afghanistan has rapidly evolved, and the Taliban's sudden takeover of Kabul has put them back to the centre of power. The unanticipated change of government in Kabul has brought forward various stakeholders, such as ethnic Afghans, women, media, and terrorist outfits, whose perspectives are important to highlight if long-term peace in the region is required to achieve.

Ethnic Afghans

Afghanistan is a mosaic of different ethnicities, and various surveys have concluded that Pashtuns constitute 42%, Tajiks 27%, Hazaras 9%, Uzbeks 9%, Turkmen 3%, Baluchi 2%, and other groups 8% of the total Afghan population.²⁴ The country's key political figures can be divided based on their ethnic lineage to understand the stance of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. They are Hamid Karzai (Pashtun), Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (Pashtun), Abdullah Abdullah (Pashtun-Tajik), Ahmad Massoud (Tajik), Amrullah Saleh (Tajik), Muhammad Atta Noor (Tajik), Abdul Rashid Dostum (Uzbek), and Abdul Ghani Alipur (Hazara). The key Pashtun political figures, Hamid Karzai, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Abdullah Abdullah, have been denied any place in the newly formed Afghan government. Thus, Pashtuns belonging to the opposition have adopted the stance that political differences among all stakeholders should be addressed through dialogue because imposing will by force has never had positive results, and it would make Afghan people continue to suffer.²⁵

After the Panjshir takeover, reports suggested that Tajik leader Amrullah Saleh of the National Resistance Force had fled to Tajikistan while Ahmed Massoud was still present in the valley. In his audio message, Masoud stated that since the Taliban had chosen not to hold talks, an uprising could take place for the freedom of Afghans.²⁶ His uncle Ahmed Wali Mehsud had also pleaded to the West to support the cause of resistance against the Taliban. Since Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum had fled to Uzbekistan, there were no reports of any resistance in Uzbek majority provinces. It seems that Uzbeks have accepted the change of government in Afghanistan.

Out of the total Afghan Shia population, nearly 90% are Hazaras. The Taliban have reassured their safety and non-discrimination. Although the statue of the late Abdul Ali Mazari in Bamyān²⁷ has been destroyed, the Shia community is gaining the support of the newly established Afghan government to live freely. The Shia Ulema Council of Afghanistan has demanded a government in which Shia Muslims of the country be given representation and rights of all minorities be respected.²⁸

Terrorist Outfits

Due to years of turmoil and war, numerous terrorist organizations have mushroomed in Afghanistan; however, the prominent are Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), and Al Qaeda. TTP, located in Nangarhar, is headed by Noor Wali Mehsud. It has almost 5,000 fighters and holds an anti-Pakistan agenda. It is evident that the terrorist group has vowed

²⁴ "Afghanistan - World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples." Minority Rights Group. World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, October 29, 2021. <https://minorityrights.org/country/afghanistan/>.

²⁵ Rasooli, Shirshah. "Afghan Politicians React to War in Panjshir." TOLONews. TOLONews, September 7, 2021. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-174553>

²⁶ PT, Pakistan Today. "Panjshir Resistance Leader Calls for 'National Uprising for Freedom' in Afghanistan." Pakistan Today. AFP, September 6, 2021. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2021/09/06/panjshir-resistance-leader-calls-for-national-uprising-for-freedom-in-afghanistan/>.

²⁷ Steinbuch, Yaron. "Taliban Destroy Statue of Foe, Stoking Fears after Moderation Claims." New York Post. New York Post, August 18, 2021. <https://nypost.com/2021/08/18/taliban-destroy-statue-of-foe-stoking-fears-after-moderation-claims/>.

²⁸ Yaad, Ziar Khan. "Shia Ulema Calls for Inclusive Afghan Govt." TOLONews. TOLONews, September 7, 2021. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-174549>.

to attack Pakistan and described its security institutions as an enemy. After the Taliban takeover, TTP has clearly stated that it is hoping to take control of the tribal region and make it an independent area.

In October 2014, TTP members pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; thus, ISKP was created in January 2015.²⁹ Currently, ISKP is headed by Shahab al-Muhajir and located at Kunar, Nuristan, and adjoining areas with an estimated strength of 2200 fighters.³⁰ ISKP claims to be the sole custodian of the ideology of an Islamic state and has termed the Taliban American puppets incapable of bringing peace to the country.³¹ The Taliban and ISKP have been at loggerheads, especially since the Taliban killed its former leader Zia-ul-Haq, while he was in Pul-e-Charkhi prison in Kabul.³²

In September 2014, Zawahiri announced the creation of a separate Al Qaeda affiliate in South Asia, i.e., Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). AQIS was an attempt to establish a more durable presence in the region by enhancing links with local actors.³³ Despite claims, the group is still operating in Afghanistan and has more than a dozen links, some of which are the Islamic Jihad Union, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, etc.

On Taliban's victory, Al Qaeda sent a message to the group congratulating them while stating that "this victory has demonstrated what the Islamic nation is capable of when it unites, takes up arms, and fights in the way of Allah to defend its religion. These events prove that the way of Jihad is the only way that leads to victory and empowerment."³⁴ Like Afghanistan, Al Qaeda has also called for the liberation of Palestine, Somalia, Yemen, and Kashmir from the clutches of the enemies of Islam.

Perspective of Women

The lifestyle and culture of a rural Afghan woman are vastly different from that of living in urban areas; therefore, the perspective here presented is that of women from urbanized centres. Earlier in September 2021, women began to protest in Afghanistan demanding their right to education, work, and political participation, especially when the Taliban have announced that women would only be allowed to work as teachers or nurses. After the Taliban takeover, the general perception amongst women was that everything they had worked for the last 20 years would disappear overnight. Therefore, one can say that the issue of women's rights will likely be one of the most significant parameters to judge the new Afghan government.

Media

There is a sense of fear and insecurity prevailing amongst media personnel that under the Taliban rule, they feel scared, nervous, and threatened. Their views can be expressed in the words of the TOLO News Director, who recently said that "the Taliban takeover has put us in a very, very difficult situation and has forced us to reconsider if we should continue to work or not."³⁵

After analysing the perspectives of various stakeholders, one can conclude that the reservations presented by each should be addressed by the newly established Taliban government in Afghanistan if stability is to be achieved.

²⁹ Department, Attorney-General's. "Islamic State Khorasan Province." Terrorist organisations. Attorney-General's Department, October 16, 2017. <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Islamic-State-Khorasan-Province.aspx>

³⁰ Department, Attorney-General's. "Islamic State Khorasan Province." Terrorist organisations. Attorney-General's Department, October 16, 2017. <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Islamic-State-Khorasan-Province.aspx>

³¹ Rana, Muhammad Amir. "The Khorasan Chapter Threat." DAWN.COM. DAWN, September 5, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1644581>.

³² Desk, Web. "Taliban Executes Former IS-K Chief a Year after Afghan Govt Jailed Him: Report." The Week. The Week, August 19, 2021. <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2021/08/19/taliban-executes-is-k-chief-a-year-after-afghan-govt-jailed-him.html>.

³³ Service, Congressional Research. "Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan - Crsreports.congress.gov." <https://crsreports.congress.gov | IF10604 · VERSION 13. crsreports, August 17, 2021. https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10604/12>.

³⁴ Stalinsky, Steven. "The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda's 'Al-Sahab' Media Wing and Its American Architect." MEMRI. Middle East Media Research Institute, September 14, 2017. <https://www.memri.org/cjlab/the-rise-and-fall-of-al-qaedas-al-sahab-media-wing-and-its-american-architect>.

³⁵ Afp, DAWN. "Top Afghan TV Network Stays on-Air despite Fear of Taliban." DAWN.COM. AFP, September 8, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1645219>



US Perspective on Afghanistan

By: Namra Naseer

The withdrawal of US-led coalition forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's swift takeover of Kabul have far-reaching effects on regional and global politics. In April 2021, President Biden announced that US military forces would leave Afghanistan by September 2021. By the end of July 2021, the US completed nearly 95 percent of its withdrawal from Afghanistan. On August 6, 2021, the Taliban captured the capital of southern Nimruz province, the first provincial capital to fall. After that, provincial capitals began to fall in rapid succession. On August 15, 2021, Taliban fighters entered the capital Kabul, and Ghani's government collapsed.³⁶ The swiftness of the Taliban's territorial gains and collapse of both the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces and the Afghan government surprised US officials and allies, as well as, reportedly, the Taliban themselves.³⁷

Decision of Afghanistan Withdrawal

The decision to pull out US troops from Afghanistan is seemed controversial as Americans are blaming President Biden for mishandling the Afghan withdrawal. Recent polling results (YouGov) show that 33% of Americans approve of how President Biden has dealt with the issue, and 16% of Americans (28% of Democrats) think that the evacuation has been carried out well. Interestingly, in July 2021, an overwhelming majority of Americans (around 70%) supported the planned withdrawal of all US troops by September 11, 2021. Now, they are evenly divided on whether leaving Afghanistan was a mistake, as many Americans were shocked once the immediate consequences of withdrawal became apparent.³⁸ This divisiveness is also noticeable among US officials. Douglas E. Lute, a retired Army General who directed Afghan strategy at the National Security Council for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, said:

Under Trump, we were one tweet away from complete, precipitous withdrawal. Under Biden, it was clear to everyone who knew him, who saw him pressing for a vastly reduced force more than a decade ago, that he was determined to end US military involvement, but the Pentagon believed its own narrative that we would stay forever.³⁹

He added:

The puzzle for me is the absence of contingency planning: If everyone knew we were headed for the exits, why did we not have a plan over the past two years for making this work?⁴⁰

Similarly, David H. Petraeus, a retired General who commanded the international forces in Afghanistan from 2010 until he was appointed CIA Director the next year, said:

We set them up for failure. Mr. Biden's team did not recognize the risk incurred by the swift withdrawal.

Similar perspectives also prevail within European allies. NATO's legitimacy has been questioned by its failure in Afghanistan. The head of the Christian Democratic Union party in Germany, Armin Laschet, has called Afghanistan withdrawal the biggest debacle in NATO history. However, NATO

³⁶ ORG, CFR. "US Afghanistan Conflict." Real Estate Find. CFR, November 3, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Economist, The. "Will Joe Biden Pay a Political Cost for America's Chaotic Withdrawal from Afghanistan?" Paper Tribune. Tribune, August 31, 2021. <https://papertribune.com/economy/will-joe-biden-pay-a-political-cost-for-americas-chaotic-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>.

³⁹ Marshall, Josh. "Vindication and the Fall of Kabul." Talking Points Memo. Talking Points Memo, August 15, 2021. <https://talkingpointsmemo.com/edblogger/vindication-and-the-fall-of-kabul>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg concurs with President Biden's opinion.⁴¹ These trends showed the impulsiveness of US decisions and confusion within the power centres. Before analysing how President Biden viewed the whole situation, it is vital to know what US goals had been at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom and whether this operation was aligned with what the US did in Afghanistan. The US proclaimed objective in Afghanistan throughout the years has been "to create the conditions whereby the Afghan government could exercise its authority throughout the country and build the capacity of the Afghan national security forces, including in the fight against international terrorism."⁴²

Failure Disguised as Success

The US perspective on the current situation in Afghanistan is quite perceivable from President Biden's address on August 31, 2021. President Biden's message targeted the American audience. He did not speak to the Afghan people and placed much of the blame on the corrupt Afghan governments of the past 20 years, as well as his predecessor Donald Trump.⁴³ He began by lauding the evacuation effort as an extraordinary success. While he repeatedly mentioned American soldiers killed during the war, President Biden ignored the loss of hundreds of thousands of Afghans' lives. He said:

*We have no vital interest in Afghanistan other than to prevent an attack on America's homeland and our friends.*⁴⁴

Strikingly defying the US-proclaimed objective in Afghanistan. The crux of US perspective on the current situation in Afghanistan and future policy is clear from this text taken from President Biden's address:

*We're engaged in a serious competition with China. We're dealing with the challenges on multiple fronts with Russia... We have to shore up America's competitiveness to meet these new challenges in the competition for the 21st century... We can do both: fight terrorism and take on new threats... and there's nothing China or Russia would rather have, would want more in this competition than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan... This decision about Afghanistan is not just about Afghanistan. It's about ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries.*⁴⁵

What's Coming

For President Biden, the recent occurrence of unprecedented events in Kabul is the tragic side of what he perceives as a necessary and popular political decision. This decision is solely for a domestic audience that has grown weary of 20 years of war. In so doing, President Biden is building on Trump's theme of placing 'America First.' A chaotic exit from Afghanistan is, however, a disruptive occurrence for US allies and adversaries as it marks a critical juncture in the transfer and dispersal of power across the world. When the dust finally settles on Kabul, the year-2021 is likely to be the new start for post-9/11 US foreign policy. The framework of the War on Terror (Enduring Freedom) would no longer be the guiding principle for future US military engagement.

⁴¹ STAF, DAWN. "Utterly Disastrous Cut-and-Run': What the US Media Has to Say about Biden's Withdrawal from Afghanistan." 'Utterly disastrous cut-and-run': What the US media has to say about Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan - Opera News. Dawn.com, August 16, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1640806/utterly-disastrous-cut-and-run-what-the-us-media-has-to-say-about-bidens-withdrawal-from-afghanistan>.

⁴² Staff, NATO. "NATO - Topic: NATO and Afghanistan." North Atlantic Treaty Organization. NATO Staff, September 16, 2021. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm.

⁴³ BROTMAN, ALEXANDER. "Opinion – the Fate and the Folly of the US ... - e-Ir.info." <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/22/opinion-the-fate-and-the-folly-of-the-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>. E-International Relations, August 22, 2021. <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/93660..>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ PRESIDENT, THE. "Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan." The White House. The United States Government, August 31, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan>.

As the US focuses on countering China, the era of US-led missions within NATO may reach an end. US unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan also places pressure on NATO allies and raises fundamental questions about the alliance's aims and legitimacy in the contemporary era. Calls for European strategic autonomy are likely to increase as Washington's foreign policy objectives are increasingly questioned. Furthermore, the US focus on countering China is multiplying the complexities for the South Asian region, especially when the US has a strategic partnership with India to counterweight China. It may also be the economic coercion for Pakistan, complications in the FATF, considering Pakistan's significant role in the BRI.⁴⁶ In short, the US may have physically left Afghanistan, but its strategic interest still lies in the region.

Who is to Blame?

It is time for the US to learn a lesson that it has not learned from Vietnam, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. It would be a big mistake for Americans to blame Afghans, who remained victims of mistakes made in Washington. That is where the reflection must take place.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ BROTMAN, ALEXANDER. "Opinion – the Fate and the Folly of the US ... - e-Ir.info." <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/22/opinion-the-fate-and-the-folly-of-the-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>. E-International Relations, August 22, 2021. <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/93660>.

⁴⁷ Mahbubani, Kishore. "Don't Blame the Afghans." PressReader.com - Digital Newspaper & Magazine subscriptions. Pressreader, August 28, 2021. <https://www.pressreader.com/pakistan/pakistan-today-lahore/20210828/281728387611941>.



Russian Perspective on Afghanistan

By: Muhammad Shabbir

Russia and Afghanistan have historical linkages encompassing almost two centuries. During these two centuries, Afghanistan has been a constant factor in Russian foreign policy and remained part of concepts like the Great Game and New Great Game. Russia connects with Afghanistan through Central Asia and considers it as an extended part of its near-abroad. In the 2016-Russian foreign policy, Afghanistan was one of its regional foreign policy priorities. Though the Russian 2021-National Security Strategy and 2014-Military Doctrine cite terrorism and drug trafficking as security threats, no direct threat from Afghanistan is perceived. However, in the contemporary setting, Russia's perspective about Afghanistan can be analysed while focusing on the following.

First, Russia is unhappy about the sudden US withdrawal from Afghanistan as Putin calls the whole US campaign achieved zero results and that Russia would not interfere in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ Russia's Permanent Representative to UN, Vassily Nebenzia, stated that "we see attempts to shift responsibility for the failure of the 20-year-long presence of the US and its allies in Afghanistan to the Taliban movement and to the states of the region that will have to deal with the effects of this prolonged campaign."⁴⁹ The above statement is from Russia's explanation to abstain from voting on the UK-sponsored resolution in UNSC.

Second, Russia remains concerned about terrorism, drug trafficking, and low living standards in Afghanistan. In the words of the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, "the lingering problems of terrorism, drug trafficking, and low living standards have not been resolved. Many problems have even become worse."⁵⁰ Third, Russia is worried about the brain drain from Afghanistan and the suspension of financial, material, and technical support from western donors. Russia maintained that "we are somewhat concerned about the escalation of socio-economic tensions in Afghanistan due to the suspension of financial, material and technical aid from the country's traditional western donors."⁵¹ It also thinks that "if experiencing a brain drain, the country will not be able to achieve Sustainable Development Goals."⁵² Fourth, Russia is tacitly acceptive of the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. As the Russian Foreign Minister stated, "we are ready to support the formation of a government that will reflect the entire range of Afghan society, including the Taliban and other ethnic groups, which will not only include the Pashtuns but also Uzbeks, Hazara, and Tajiks."⁵³ Fifth, Russia fears that terrorists and extremists can enter regional countries as refugees, particularly Central Asian states. It considers that the immediate task for the new Afghan government would be the creation of favourable living conditions for the people and naturally solving the migration problem.⁵⁴ Lastly, regarding the future of Afghanistan, Russia is consistently advocating the development of Afghanistan as a peaceful,

⁴⁸ Staff, Al Jazeera. "Putin Hopes the Taliban Will Be 'Civilised', Open to Dialogue." News | Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, 3 Sept. 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/3/putin-hopes-the-taliban-will-be-civilised-open-to-dialogue>.

⁴⁹ Bozinovska, Elizabeta. "Russia Abstains UNSC Resolution Vote Due to Ignored Concerns, US Disappointed." Focus Washington - Navigating the Swamp. Focus Washington, August 31, 2021. <https://focuswashington.com/2021/08/31/russia-abstains-uns-c-resolution-vote-due-to-ignored-concerns-us-disappointed/>.

⁵⁰ Federation, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian. "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, September 2, 2021." Request rejected. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, September 2, 2021. https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/4851800ent/id/4851800.

⁵¹ STAFF, PMOTRFTTUN. "Statement by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia at UNSC Briefing on the Situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina." Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. PERMANENT MISSION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TO THE UNITED NATIONS, November 3, 2021. <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/bih0312021>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Petersburg, St. "Sergey Lavrov's Answers to Media Questions Following a Visit to Leningrad Region." Request rejected. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, September 6, 2021. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/4853809

⁵⁴ Staff, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, ." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 9 Feb. 2021. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/4851800.

independent, and economically prosperous state. It believes that the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan can harm the well-being of Afghan people at this juncture of its history. Moreover, Russia emphasizes that the bulk of responsibility for rebuilding Afghanistan rests with the western states.⁵⁵

Russia has used forums like CSTO, EAEU, and SCO to advance its narrative on Afghanistan. In addition to that, since the end of July 2021, Russia has participated in three joint military exercises: with Beijing in China's western region of Ningxia; with Tashkent at Uzbekistan's Termez training ground; with both Tashkent and Dushanbe near Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan. Interestingly, though Russia tacitly accepts the Taliban, they remain on the terrorist list of the Russian Federation.

Russia has adopted a three-pronged strategy, i.e., engage with Taliban and regional countries, prepare militarily to secure its interests, and run a propaganda campaign against the US and its allies on hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan. Also, in Russia, the withdrawal of US forces is seen as a setback for US foreign policy, scoring points for Putin's idea of a multi-polar world, which rejects US efforts to promote democracy around the world. Whatever happens in Afghanistan, it is reasonable to conclude that Russia, due to its historical linkages and contemporary profile, will remain a significant factor for days to come in Afghanistan.

⁵⁵ Ibid.



Central Asian Perspectives on Afghanistan

By: Lieutenant Colonel Syed Wahid Aleem

Central Asian states, once part of the Soviet Union, are in the north of Afghanistan. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan share direct borders with Afghanistan, thus, connect Central Asia with South Asia. Afghanistan is also known as the “Heart of Asia” and key to connectivity. Stable and peaceful Afghanistan is the desire of many regional states as well as the world.

Figure 2.1: Map of Afghanistan and the Central Asian States

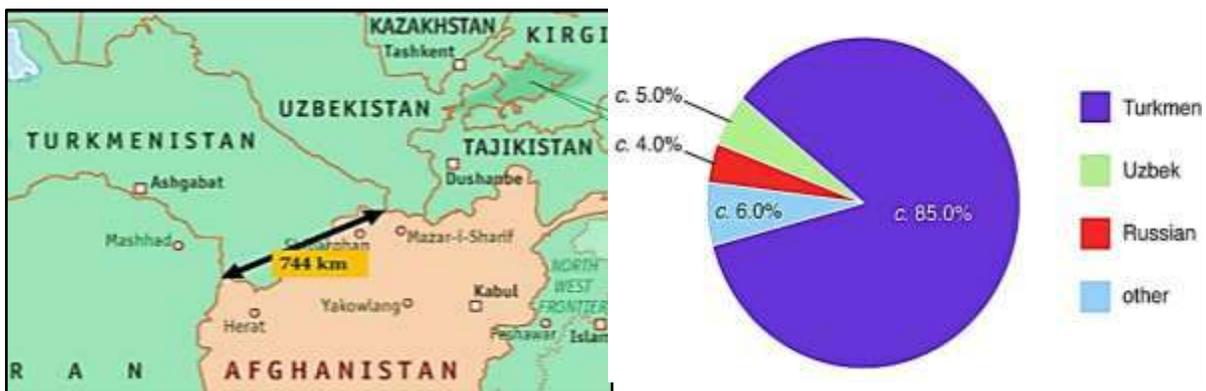


(Source: Own Compilation)

Turkmenistan Perspective

The total area of Turkmenistan is 491,210 square kilometres having a population of 6,031,000 with ethnic division as shown in Figure 2.2 below. Turkmenistan shares 744-kilometre of borders with Afghanistan along with cultural and social values. According to the Asia Development Bank, Turkmenistan provides 17% of electricity to Afghanistan.

Figure 2.2: Turkmenistan Border with Afghanistan and Ethnic Composition



(Source: MoFA Turkmenistan)

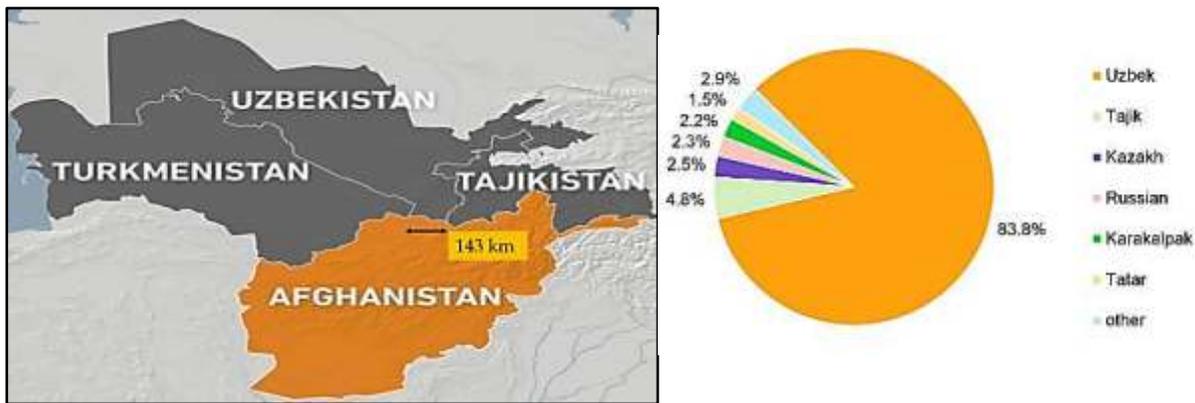
Turkmenistan has been extending its support to Afghan people in the past. It is willing to accept the new realities in Afghanistan by emphasizing that it always seeks neutral, friendly, constructive, and respectful relations with all states. On September 5, 2021, Turkmenistan hosted a video conference of Special Representatives of Iran, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan on the Afghanistan situation. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs emphasized stability, security, and sustainable

development of Afghanistan through regional efforts. Turkmenistan is willing to contribute towards peace in Afghanistan through undertaking large-scale projects in socio-economic domains, energy, transport, and communication sectors. Turkmenistan will continue to render humanitarian assistance and food aid to Afghanistan, especially to the people living in the areas bordering Turkmenistan.

Uzbekistan Perspective

The total area of Uzbekistan is 447,400 square kilometres having a population of 34,221,000 with ethnicity shown in Figure 2.3. Historically, Uzbekistan had good relations with Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of US forces, Uzbekistan closed its borders with Afghanistan; however, they allowed thousands of Afghan Refugees, including army personnel, to enter their country before August 31, 2021. At least 22 Afghan Air Force planes and 24 helicopters carrying 585 Afghan military personnel fled to Uzbekistan during the Taliban takeover. An Afghan Embraer EMB 314 Super Tucano also crashed after crossing the border. The Uzbek authorities issued conflicting reports on the case. Uzbekistan also supported other countries (especially NATO states) to evacuate their citizens from Afghanistan. Tashkent has been facing the issue of returning Afghan government and military personnel along with warplanes and helicopters as the Taliban demanded their return.

Figure 2.3: Uzbekistan Border with Afghanistan and Ethnic Composition

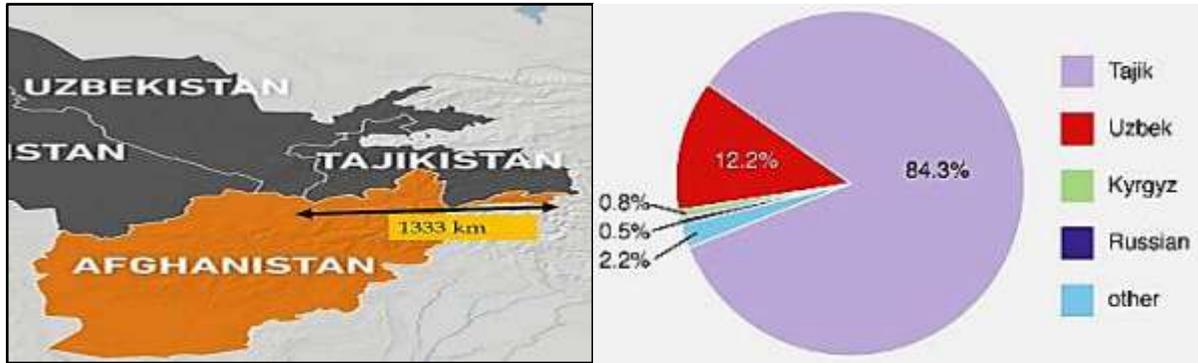


(Source: MoFA Uzbekistan)

Tajikistan’s Perspective

The total area of Tajikistan is 142,326 square kilometres having a population of 9,442,000 with ethnicity shown in Figure 2.4. Tajikistan shares a 133-kilometer border with Afghanistan. About 25% of the Tajik population lives inside Afghanistan. Tajikistan hosts Russia’s largest military base and Indian military base with an intelligence setup. China also has a military post in Gorno-Badakhshan province. Historically, Tajik-Afghan relations have witnessed many ups and downs for the last three decades. Tajikistan had been supporting Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. The recent developments in Afghanistan have not seen favourable to Tajikistan as its long-time ruler, Emomali Rahmon, expressed serious concerns over the presence of international terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Tajik President opined that any government in Afghanistan based on humiliation and ignoring the interests of the people of Afghanistan including ethnic minorities, such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and others, would not be accepted by Tajikistan. On August 5, 2021, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan hold joint military exercises in the area bordering Afghanistan to ensure control of the Tajik border. Two Afghan military planes carrying over 100 soldiers also landed in Tajikistan during the Taliban takeover.

Figure 2.4: Tajikistan Border with Afghanistan and Ethnic Composition



(Source: MoFA Tajikistan)

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's Perspectives

The total area of Kazakhstan is 2,724,842 square kilometres having a population of 19,005,000. The total area of Kyrgyzstan is 2,724,842 square kilometres having a population of 19,005,000. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do not share borders with Afghanistan as they are situated away from Afghanistan. Both states remain concerned about the spillover effect of Afghanistan's security situation after the withdrawal of US-led coalition forces. The leaders of both nations have joined other regional states in raising concerns about peace and stability in Afghanistan. Russia operates a military base in Kyrgyzstan through the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Figure 2.5: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Ethnic Composition



(Source: MoFA Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan)

The current security situation in Afghanistan is improving as the Taliban have established an interim government; however, concerns of various regional stakeholders, especially Central Asian states remain at large. These states are much concerned about terrorist organizations and their linkages in Afghanistan, such as ISIS, IMU, IJG, and ETIM, etc. The ethnic-nationalist tendencies, water crises, border problems, and migration problems may contribute towards grievances, insecurity, mistrust, and perceived vulnerability. Central Asian states demand a stable Afghanistan in the future. Any new crisis in the region could rapidly transform itself into widespread civil unrest. Generally, a sense of insecurity in the region will remain until a resilient Afghan government takes place.



Iranian Perspective on Afghanistan

By: Syed Taimoor Shah

Iran and Afghanistan share strong religious and cultural ties. Both countries are also bordering neighbours. Tracing the chronology of their relationship, Iran's relations with Afghanistan have been complex, thriving and with withering tides time and again. It is merely coincident that the birth of revolutionary Iran occurred when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Presently, Iran remains actively involved in regional initiatives, which promote connectivity, peace, and stability. Tehran advocates for an inclusive approach and maintains that only a comprehensive regional security system will ensure regional stability.

Iran is wary of an intrincating environment emanating from the fast-changing geopolitics of the region. Tehran is balancing its political, security, and economic interests in Afghanistan, especially in the regional balance of power context. In his tweet, the Iranian supreme leader expressed that “behind the scenes of US foreign policy there lies a predatory wolf that sometimes changes into a cunning fox.” The newly elected Iranian President also stressed security, peace, and tranquillity in Afghanistan and termed the US withdrawal a turning point.

Going through Iran's policymaking in its relations with other countries has been that of a Strategic Hedging, a risk management strategy employed to offset losses in investments by taking an opposite position in a related asset.⁵⁶ Iran and the Afghan Taliban had coarse relations in the past, from ideological differences to political rivalry, as Tehran supported the then anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Iran also tagged the Taliban as being Saudi sponsored group, put on the behest of the Kingdom's policy to encircle Iran.⁵⁷

There is a long history of ideological differences and political rivalry with the Afghan Taliban. In the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan during the War on Terror, Iran fully supported the US and played a role in toppling the Taliban regime.⁵⁸ In 1998, Tehran was at the brink of war with the Afghan Taliban when the latter murdered eleven diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif. However, in 2007, the Taliban established a full-scale leadership council in Mashhad, Iran, known as the Mashad Shura. It was to oversee operations in the western part of Afghanistan. Due to cooperation with Iranian authorities and two of the most influential figures, Akhtar Mansour and Hibatullah Akhundzada, who frequently travelled to Iran, were lynchpins for this council.⁵⁹ Such coordination was soon highlighted candidly by the then Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, that “the insurgents in Afghanistan receiving shipments of arms from Iran.”⁶⁰

Geopolitical Realities

Geopolitical realities consequently change attitudes, from ambivalent to conciliatory ones. As Vladimir Lenin once said, there are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen. The latter part of his famous quote is pertinent to the situation of Afghanistan today. The diplomatic dalliances are observed; the meeting for confidence building and ensuring rights took place between the Taliban and aggrieved ethnic minorities in Afghanistan, which was witnessed by the whole world. In the aftermath, words of affinity by the Iranian supreme leader were welcoming that “we

⁵⁶ Investopedia. 2019. “A Beginner's Guide to Hedging.” Investopedia. 2019. <https://www.investopedia.com/trading/hedging-beginners-guide/>.

⁵⁷ RUBIN, BARNETT. “A New Look at Iran's Complicated Relationship with the Taliban.” War on the Rocks. warontherocks, September 16, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/a-new-look-at-irans-complicated-relationship-with-the-taliban/>.

⁵⁸ Alavi, Ali. “Review: Soleimani, the U.S., and Iran's Global Ambitions, by Arash Azizi.” The Middle East Journal 75, no. 1 (2021): 168–68. <https://doi.org/10.3751/75.1.304>.

⁵⁹ Giustozzi, Antonio. “The Taliban at War,” 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190092399.001.0001>

⁶⁰ STAFF, Express Tribune. “TTP Leader's Interview with CNN Triggers Strong Backlash.” The Express Tribune. APP, July 30, 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2313036/ttp-leaders-interview-with-cnn-triggers-strong-backlash>.

support the Afghan nation. It is the Afghan nation that will remain. The nature of our relations with other governments depends on the nature of their relations with us.”⁶¹

An Iran watcher and CEO of the Centre for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient believes the Iranian security apparatus have now realized that there is a powerful force on the ground with which Iran will pursue its relationship and set aside ideological and religious contentions. Tehran’s optimism towards the Taliban now reflects the improvement of its relations with once known as a mortal enemy of the revolutionary republic Iran. In addition, the Iranian authorities also advised media outlets to avoid criticizing the Taliban. Amidst decades-old imbroglio in Afghanistan, one of the central questions remains that are there stakeholders or spoilers. In its first rebuke after the Taliban took over Afghanistan, Iran slammed the Taliban for their siege of Panjshir Valley that which is not acceptable in terms of international and humanitarian law and condemned the foreign interference in Afghanistan.⁶²

Narcotics

Iran accounts for 91% of the world’s opium seizures and is one of the major transit routes for drug trafficking from Afghanistan to European countries.⁶³ During the COVID-19 pandemic, Poppy cultivated 37% more in May 2020.⁶⁴ Additionally, the UN officials also reported that between the years 2018-19, Afghanistan earned 60%, from the only drug trade, which is more than \$400 million.⁶⁵

Water Issue

There is no water management mechanism between the two countries. The Helmand River flows into south-eastern Iran from the Hindu Kush (Afghanistan). They signed a treaty back in 1973 on sharing water resources, but it was neither ratified nor implemented.⁶⁶ However, in February 2021, an agreement was signed. But the disputes over three important dams remain. These are Kajaki, Grishk and Kamal Khan.

Refugee Issue

The alleged mistreatment of refugees and undocumented migrants has been a contentious issue between Tehran and Kabul. Iran hosted 950,000 documented Afghan refugees and around 2 million undocumented Afghans. It had also deported more than 375,000 Afghans.⁶⁷ Iran has recently set up temporary camps in three border provinces – Razavi Khorasan, South Khorasan, and Sistan and Balochistan.

Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP)

It was in 2015 that ISIS, a self-proclaimed Islamic State, announced its presence in the eastern part of Afghanistan under their extended chapter of ISKP. Furthermore, in 2019, the Secretary of Iran’s

⁶¹ Motamedi, Maziar. “Predatory Wolf: Iran Supreme Leader Says Biden Same as Trump.” Joe Biden News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 28, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/28/no-different-than-trump-irans-khamenei-slams-predatory-biden>.

⁶² staff, Raoul Wootliff and TOI, Lazar Berman, AFP and TOI staff, TOI staff and Jacob Magid, Judah Ari Gross, Jamey Keaten and Cara Anna, Nathan Jeffay, et al. “Iran Condemns Taliban for Assault on Holdout Fighters in Panjshir Valley.” The Times of Israel. Times of Israel, September 6, 2021. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-condemns-taliban-for-assault-on-holdout-fighters-in-panjshir-valley/>.

⁶³ Umarov, Akram. “The Iran-Taliban Relationship: Friends or Foes?” European Eye on Radicalization. European Eye on Radicalization, July 19, 2021. <https://eeradicalization.com/the-iran-taliban-relationship-friends-or-foes/>

⁶⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC’s) World Drug Report 2020

⁶⁵ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR), May 2021

⁶⁶ Marti, Mike. “An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, 1978–2012.” Taylor & Francis. Taylor & Francis, January 9, 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00940798.2019.1705702>.

⁶⁷ United Nations Migration Agency, 2020

Supreme National Security Council acknowledged that Iran had coordinated with the Taliban to counter the ISKP threat in Afghanistan, which also threatens Iran.

Prospects

There are prospects for Iran in shaping its perspective of Afghanistan of today and in the future as the Eurasians advocate a closer alignment with Iran relating to geopolitics and culture.⁶⁸ The Russian discourse on 'Greater Eurasia' also stresses Iran's potential. It assumes a pivotal role in regional power structures and stands as a geographic bridge connecting Eurasia to the Middle East and South Asia.⁶⁹ Embarking on the new regional policy, during Baghdad Conference 2021, Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, said that "our region has all the religious, cultural and civilizational characteristics as well as material and spiritual capacities for regional cooperation and convergence, but unfortunately, due to foreign interventions and the dominance of security-oriented ideas, it has many problems, including war, instability, and insecurity."⁷⁰ Moreover, the recent trends in trade are tremendous as there is a 260% increase since March 2021. The exports are thriving to Afghanistan via Dogharoun in Razavi Khorasan. Trade with Eurasian Economic Union is also having 93% growth and in value, it has amounted to \$1.6 billion. For the prospects of Iran in the future governance model, there is an apparent silver lining for Tehran in the unfolding theocracy in Kabul's new regime.⁷¹

Analysis

- The civilizational zone of the axis is emerging (China, Iran, Afghanistan) – the new international relations.
- Iran will remain a major stakeholder in Afghanistan.
- Iran is balancing short-term necessities with long-term interests (Chinese factor – the Belt and Road Initiative).
- Iran will tackle the new threat of ISKP (case in point is Islamic State in the Middle East).
- There will always be a political solution to Afghanistan. A grand strategy of win-win and not a zero-sum will bring peace and stability not only to Afghanistan but the whole world.
- Iran's policy with Afghanistan might be a strategic partnership, or they are using a strategic toolkit.
- There is a steady deepening of Islamic conceptualization in the state's foundation and institution building of Afghanistan and Iran.

Iran's incumbent foreign policy towards Afghanistan can be seen from a constructivist lens as it brings the role of culture and identity in which systemic factors are interpreted through the normative social, cultural and historical context, which both the countries share.

⁶⁸ Dugin, Alexander. *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism*. Arktos,

⁶⁹ Pizzolo, Paolo. *Eurasianism: an ideology for the multipolar world*. Lexington Books, 2020.

⁷⁰ Baghdad Conference, 29 August 2021

⁷¹ Borzou Daragahi, Atlantic Council's Middle East Security Initiative



Europe's Perspective

By: Khadija Younus

Geographically, Europe is not directly linked to Afghanistan; however, since the US invasion of Afghanistan post-9/11, it has been actively involved there vis-a-vis the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and later NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM). European countries remained an integral part of the US-led coalition force in Afghanistan until their chaotic withdrawal in August 2021. Taliban's sudden takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and the Afghan Security Force's rapid collapse shocked Europe, thus, leading to deliberations on its implications for European policy. European countries being part of the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan invested heavily, but all efforts are in ruins now. They are facing serious concerns for their policies on security, strategic autonomy, migration, and relations with the US.

Key Concerns

The humanitarian and refugee crisis, unanimous and no bilateral recognition of Taliban, safe havens for terrorists, respect for human rights, especially of women, the constitution of an inclusive government, and acceptance of humanitarian aid are the key concerns for Europeans. Following are the country-wise perspectives regarding the prevailing situation in Afghanistan.

Perspective of the UK

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, while speaking to French President Emmanuel Macron on August 17, 2021, stressed the need for a common stand on recognizing any future Afghan government and to prevent a humanitarian and refugee crisis. He stated that "we don't want anybody to bilaterally recognize the Taliban."⁷² British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace slammed the US decision to leave Afghanistan and warned that the Taliban resurgence would create a breeding ground for extremists that threatened the world.⁷³

German Perspective

German Chancellor Angela Merkel admitted that developments in Afghanistan were bitter, dramatic, and terrifying. Once the US decided to withdraw from Afghanistan, it was clear that Germany and other allies had to follow the suit. The troops' withdrawal sparked a domino effect that culminated in the Taliban's sweeping back into power.⁷⁴ German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said that failure to anticipate the speed of the Taliban's advances was a collective error. He added that "all of us - the federal government, intelligence services, the international community - misjudged the situation."⁷⁵

French Perspective

French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, set five conditions for the recognition of the Taliban government, i.e., respect for humanitarian law to allow some Afghans to leave

⁷² Wires, News. "We Do Not Have Any Illusions: Europe Seeks United Response to Taliban Takeover." France 24. France 24, August 17, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210817-we-do-not-have-any-illusions-europe-seeks-united-response-to-taliban-takeover>.

⁷³ France 24, France. "Allies Round on Us over Afghanistan 'Debate'." France 24. France 24, August 16, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210816-allies-round-on-us-over-afghanistan-debate>.

⁷⁴ France 24, France. "Allies Round on Us over Afghanistan 'Debate'." France 24. France 24, August 16, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210816-allies-round-on-us-over-afghanistan-debate>.

⁷⁵ James, Twitt. "https://t.co/tKULpuloW6." Twitter. Twitter, September 6, 2021. <https://twitter.com/James50064696/status/143501118590742532>

the country, clarity vis-a-vis terrorist movements, respect for rights, particularly of women, acceptance of humanitarian aid on Afghan territory and the constitution of an inclusive government.⁷⁶

Perspective of NATO

NATO heads of states and governments met at the NATO Brussels Summit on June 14, 2021 and decided to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and complete it within a few months.⁷⁷ The Czech Republic's President Milos Zeman, at the NATO Summit, called the decision to pull troops out of Afghanistan a betrayal, but Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary-General, harped on the preferred US theme of challenging China in his statement.⁷⁸

Perspective of EU

Josep Borrell Fontelles, the EU foreign affairs chief, told the European Parliament that the departure was "a catastrophe for the Afghan people, for western values and credibility and the developing of international relations."⁷⁹

G-7 Meeting on Afghanistan

A joint statement after the G-7 meeting on August 24, 2021, expressed grave concern about the crisis in Afghanistan as thousands of Afghan refugees amassed around Kabul airport trying to get out of the country. Britain spoke of considering economic sanctions and withholding aid if the Taliban would commit human rights abuses and allow its territory to be used as a haven for militants.⁸⁰

Criticism in Europe is loud at the messy US withdrawal from Afghanistan and disintegration of the Afghan Unity Government. European countries complained that they were not consulted despite promises of consultation, and there has been more of an order than conversation. Taliban seizure of Afghanistan has left NATO with one primary question: Will there be any change in the manner it operates? That is the US leading and Europe following behind. Earlier, European countries demanded a condition-based withdrawal from Afghanistan and requested to open Kabul airport for evacuation beyond August 31, 2021 but rejected by the US. Knowing that they could not operate in Afghanistan without US support, NATO allies left the decision of withdrawal to Washington. This scenario has raised multiple concerns regarding European independence or strategic autonomy; will it remain rhetoric when NATO European members spend just 2 percent of their GDP on defence.

Analysts say there is no concern that the US will fall back on its commitment to collective defence. However, the US message to Europe is that it has no desire to participate in problems in its neighbourhood that could impact it. The withdrawal of NATO forces is a clear sign that the alliance will shift its focus like the US on great power competition with China and Russia. European strategic autonomy is possible if they attempt to create a pillar in NATO with heavy investments providing surveillance, reconnaissance, and command and control capabilities, which are, at present, provided by the US. Calling the US withdrawal, the greatest debacle is nothing more than virtue signalling, underlining Europe's moral correctness by criticizing the chaotic withdrawal.

⁷⁶ Hua, Xin. "GLOBALINK: France Sets Conditions for Recognition of Taliban Government." Xinhua. Xinhua, August 31, 2021. http://www.news.cn/english/2021-08/31/c_1310159987.htm.

⁷⁷ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm#:~:text=Its%20aim%20was%20to%20provide,forces%20by%201%20May%202021.&text=Resolute%20Support!%20was%20a%20NATO%20Dled%2C%20non%2Dcombat%20omission

⁷⁸ Erlanger, Steven. "Afghan Fiasco Raises Hard Questions for Europe." The New York Times. The New York Times, August 23, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/23/world/europe/afghanistan-europe-nato-biden.html>

⁷⁹ Erlanger, Steven. "Afghan Fiasco Raises Hard Questions for Europe." The New York Times. The New York Times, August 23, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/23/world/europe/afghanistan-europe-nato-biden.html>

⁸⁰ Turak, Natasha. "Biden Addresses Emergency G-7 Meeting on Afghanistan as U.S. Withdrawal Deadline Nears." CNBC. CNBC, August 24, 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/24/world-leaders-prepare-for-emergency-g7-meeting-on-afghanistan.html>.

With its isolationism (avoiding political and economic entanglements) regarded as European weakness and its reliance on the US for its security and toeing the US line is the likely course of Europe and complaining about lack of consultation is unlikely to promise commitment by the US to European concerns. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan will benefit its allies in Europe and the Asia Pacific being beneficiaries of an overdue strategic realignment of the US that focuses more attention and resources on China and Russia - its formidable challenges.

Turkey's Perspective

By: Hadiqa Mir

Although Turkey and Afghanistan do not have geographical proximity, the role of Turkey in the current situation is significant. Turkey tactfully balances the relations between the west being an ally in the Afghan war and the Taliban as an aspirant partner. Therefore, both sides in the current situation are trying to engage Turkey as part of their foreign policies.

Figure 3.1: Map of Turkey and Afghanistan



(Source: Google Maps)

Turkey operated following Article 5 of NATO, i.e., supporting international cooperation, not being a part in armed conflict, protecting civilians, and acting under the UNSC resolutions in Afghanistan. In this regard, Turkey ran the Kabul International Airport and the multinational headquarters under the mandate of the ISAF. Turkey had twice led the Kabul Regional Command between June 2002 and February 2003. Besides, it is the largest investor country with an investment of \$120 million followed by Germany and India after the fall of the Taliban regime. It also helped in the training and capacity building of the Afghan army and LEAs.

Currently, the Turkish embassy is carrying out its operation in Afghanistan. Turkish forces in Afghanistan have always been non-combatant despite the US demand to send combatant forces; it has never involved itself in combat activities. In the ambient of withdrawal of international troops, Turkey offered the Taliban and the international community to guard and run Hamid Karzai International Airport and demanded financial compensation from NATO and the US.⁸¹ However, the spokesperson of the Taliban in Qatar, Mohammad Naeem Wardak, said: "The airport is Afghan territory, and Afghans are responsible for their land, institutions, and honour. It is a matter of sovereignty. Aid is another (thing), but the administration of the country is our duty, and we are able to do it... No country in the world accepts the security of its airport by someone else. We also ask everyone to respect the rules and sovereignty of visiting the country."⁸²

Following the statement, Turkey completed the evacuation of its forces from Kabul. However, to provide technical assistance at the airport was yet to be decided. Besides, the Taliban have indicated their interests in fostering relations with Turkey. The spokesperson of the Taliban said that "Turkey is an important country; Turkish people are Muslims and brotherly people. We have historical, social, and

⁸¹ Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera. "Erdogan Says Turkey to Maintain Diplomatic Presence in Kabul." Taliban News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 29, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/29/erdogan-turkey-diplomatic-embassy-kabul-afghanistan>.

⁸² Agencies, Daily Sabah With. "Turkey Evacuating from Afghanistan, Could Support Kabul Airport." Daily Sabah. Daily Sabah, August 26, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-evacuating-from-afghanistan-could-support-kabul-airport>.

cultural relations with Turkey. We want to improve relations in the future, and we are in communication with Turkey."

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that "if needed we can meet with the Taliban. When there is a knock on the door on this issue, we will open our door and conduct our negotiations." Turkey has demanded the surety of human rights in Afghanistan in multiple statements. Further, Turkey has linked the probability of de-facto recognition of the Taliban regime with the international community. The Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that "Turkey would act in coordination with the international community on its position on the recognition of the new government in Afghanistan."

Addressing ambassadors at a ceremony marking the 950th anniversary of the Battle of Malazgirt, the Turkish President comprehensively indicated Turkish perspective emphasizing attaining stability in Afghanistan, the need for close dialogue with all parties in Afghanistan, the importance of forming an all-inclusive government in Afghanistan, and the International community to help Afghanistan in this tough time and show solidarity, regardless of who governs the country.⁸³ The President of Turkey has also indicated the chances of signing an agreement similar to the agreement signed with Libya on November 27, 2019. In a statement, he said, "Turkey may strike a similar agreement with Afghanistan as it did with Libya."⁸⁴

Turkey and the Taliban are ready to have diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation with each other. However, recognition of the Taliban regime will depend on the trend adopted by the international community and the actions of the Taliban. Furthermore, Turkey has demanded the surety of Human Rights and inclusive government and is trying to avoid refugee influx. Turkey is cognizant of changing political and strategic dimensions of Afghanistan, thus, involved in proactive diplomacy. Turkey is using the strategic space to operate in Afghanistan to increase its foreign policy outreach and gain its vested interests. Besides the offers to help the war-torn country, Turkey is aspiring to infer the messages from Taliban leaders with cautious optimism and the group's actions, not words. Henceforth, the recognition of the Taliban regime will depend upon the actions of the Taliban in terms of Human Rights indicated by Turkish officials in several statements and coordination with the international community.

⁸³ President, Turkish. "Taliban's Actions, Not Words to Determine Future Afghanistan Process: Turkish President." Anadolu Ajansı. Anadolu Ajansı, August 25, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/talibans-actions-not-words-to-determine-future-afghanistan-process-turkish-president/2346151>.

⁸⁴ President, Turkish. "Taliban's Actions, Not Words to Determine Future Afghanistan Process: Turkish President." Anadolu Ajansı. Anadolu Ajansı, August 25, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/talibans-actions-not-words-to-determine-future-afghanistan-process-turkish-president/2346151>.



Perspectives of OIC and Gulf Countries

By: Ayesha Afgun

As the Taliban take a grip over Afghanistan, nations are watching the events unfolding closely. While some countries have shown interest in maintaining good ties with Kabul, others have chosen to remain silent and wait for the dust to settle. Amongst these countries are several Islamic states besides OIC, the second-largest intergovernmental organization, representing 57 Muslim countries.

After the Taliban took control over Kabul, OIC summoned a meeting in Jeddah on August 22, 2021. Secretary-General Yousef bin Ahmed Al Othaimen highlighted the escalating humanitarian needs in Afghanistan and the need for reconciliation to bring peace and prosperity. He also called upon the Afghan leadership to ensure that their land should be not used as a platform for terrorism. OIC urged parties to renounce violence and protect the right to life and security in the light of tolerant Islamic principles and the member states to provide humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, the meeting underscored the necessity for inclusive dialogue among all Afghan parties. Many member states chose to steer clear of any discussion related to the Afghanistan refugee situation.

Historically, Gulf countries played a pivotal role as financiers to the Mujahideen in the 1980s and 1990s. When the Taliban came into power, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the only Gulf countries to recognize them. Moreover, Qatar did not officially recognize the government of the Taliban but maintained cordial relations. Today, the ground realities have changed. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are silent on the developing situation, and Qatar is playing a central role. Qatar has been mediating talks between the Taliban and the US in Doha since 2018 and supported a peaceful transition of power. After the swift Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021, the US looked towards Qatar to shoulder the evacuation of their personnel. In addition to facilitating the US soldier's evacuation, Qatar has also provided transit facilities to the fleeing Afghans and is working with the Taliban to reopen Kabul airport.

In parallel to Qatar, UAE has also agreed to provide transit facilities to 5000 Afghan refugees, and their foreign ministry expressed solidarity with the Afghans in a statement passed on August 17, 2021. In contrast, Saudi Arabia only expressed their solidarity with the Afghans and the choices they made on their own without any interference in a statement passed by their foreign ministry with nothing related to the refugees. Despite their leading role in the OIC, they remained distant in Afghan affairs since peace talks started in Qatar.

In the case of Bahrain, they have agreed to provide transit facilities but will decide the future course of action after consultation with the GCC. In an official statement, they iterated their support for relief efforts. The Grand Mufti of Oman has spoken in support of the Taliban's victory over the invading forces. He has also stated that tolerance and harmony must prevail. Kuwait's stance is similar to Bahrain's on providing transit facilities to 5000 Afghans. The foreign ministry of Kuwait has passed a statement in solidarity with the Afghan people and asked all parties to exercise maximum restraint to spare bloodshed.

The policy in the gulf right now is that of wait and watch. Countries are still apprehensive and do not want to make hasty decisions. It is likely to be the case until the situation stabilizes. Moreover, the role of the Gulf States remains crucial in the days to come due to cultural and religious ties, historical and diplomatic linkages between Afghanistan and the Gulf Arab states.



Indian Perspective

By: Dr. Ghulam Qumber

Historically, India and Afghanistan maintained close relations except for the first Taliban era in the 1990s. After the 9/11 incident till the demise of President Ashraf Ghani's government, India was one of the largest economic partners of Afghanistan under the Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011. India invested \$3 billion while providing humanitarian aid, reconstruction funds, financial support, training, intelligence sharing, and institutional building in Afghanistan. India also exploited the situation after 9/11 to weaken Pakistan's strategic position in the region.

Appraisal

The US, NATO, and India are 'main losers' in Afghanistan. Pakistan, China, and Russia are winners, and Turkey and Iran fall in-between to some extent. India thinks that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan could significantly weaken the current strategic partnership between the US and Pakistan. Developments in Afghanistan could intensify Sino-Indian divergences, consolidate Indo-US relations, and will result in a greater distance between India and Russia, quickening the pace of transformation of India's great-power relationships that were already underway. India's Afghanistan policy is very calculated and avoids making comments on the Afghanistan situation. India desired to curtail Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan with the help of its allies, i.e., the US and the west. Pakistan should be vigilant on this Indian move. India is not likely to recognize the Taliban regime soon. However, India would open backdoor communication channels to engage both Taliban and anti-Taliban groups. The rise of the Taliban may cause a significant shift in the geopolitics of South Asia. Pakistan and China are likely to have better space in Kabul. In this context, India views that this structural shift may have a direct impact on border disputes with Pakistan and China.

Taliban-India Contacts

The change in Afghanistan has denied India the freedom to hurt Pakistan using Afghan soil. Pakistan must remain vigilant about Indian devious machinations. India will be interested to return to Afghanistan to save its investments, both concrete and abstract. They have invested hugely in Afghanistan and would not like to see that go to waste. Pakistan should share with the new Afghan government all the dossiers containing evidence of Indian efforts to destabilize Pakistan, originating from Afghanistan. The Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister in the interim government Stanakzai has already said that Afghanistan will have good relations with every country, including the US, Iran, China, India, and Pakistan. India and Pakistan should not use Afghanistan in furtherance of their rivalries. They should take their conflicts to their border and not fight each other's wars on Afghan soil. He invited India to reopen its embassy in Kabul and asked Pakistan to facilitate land transit trade between India and Afghanistan.⁸⁵ Stanakzai also met the Indian ambassador in Doha, who conveyed India's concern that Afghanistan's soil should not be used for anti-Indian activities and terrorism.

Indian Concerns

India views the Taliban are micro-managed by Pakistan. China has positioned itself as the Taliban's most important ally and if there is a concrete collaboration between Pakistan and China then India will be unable to override. Further, in place of Chinese aid, the Taliban have indicated that they will support Belt and Road Initiative. India views that the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan will add strategic depth to Pakistan against India. India also views the Chinese role in Afghanistan with concern

⁸⁵ CNN-News18 on August 30, 2021.

because it intends mega investments in different sectors of Afghanistan. Making matters worse for India is Russia's new role in the region. New Delhi has not been comfortable with Moscow's growing strategic partnership with Beijing. That partnership is now acquiring a new dimension with the Russian tilt towards Pakistan and the Taliban. The biggest challenge India will face would be whether to recognize the Taliban government or not. The decision will get tough, especially if Pakistan, Russia, and China decide to acknowledge the Taliban government in some form. The US and its allies including India have invested in the Afghanistan invasion to establish unipolar western hegemony but failed miserably.

Options

India will try to keep a channel of communications open with the Taliban. But it will not be an easy relationship, considering the history between the Taliban and Delhi. India will try to develop a strategy to ensure that Illegally Occupied Kashmir does not become the next rallying point for the mujahideen. India may try to explore the ways of regrouping of Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban tentacles to counter the Taliban by developing the US-led west to counter the influence of China, Russia, and Pakistan. As India has limited options in Afghanistan, it will encourage Pashtun separatism within Pakistan. Pakistan may work closely with China and other regional powers for a stable and prosperous Afghanistan. If Pakistan has any influence on the strategic policy formation in Afghanistan, it should try to influence the political behaviour of the Taliban so that they can become an acceptable member of the international community.



International Law Perspective

By: Faraz Khan Yousafzai

International law perspective on the current Afghan situation spans the international law spectrum in its entirety. While the matter of recognition of the new government, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the sanction's regime stand out as primary issues, the foreign terrorist fighter regime and the potential influx of refugees also pose challenges both Afghanistan and Pakistan can face.

Recognition of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

On recognizing a new government, international law lacks clarity since it is a political decision. The Montevideo Convention states four requirements for statehood: a defined territory, a permanent population, a government, and the capacity to conduct international relations. Recognition, however, is derived via a political decision on the part of the recognizing state, from which legal consequences flow. Therefore, it then becomes relevant as a matter of international law. Initially, governments used to routinely recognize new governments in other States, *de jure* or *de facto*. This practice, however, got discarded by the new practice, whereby states now prefer to sever or downgrade diplomatic relations with a government they object to.

In the US-Taliban Peace Deal, the US repeatedly states that it does not recognize the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan. It was to emphasize their stance on the non-recognition of the Taliban as a government. Since the Taliban takeover of August 2021, several countries have released statements on where they stand on the issue of recognition. This momentum will then lead to a discussion in the UN on the matter of recognition.

At the UN, an application by the Afghan state will be made for the change of seat from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). It previously happened with China's seat, when it changed from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China in 1971. While during the previous regime of the IEA from 1996-2001, it had "Effective Control" of 90% of the territory, it was still only recognized by three countries. Pakistan, one of the three countries, made persistent efforts to get the Taliban country's seat at the UN. This time the IEA faces another hurdle in the shape of UNSC Resolutions 1267, 1333, and 1373 Listings and Sanctions. Several members of the IEA are still part of these lists, including the newly appointed Acting Minister of Interior, Sirajuddin Haqqani.

Unilateral Sanctions by the Western States

The listings depend heavily upon the un-sanctioning of the IEA members. The US-Taliban Peace Deal stated that the "US will initiate an administrative review of current US sanctions and the rewards list against members of the IEA ... with the goal of removing these sanctions," while also starting "diplomatic engagement with other members of the UNSC and Afghanistan to remove members of the IEA ... from the sanctions list." This un-sanctioning can also provide a strategic lawfare opportunity to Pakistan to remove its citizens and domestic organizations from UN sanctions lists linked with the Taliban while also pushing for reform and accountability of global counterterrorism legal frameworks.

However, if sanctions like those on North Korea and Iran are imposed on the IEA, Pakistan's extent of cooperation with Afghanistan will be severely impacted along with the paradigm shift towards geo-economics in which Afghanistan plays a crucial role as a bridge between Pakistan and Central Asia. It will have serious implications on trade, transit, and investment. These sanctions can result from potential human rights violations or anti-democratic moves by the IEA government.

Emerging International Regime on Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs)

Based on UNSC Resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017), the global regime imposes binding obligations on member states to act against FTFs by disrupting cross-border movements, preventing illicit financial flows, and implementing effective investigation and prosecution, on both inbound and outbound FTFs. This issue is of significance to Pakistan since it caters to Pakistani citizens involved in fighting in Afghanistan, upon whose arrival Pakistan will be pressurized to prosecute those under this regime. Similarly, inbound FTFs (Pakistani or not) will have to be prosecuted or prevented by the government as well. Additionally, Pakistan's risk profile under the FATF regime may get substantially increased since Afghanistan may now become part of FATF's grey-listing and scrutiny. With this, the chances of Pakistan and Afghanistan getting clumped together will increase too. Pakistan has made significant gains over the last few years since getting grey-listed, and this may severely impact Pakistan's efforts and increase the already-existing obligations. It means more lawfare challenges popping up against Pakistan.

Domestic Legal Mechanisms to deal with Afghan Refugees

While the current situation in Afghanistan shows signs of stability, the future remains unclear when it comes to refugees, and with already 1.4 million registered refugees in Pakistan, the legal mechanisms need to be enhanced to cater to the issue. From a policy perspective, Pakistan's legal framework for Afghan refugees remains opaque, limited, and outdated. Refugees who find themselves in Pakistan remain in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo in the country. Currently, it is governed by a patchwork of agreements between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the UNHCR or regulated under an archaic, colonial-era law, namely the Foreigners Act (1946). There is a need for a more appropriate strategy that balances both Pakistan and Afghanistan's interests with the humanitarian concerns of Afghan refugees, also facilitating economic migrants, which can prove beneficial for both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The issues do not stop here and span different sectors of international law, including the Pak-Afghan Transboundary Water Management, which has been a contentious issue for Pakistan for the last two decades. Pakistan and the rest of the neighbours along with the international community need to be well-prepared legally to respond to these challenges as they materialize and intensify.



China's Perspective

By: Commodore Faiq Hussain, SI (M)

China is one of the six neighbours of Afghanistan. Both countries share a 74-kilometer border along the remote Wakhan Corridor, a narrow, inhospitable, and barely accessible strip of land. The two countries have had diplomatic ties since 1955. However, China has regarded Afghanistan as a neighbour wielding little diplomatic significance. Until 2001, political and economic cooperation between the two countries remained inconsequential. It was only after the establishment of the provisional government led by President Hamid Karzai in 2001 that bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan began to grow.

China's primary interest is that religious extremism stemming from Afghanistan does not affect China. Beijing has been voicing concerns about unrest in Afghanistan, over fears that Uyghur militancy could be bred in Afghanistan and brought into Xinjiang. During the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Taliban representatives meeting in Tianjin in July 2021, the Chinese Foreign Minister had specifically asked the Taliban to make a 'clean break' with the ETIM. The Taliban pledged that they would never allow any force to engage in acts detrimental to neighbouring countries. Apart from security concerns, China's growing involvement in Afghanistan can also be attributed to the country's economic ambitions. Afghanistan lies at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia, and its geographically strategic location gives it a competitive advantage over others in terms of being a regional hub for trade and transit. Afghanistan is also home to a vast natural resource repository worth trillion dollars.

Chinese officials have frequently expressed interest in expanding BRI's signature undertaking CPEC into Afghanistan. The signing of an MoU (2016) between China and Afghanistan served as an expression of commitment to jointly promote cooperation under BRI and marked development integrating Afghanistan in the transcontinental infrastructure. China is linked to northern Afghanistan through the Sino-Afghanistan Special Railway Transportation project and the Five Nations Railway project and intends to connect with southern Afghanistan via CPEC in a mutually beneficial arrangement. In June 2021, China's State Councillor and Foreign Minister, Mr. Wang Yi, expressed their support for extending CPEC to Afghanistan. During this meeting between foreign ministers from China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, the three countries agreed to deepen high-quality Belt and Road cooperation and enhance connectivity among the three countries. The Afghan Taliban reciprocated this interest. If materialized, this would also give Central Asian states access to the Arabian sea for trade via Pakistan and vice-versa.

After the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying during a press conference on August 16, 2021, welcomed Afghan Taliban's statement that "they hope to grow sound relations with China, look forward to China's participation in Afghanistan's reconstruction and development and will never allow any force to use the Afghan territory to engage in acts detrimental to China." The spokesperson said, "China has all along with respected Afghanistan's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, adhered to non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs and pursued a friendly policy toward the entire Afghan people". She further said, "we are ready to continue to develop good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation with Afghanistan and play a constructive role in Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction."

It may be construed that Beijing's relationship with the Taliban will be twofold. Firstly, it will be mercantilist. China will seek to revive business ventures inside Afghanistan, which the Taliban is likely to support because the investment will provide severely needed revenues. The Afghan economy is highly

dependent on western donors' foreign aid, which may be cut off. Secondly, the relationship will depend on each side not interfering in each other's internal affairs.

To recognize the Taliban government, Beijing has not so clearly hinted that it would recognize the Taliban regime as Afghanistan's legitimate government. During the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson's regular press conference on September 8, 2021, while answering a question regarding recognizing the new government, he said, "the Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan is operating normally. We stand ready to maintain communication with the new Afghan government and leaders. We hope the new Afghan administration in the capacity of the interim government will broadly solicit the opinions of all ethnic groups and factions and live up to the expectation of the Afghan people and the aspiration of the international community. We noted that the Afghan Taliban stressed that all people will benefit from the new administration." China will be careful about its economic involvement in Afghanistan. It will take a more active political role to secure its interests and steer clear from security involvement. Beijing will be a big player in Afghanistan than it was in the last couple of decades, though it will remain careful about being involved too far.



Pakistan's Perspective

By: Umar Farooq Baloch

Pakistan's perspective on the current situation in Afghanistan is of greater importance as the international community is continuously engaged with Pakistan and concerned regarding the future of Afghanistan. The current situation in Afghanistan is linked with the history of terrorist attacks of 9/11 on the US, which transformed the landscape of South Asia. The Taliban's swift advance into Kabul has left much of the world in a state of inertia. Beyond Afghanistan's borders, its neighbours are feeling the most immediate impact. Earlier this year, Russia, China, and Pakistan desired that the future of Afghanistan should be decided through a political settlement process.

The notion of an Afghanistan-led peace process was conceived by Pakistan. Pakistan's constructive efforts with the support of the international community led to achieving important milestones in the Doha peace process including the US-Taliban Peace Agreement and subsequent commencement of Intra-Afghan negotiations, clearly advocating Pakistan's perspective. Pakistan has suffered for four decades with a loss of more than eighty thousand casualties since 9/11, financial loss of \$152 billion for the economy, and over two million internally displaced people just for the sake of war that Pakistan had nothing to do with it. Pakistan's Foreign Minister has mentioned during the SCO contact group meeting that "there is no other country more desirous of peace in Afghanistan than Pakistan as no country is more deeply affected by instability in Afghanistan than Pakistan." In this milieu, Pakistan has a clear perspective on the situation in Afghanistan, which is contrary to the military solution.

Against this backdrop, when the uncertainty surrounded the question of Afghanistan's future, merely, this is only Pakistan facilitating a complete withdrawal process on humanitarian grounds and helping to evacuate troops, diplomats, and people from several nationalities. The Foreign Minister of Pakistan has already emphasized that "lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan was in Pakistan's interest and Pakistan will continue to play its constructive role to support a peaceful, united and prosperous Afghanistan." Interestingly, while the withdrawal was in full swing, a high-level delegation visited Pakistan from 15 to 18 August 2021. During their visit, Pakistan's perspective on the current and evolving situation in Afghanistan and the way forward was underlined. The Foreign Minister shared Pakistan's perspective and said that Pakistan considers all segments of the Afghan society important in the final destiny of Afghanistan. Afghan leaders to work together to deal with the evolving situation in Afghanistan in the supreme national interest.

On the other hand, the Prime Minister of Pakistan has urged the international community to stand in solidarity with the Afghan people, undertake positive engagement while ensuring sustainable peace, stability, and economic development in Afghanistan. The National Security Adviser also stated that no country had made any statement against Pakistan and "this is our success;" he also added that "even India is silent." The COAS also shared Pakistan's perspective with the international community while saying that "Pakistan will continue to work for peace and stability in Afghanistan and support the establishment of an inclusive government in Afghanistan."

Similarly, Afghan soil will not be used against any other country. It will also be a great test for the Afghan Taliban to establish a government that must cater to the aspects of security, economy, and stability, and most importantly, Pakistan has a clear perspective on Indian engagement in Afghanistan because, during the last two decades, Pakistan had faced severe effects on the economy and internal security because of Indian activities in Afghanistan. India has already invested billions of dollars, and it is likely to drag its feet in Afghanistan again.

Besides this, Pakistan is already hosting approximately four million Afghan refugees and giving respect to them as they are human beings. The crossing points have remained open as usual, and Pakistan has prepared a comprehensive strategy to isolate refugees in temporary camps near the border, as stated by Mr. Fawad Chaudhry. Drugs smuggling is one of the main concerns, and Pakistan has a clear perspective on drugs. The Prime Minister expressed deep concern over the menace of drugs in the society, especially among the younger generation, and assured that a comprehensive strategy is formulated to effectively control smuggling, production, sale, and use of drugs in consultation with the new government in Afghanistan. In addition, Pakistan views Afghanistan as a gateway to the more lucrative markets and believes in regional economic integration and connectivity. Mr. Razzak Daud stated that “we have already allowed Afghanistan to use Gwadar for their transit trade as the same was demanded by Central Asian states to connect them with Gwadar Port in near future.”

Moreover, sustainable peace and development are dependent on the efforts of Pakistan. Regional consensus is imperative to continue efforts for sustainable peace in Afghanistan. Regional stability is necessary for sustaining the current momentum to harness peace and development. The support of regional states is also required to form an effective and visible transformation. Interestingly, in a recent statement of Zabihullah Mujahid, “the development of new Afghanistan is now in China’s hands” advocates the shared perspective of Pakistan on regional cooperation. The new Afghanistan will take China’s help to rebuild infrastructure and economy. Hereafter, China is in a relevant position to play its role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan’s perspective becomes important because Pakistan and China are strategic allies and believe in development and peaceful co-existence with neighbours. Therefore, the cooperation and interdependence among the three countries will bring stability and boost the regional economic interests of South Asia. In this way, Pakistan and China have to capitalize on their joint efforts and take stakeholders on board for regional peace, prosperity, and connectivity. It will bring Afghanistan into China’s grand vision of BRI and CPEC.

Pakistan and Afghanistan are situated at the crossroads for the development of Asia and Europe. Both countries have the best chance of enhancing cross-border ties for the sake of stability and the economic development of the region. It can be concluded with Pakistan’s core perspective stating that “at the cusp of this historic juncture in Afghanistan, let us maximize our cooperation and coordination to support the Afghan people. It is the time that friends and partners of Afghanistan must remain closely engaged to advance shared goals and objectives.”



Emerging Shape of the Environment of Afghanistan

By: Brigadier Masroor Ahmed (Retired)

The takeover of Kabul has left the world questioning if history will repeat itself or the emerging environment under the reformed Taliban will be different. Therefore, there is a need to analyse the newly formed interim government and Taliban's perspective, other countries' perspectives, challenges likely to be faced by the interim government, and prospects.

Interim Government and Taliban's Perspective

The newly formed Afghan cabinet is dominated by ethnic Pashtuns and out of the total 33 members, only three portfolios have been given to non-Pashtuns. Qari Faseeh Uddin (Army Chief) and Qari Deen Muhammad Hanif (Economic Affairs) are the only representatives of ethnic Tajiks, whereas Maulvi Abdul Salam Hanafi (Second Deputy to PM) is the only Uzbek in the cabinet. All three non-Pashtuns are long-time Taliban members and will be unable to satisfy demands for inclusivity and minority representation. It needs to be noted here that Afghanistan's third-largest ethnic group, Hazaras, has not been given any representation at all.

Political stakeholders, such as Hamid Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, are not included in the government, and the cabinet looks contrary to the Taliban's claims of an inclusive and moderate government. Addressing these claims, Zabihullah Mujahid has emphasized that the appointments are temporary; however, he did not elaborate on how long they would serve and what would be the catalyst for a change. Therefore, it seems that the ideology of the Taliban's "foot soldiers" has prevailed in the first round. Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani is on the FBI's most-wanted list with a \$5 million bounty on his head. In addition, the names of 15 cabinet members are present in the UN Consolidated Sanctioned Individuals' list. Taliban do not intend to be isolated diplomatically. However, sanctions will have the funds and other financial resources frozen and keep the group under extra pressure until they comply with their international commitments.

Other Countries Perspective

As the Taliban leadership could not give very positive signals to the inclusiveness of government, most countries have a "wait and see" policy. Europe and the US stress that they would wait for the fulfilment of promises on other issues while the regional countries are trying to pursue a regional approach. An arc of cooperation comprising Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan (PIA) backed by China has emerged while India is still in a state of shock and is desperately trying to engage with the group. Pakistan is being appreciated for its positive role while countries like Qatar have started humanitarian assistance for the Afghans.

Challenges

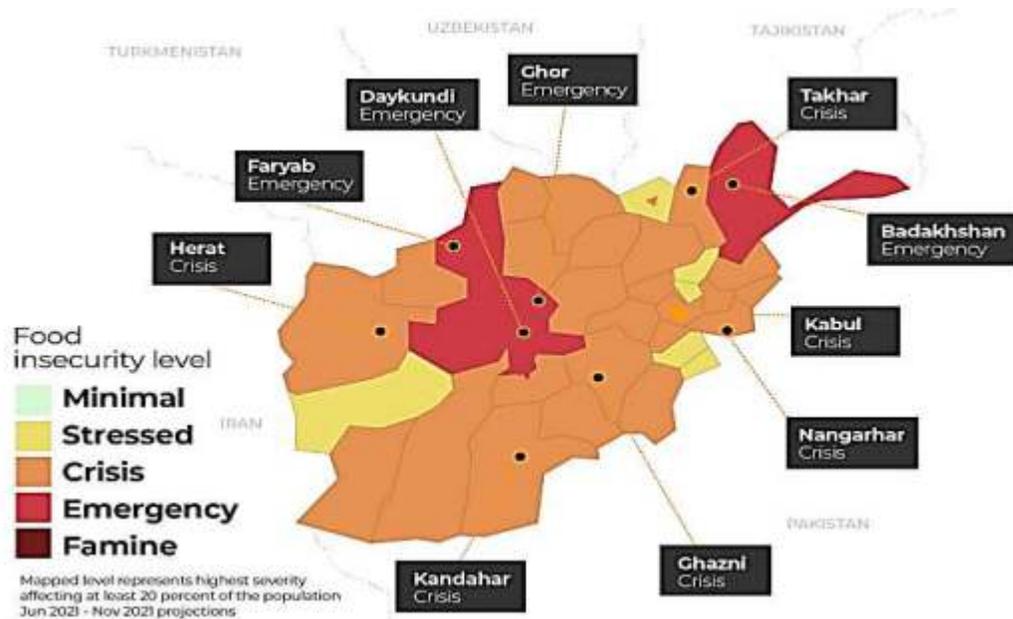
The challenges to Afghanistan in the foreseeable future will be diplomatic isolation, the dismal state of the economy, governance issues, internal security, and humanitarian crises.

- **Diplomatic Isolation:** Taliban are asked to establish an all-inclusive government. They have performed well by appointing an Uzbek as Deputy Prime Minister and a Tajik as their Army Chief, and the second round may improve the situation further. Pakistan thinks that a governance structure is in place and, for the time being, would be effective in ensuring peace and stability; however, Islamabad will wait like other countries for

Taliban actions on the ground as per their promises. Western countries are trying to establish contacts but will be having a cautious approach.

- **Dismal State of Economy:** Afghanistan's economy is marked by fragility and aid dependence. Challenges are drugs trade, smuggling, and illegal mining (an important source of revenue for the Taliban). Dependency on foreign aid is also a big challenge for Kabul. Aid flows decreased from around 100% of GDP in 2009 to 42.9% of GDP in 2020. Declining grants led to a protracted contraction of the services sector, with associated deterioration in employment and incomes. 75 % of public spending comes from grants/donations. The US has frozen nearly \$9.5 billion that belongs to Afghanistan's international reserves, which are held within the US Central Bank. IMF has suspended payment of more than \$460 million for Afghanistan as a part of the Coronavirus Relief Program. Currency has depreciated. The economy is melting down and there is hardly any source of income. The institution will take time to revive and perform.
- **Governance Issues:** Taliban have no experience of running a modern government. They will struggle to provide effective governance to the people as the government does not have much revenue to spend on public services. Brain drain, retaining enough manpower, bureaucracy, and civil servants to run the affairs of the government are formidable challenges, where the Taliban face vulnerability besides no effective police force.
- **Internal Security:** Maintenance of law and order is a tall order (Taliban are not trained to control mob/processions), and such issues at a smaller level, sponsored by spoilers, may keep propping up in other parts of the country. The presence of terrorist organizations (Al-Qaida, ISKP, TTP, ETIM, IMU, Jandullah, BLA, BRA, etc.) in Afghanistan is a major concern.

Figure 4.1: Food Insecurity Level in Afghanistan



(Source: Google Map)

What Does the Future Looks Like?

Regional countries are eager to see peace and stability in Afghanistan avoiding humanitarian crises, while the Taliban have formed a government that is not being called an inclusive government by

the west. However, it may improve in the coming days. Pakistan is spearheading efforts to bring regional consensus. In the coming months, regional countries may start recognizing the Taliban-led government. The US and Europe may take some time to reconcile but cannot leave a vacuum for regional powers to exploit. To solve economic crises, China and Russia may come forward with grants or soft loans initially and later may heavily invest. Iran, Pakistan, and other neighbours would also help within their capacity particularly to ward off humanitarian crises. Europe and the US may follow the suit. Inter-security issues may linger on for some time. Issues of TTP and other non-state actors would linger on for some time, and regional countries would increase pressure. Pakistan, however, has to put its foot down with regards to TTP. Governance is likely to remain a challenge. Regional states would be coming forward to rebuild the institutions. Governance would also improve with an enhancement of fiscal space and improvement in internal security. At a later stage, once there is a semblance of peace and stability, those who have fled Afghanistan due to fear may start coming back.

Whatever the emerging environment would like, bringing peace to Afghanistan will be an uphill task for the Taliban government due to a plethora of challenges. However, with the participation of all stakeholders and through negotiations, these can be overcome for long-term stability.



The Way Forward for Pakistan

By: Ambassador Fauzia Mazhar Sana (Retired)

Taliban victory in Afghanistan has created both opportunities and challenges for neighbouring countries, particularly for Pakistan. The question one may ask is whether this is the end of an era or the beginning of another turbulent era. It is both. When a ship changes course, turbulence is bound to occur in the waters around it and within the ship itself. Having won the war is the easiest part. To rebuild and reconstruct Afghanistan and strengthen a social contract with the people is the difficult and tricky part for the Taliban, who have known only war in the last four decades. Bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have seen various levels of mistrust, sometimes bordering on hostility during the Soviet occupation and US longest war. With the new Taliban-led government in Afghanistan, Pakistan is hoping to reap the dividends of peace in Afghanistan and realize its long-held dream of becoming an economic and connectivity hub in the region.

Pakistan's Role for Peace

The Taliban's take over in Afghanistan will generate opportunities for Pakistan to be able to play a positive role in peace in the region. A stable Afghanistan will open the entire region for regional cooperation. China is poised to invest in infrastructure in Afghanistan provided the new Afghan government gives enough security assurance to China. Afghanistan can be a development partner of Pakistan in the region.

Potential Challenges

At the same time, we must recognize the potential challenges for Pakistan arising from the Taliban's desire for two-way trade access to India, border crossings and border mechanisms, pressure groups of religious parties in Pakistan aligned with Taliban ideology, especially TTP. Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan may hinge on the Taliban's perception of how helpful Pakistan is, for instance, in extending economic relief and diplomatic support for early recognition of the new Afghan government at the UN.

Question of Recognition

The Taliban may demand that Pakistan should recognize its government as it has an interim government in place. Pakistan's embassy is fully functioning. There is a tacit recognition by Pakistan of a Taliban-led dispensation in Kabul. Pakistan will have to decide soon. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister are reaching out to neighbouring countries of Afghanistan (also China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) to build a regional consensus on the recognition of the new government in Kabul and secure humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan. Pakistan's special representative held a virtual meeting with special reps for Afghanistan from the neighbouring countries, including China. The Foreign Minister also held a virtual meeting with the foreign ministers from these countries. The Prime Minister has stressed to the UN Secretary-General that the Afghans should be enabled to achieve lasting peace and security.

Humanitarian Assistance

With US aid and assistance evaporated, the Afghan foreign reserves frozen, and IMF aid suspended, the Taliban do not have the resources and capacity to govern a country ravaged by war and abandoned once again. Pakistan has urged the international community to step up assistance to Afghanistan to avert a humanitarian and refugee crisis. The PIA flights have formed a bridge from Doha

to Kabul for WHO humanitarian aid. Pakistan should organize humanitarian assistance at the bilateral level also.

Technical Assistance

A joint decision by the regional countries (Pakistan, Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran) to assist the Taliban in capacity building and human resource development would reflect their resolve not to let Afghanistan slide back into chaos. Also, financial and technical assistance offered at the regional level to rebuild the Afghan state institutions will boost the morale of the Afghan people.

Blame Game

It is refreshing that Pakistan is not being blamed for the rout the US forces suffered in Afghanistan. However, in the media, old arguments about safe havens in Pakistan are beginning to resurface. There is talk of sanctions on the Taliban and perhaps on Pakistan. The US and European countries and India will eventually resurface in Afghanistan. Future proxy wars in Afghanistan may destabilize the whole region once again. In that case, Pakistan will have to brace itself for another extended period of instability in Afghanistan.

Bilateral Relations

At the bilateral level, Pakistan should adopt policies that do not add to its problems. Pakistan should continue to stress an inclusive political government. The interim government is Taliban-heavy and not inclusive. Treat the Taliban leadership with respect. Not gloat over the Taliban victory as our victory. Assist them to resolve their differences but not interfere in their internal affairs. Do not proffer unsolicited advice. It will offend their pride. Offer training for Afghan civil and military bureaucracy. Make available teachers, doctors, paramedics, construction and technical machinery, bankers, auditors, Pakistani pilots for the Afghan Arianna Airlines. Resume PIA flights to various major airports in Afghanistan. Enhance the flow of trade to Afghanistan on a concessional basis.

Rebuild Pakistan's Image

In the last 20 years, India has managed to sow the seeds of distrust against Pakistan among the politicians and people of Afghanistan. Pakistan must rebuild its image and reputation maligned and tarnished by Indian ingress at political, intelligence, education, and social levels. Media can play an important role. Pakistani journalists may join the Afghan media. The Pakistan media should extend its outreach through programs in Afghan languages and discussions on Afghan issues.

Pakistan's Concern on TTP

Pakistan is worried about the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan (Al Qaeda, ISKP, TTP, and other anti-Pakistan elements). The Taliban leadership has assured that the Afghan soil will not be used for terrorist activities against Pakistan and any other country. However, they have not given a firm assurance to Pakistan to reign in TTP. Some Afghan leaders including Sher Mohammad Stanakzai have even stated that Pakistan should deal with TTP itself. The Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid has said that TTP was not functioning from inside Afghanistan's border. TTP is dependent upon Pakistan and Pakistani Ulema, not the Taliban, to decide whether the TTP's war is legitimate and to formulate a strategy in response. One of the Taliban spokesperson during Doha talks, Shahabuddin Dilawar was blunt, "TTP is Pakistan's problem, not ours " Commander Khalil Haqqani was also non

committal and diplomatic as if to appease the TTP, conversely advising Pakistan, "we want peace between Muslims. Muslim countries should also review repressive policies."

TTP's entire leadership and the bulk of its cadres are based in Afghanistan. This issue will become a big problem for Pakistan. The Taliban will use TTP as leverage against Pakistan. Recently, attacks on our military personnel have visibly increased. Using Afghanistan as a forward base, the TTP would continue to keep its assets and sleeper cells in the population centres in Pakistan, making it difficult for security forces to target them. The TTP attacks on Chinese engineers and workers, if not stopped, will create strains in China-Pakistan relations. Pakistan needs to convince Afghanistan to dismantle terrorist outfits and foreign proxies on its soil.

Pakistan-Afghanistan Transit Trade

In an interview with CNN-News18 on August 30, 2021, Stanakzai has asked Pakistan to facilitate transit trade between India and Afghanistan. Pakistan has resisted this demand for decades. Stanakzai chose to publicly raise an extremely sensitive issue for Pakistan. Pakistan should sensitize the new Afghan leadership about its reservations. Also, reassure them that Pakistan will continue to facilitate transit trade from Afghanistan to India. We should seek assurances from the Afghan government to ensure the safety of transit trade and energy connectivity routes/pipelines between Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics.

CPEC and Economic Connectivity

The Taliban are keenly interested to become part of China's BRI. Zahibullah Mujahid invited China to be Afghanistan's partner for economic development and welcomed the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan. Afghanistan's inclusion and participation in CPEC will help Pakistan realize its geo-economic vision. It should, however, be kept in mind that a stable Afghanistan will present an alternative route for China via Iran's Chabahar port. Pakistan, therefore, should concentrate on the completion of CPEC projects within Pakistan to be able to reap its economic benefits.

Afghan Refugees

Pakistan's worst fear was a wave of Afghan refugees. So far, only a trickle has moved across the border. However, instability and food shortages may create a sense of despondency among the people propelling them to migrate to other countries including Pakistan. To check illegal crossings and movement of miscreants, the border mechanisms at all border crossings need to be reinforced. Pakistan may issue a special short-term emergency visa to the Afghan refugees, and refugee camps should be kept close to the Afghan border, and the movement of refugees should be restricted.

Conclusion

Pakistan has an important role to play for peace and stability in the region. Pakistan shares unique assets of population overlap, common geography, and culture. What happens in Afghanistan has a direct and immediate impact on Pakistan. We should not hesitate to help and assist the Afghan people and the Taliban for fear of being labelled as their mentors. The US and Europe, the champions of international law and human rights, do not bat an eye to violating these very values if it suits their "strategic and national" interests in far-off countries. Pakistan's strategic and national interest is to ensure a peaceful transition in Afghanistan and its political, social, and economic stability. Pakistan's security and success of its geo-economic vision are linked to peace and stability in Afghanistan.



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