

Essay

Afghanistan: The Taliban Takeover and its Strategic Fallout

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Although it is still too early to predict the full strategic fallout of the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan after nearly 20 years, triggering an unexpectedly swift collapse of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Afghan government and state, its implications are without a doubt, seismic. The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989, after a 10-year-long intervention, was followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc within two years, the collapse of the Najibullah PDPA government in 1992, and the intra-Mujahideen fighting from 1992-96. That interlude paved the way for the takeover of Afghanistan in 1995-96 by the Taliban == a religious militia raised by Pakistan in the refugee camps and madrasas on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line. It was nominally led by a religious preacher, Mullah Omar, anointed as the 'Emir-ul-Momineen' or Commander of the Faithful [with a cloak attributed to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH)]. It led eventually to the allegiance and arrival of Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, the fateful airborne terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States, the US two decades of 'war on terror' fought on Afghan soil, and its final almost unconditional and unilateral withdrawal by the end of August, declaring 'mission accomplished'. By then, ahead of the US withdrawal deadline, the Taliban had on August 15 swarmed into Kabul.

With the announcement of a radical and ultraconservative interim government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan consisting of as many as 17 designated terrorists, including Sirajuddin Haqqani, the wheel has come full cycle. A chapter in Afghanistan's

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tortuous recent history has ended, and a new one has begun with the Taliban back in power, but now more emboldened, radicalised and allied with a range of extremist outfits with both narrower regional and sectarian agendas and wider internationalist objectives like that of the Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) that are in competition with it. A new, perhaps even more violent, chapter appears to be commencing.

No one expects the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2021 to lead to the collapse of the United States, the world's pre-eminent power for close to a century, but its fallout could be just as earth-shaking. Sober voices in the US are cautioning against any premature declaration of the decline of the US as a military, technological or economic power, pointing to its robust performance for another 40 years after its ignominious retreat from Vietnam, and its eventual victory in the Cold War, asserting that the US would take this contretemps too in its stride.

But there are at least three ways in which the wind may be blowing in a contrary direction: first, the revival of regional and international terrorism emboldened by the victory of the Taliban; second, the opportunity it gives to China to expand its strategic space into areas such as the Persian Gulf and West Asia where it has had a weak strategic presence until now; and third, the impact of a barely concealed defeat on the image and standing of the US both in terms of the exercise of power and the influence of liberal values. Ironically, it has come so soon after the shock dealt to democracy in the US itself by the right-wing insurrection at Capitol Hill just as President Biden was being sworn in and which he had vowed to defend at home and abroad.

Regional and International Terrorism

Let us take each of these challenges one by one. First, consider the threat of terrorism. Afghanistan, after its takeover by the Taliban, presents a very complex security picture. At the primary level, although the Taliban takeover was swift and largely without military opposition-- the reasons for which are complex and lie in the nature of the US engagement in Afghanistan--, the resistance to the violent seizure of power is bound to grow. Despite the shock of the takeover and with gun-toting Taliban everywhere, protests, both symbolic and physical, though not large, are frequent. As the Taliban institutionalize their repressive social and political agenda and the resistance, now suppressed, organizes itself, pockets of resistance can be expected to grow. Some of

this resistance will be 'nationalist' in character, but some could also follow ethnic fault-lines and take on a north-south, Pashtun-non-Pashtun character.

At the next level, one can expect to see intra-Taliban factional tensions and fighting, particularly between the Quetta shura centered around Loya Kandahar and the Haqqani Network that is dominating the new government centered around Loya Paktia, but also other excluded Taliban groups such as those of Sadr Ibrahim and Mullah Zakir. These are likely to be mirrored in Taliban-ISI frictions so far contained, spilling over into the open. For every Taliban faction, individual or group, that raises its head in defiance or opposition, the ISI can be expected to prop another to sabotage the former and take its place. Pakistan has a vested interest in keeping Afghanistan unstable, if not under its full tutelage, to neutralize the threat of a united and independent Afghanistan that will revive the Durand Line question or otherwise avenge Pakistani interference in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the most prominent conflict, however, is likely to be between the governing Taliban and more radical and disgruntled elements that are likely to coalesce around the IS-K. Already, we see an upward spiral in the nature and intensity of violence from Taliban 1.0 when they were an ultra-conservative, repressive militia (but not yet strictly speaking a 'terrorist' force); to Taliban 2.0 when the Taliban were radicalized under ISI tutelage in Pakistan as a suicide terrorist force that waged war using IEDs, rockets, and suicide and complex attacks; to the arrival of the IS-K in Afghanistan with its nihilist agenda and harshest attacks against soft Shia targets.

The birth of Taliban 3.0, marked by its return to Kabul with the Kabul airport attack of August 27 killing nearly 200 Afghans and some US soldiers (unlike the peaceful birth of post-Bonn Afghanistan) while the Haqqani Network oversaw security in Kabul and its airport, is a bad augury for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Whether the attack occurred despite the HN or in collusion with it, its implications are as bad. This has been followed by other attacks against the Taliban in the Nangarhar district attributed to the IS-K.

The role of Pakistan in radicalizing the Taliban since 2001 and executing a very sophisticated 20-year old hybrid war against both the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the US and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces -- has surprisingly drawn little attention and needs to be studied seriously.¹ To achieve its aims it used the

Taliban as an Afghan ‘face’ with Pakistani ISI ‘brains’ and hands behind it, and terrorism and psychological warfare as its main weapons to occupy Afghanistan by force without much fighting. Equally suspicious is the almost too neat a division of labour between the Taliban and IS-K in the choice of targets and methods employed, as well as the documented links between the ISI, LeT and IS-K and between the ISI-HN and IS-K, if not others.²

But possibly the most worrying phenomenon is the one that has been least visible as yet: the agenda of the multitude of fraternal regional and internationalist organizations that have been fighting alongside the Taliban over the last 25 years and allied to them in various ways; and the influence of the ISI over them. Such organizations include, besides those already mentioned, loose radicals of Chechen and other Caucasian groups; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), etc., with a Central Asian focus; the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM) and other Uighur groups with a focus on Xinjiang; the Sunni Jundullah with a focus on Sistan-Baluchistan in Iran; a smorgasbord of anti-Indian or Kashmir focused groups propped up by the ISI in Pakistan, such as the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and others; the TTP ranged against Pakistan; and an assortment of anti-Shia outfits mainly based in Pakistan such as the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), the Sipah-e-Sahiba, and Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI), amongst others.

The question this raises is that if the objective of Taliban 2.0 to invade and occupy Afghanistan has been fulfilled, what are the ISI’s plans next? Will the Taliban and the ISI now call off their jihad? Or is the ISI’s plan next to unleash this potpourri of radical and extremist organizations over the entire region? And will they embark on a similar strategy in Jammu & Kashmir and India as a whole? All indications are that while the Taliban will focus internally on an agenda of eliminating what they call ‘vestiges of foreign occupation’ in Afghanistan, they will not interfere in the activities of fraternal organizations in their areas of concern.

Finally, there can be little doubt that the triumph of the Taliban in Afghanistan will herald a powerful return of international terrorism of the Al Qaeda and the Islamic State that had been on the back foot in the Arab world because of the war or terror over the last 20 years. UN reports have documented the continued

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presence of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, both its Arab chapter and the AQIS, the Al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent, and their continuing links with the Taliban. Although Al Qaeda had kept a relatively low profile over the last few years, they can be expected to be emboldened by the Taliban victory and revive their international networks from Africa to South East Asia, spurring violence and instability in several areas.

We can also expect to see that a degraded Islamic State will be revived not only by the example of the Taliban but also by a general radicalization that is likely to occur as the Taliban and IS-K jockey for power and turf in Afghanistan, and discontents among the various extremist outfits -- from the Afghan Taliban to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)-- shift allegiance to more radical outfits.

China, the Regional Dynamics and Geopolitical Implications

The second major strategic fallout of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is its impact on the regional geopolitical dynamics and the emergence of China as a power to contend with in Afghanistan. Its immediate impact is of overturning a balance of influence, if not power, in the region from an alignment of the US, the Islamic Republic, Europe and democratic Asia, including India, on the one hand, to a Pakistan-Taliban-China axis with Russia and Iran presently aligned to them on the other. As Russia and Iran realize the contradictions in their relations with the Taliban (as they seem to be doing already), this may change, but for the present their interest in seeing the back of the US and dealing with the regime in power in Afghanistan prevails.

At one level, it is baffling that the US should surrender this advantage and cede space in Afghanistan at the weakest underbelly of its key rivals, China (in Xinjiang), Russia (in the CARs), and Iran (where there is a new hardline government) overnight while it has prioritized the China threat in the Indo-Pacific and the world in general. But whatever the stated reasons for the US withdrawal, it is possible to argue that the US withdrawal was not just a function of US fatigue with 'endless' war and a dysfunctional Afghan government, but was specifically intended to unleash the Taliban (along with the 20-30 allied extremist, radical or terrorist that we have drawn attention to) to destabilize the region and keep its strategic rivals in the neighborhood, China, Russia, Iran and even Pakistan, off balance, confident that it can manage threats to its homeland from remote bases in the region, 'Over-The-Horizon'. If so, Afghanistan,

the Central Asian Republics and India are just collateral damage.

In fact, every US action since its direct US outreach to the Taliban in 2018 in Doha - the signing of the US-Taliban deal stacked heavily in favour of the Taliban, the discreet projection of Sirajuddin and Anas Haqqani as potential future leaders of the Taliban, and its unilateral and poorly planned withdrawal suggests that the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban backed by Pakistan was facilitated, if not planned, by the US, perhaps in covert alignment with the Taliban and the Pakistani military. It is difficult to believe that a country like the US with a highly sophisticated intelligence agency and security establishment could not have visualized what would happen once the Taliban took over. If so, it would be a huge intelligence failure demanding accountability. We do not see that.

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On the contrary, the US war in the region has only just changed character. What started as a Counter-Terrorist (CT) campaign against the Al Qaeda, expanded to a Counter-Insurgency (COIN) strategy learning lessons from Iraq, changed to a Training and Equipping mission (limited to CT and COIN, but not the development of a conventional national army capable of defending and holding its territory), and is now transforming into an intelligence war in Central Asia. In this war, the signs are clear that the CIA will play a much larger role, at least for the time being, than the Pentagon or Central Command. There are also those in the US who suggest that China, together with Pakistan, is best placed to 'stabilize' Afghanistan, but it is not clear if this is just to lure China to a Soviet-style bear trap in Afghanistan or a genuine hope.

China is presented with a dilemma. It is tempted to step into the vacated space and stretch out towards the Gulf for a variety of reasons and has been preparing to do so by participating in various dialogue fora involving the Taliban with Pakistan, Russia, the US --the Extended Troika. At the same time, it made overtures to the Ghani government through soft power diplomacy-- offers of COVID vaccines, BRI projects, meetings of Himalayan Foreign Ministers, and trumpeting the benefits of the China-Pakistan relationship to Afghanistan. Some of its actions along the Central Asian mountain ranges, such as its provocative forays into Ladakh since 2020, its positioning along the Tajikistan boundary at Gorno-Badakshan and Afghanistan at the Wakhan corridor, and its attempts

to crush and Sinicize the Uighurs in Xinjiang, also suggest that it aims to penetrate these ranges into the Hindu Kush and beyond.

It also has several reasons to do so. A forward strategy in Afghanistan will enable China to secure its vulnerable underbelly in Xinjiang from destabilizing influences, including Islamic radicalism in general and the East Turkestan Independence Movement and other like-minded organizations. It opens the way for China to link up via Afghanistan to its US\$ 400 bn, 25 year geo-economic 'deal' with Iran with strategic overtones potentially bringing the Gulf and Arab world within the orbit of its strategic rivalry with the US. China is also eyeing Afghanistan's natural resources, including copper, iron ore, oil and gas, and particularly its known reserves of lithium (and possibly rumored resources of uranium) for investments. It also offers an opportunity to Beijing to escape US-Quad pressure in the Indo-Pacific by reaching its energy sources in the Gulf through the Central Asian landmass.

Afghanistan also provides a theatre for China and Pakistan to ride 'piggy-back' on each other in many ways. Pakistan can act as China's 'eyes and ears' in an area Pakistan knows intimately but China does not. In return, China's economic muscle and strategic heft can help Pakistan reinforce its control and tutelage over Afghanistan. In addition, it can facilitate Pakistan's long-term aim of severing Afghanistan's traditional trade and other ties with India and re-orient Afghanistan towards Central Asia and China, limiting Afghanistan's ties with South Asia to Pakistan under the slogan of 'geo-economics'. For Pakistan, Afghanistan will also provide strategic depth both in terms of conventional war and terrorist safe havens that can be moved from Pakistan. Together with China, it can also be used as an additional point of pressure against India.

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For China, however, all these temptations will come with a poison pill of Islamist radicalism and separatism in Xinjiang that the US (which has lifted its 'terrorist' tag on the ETIM) could exploit in its attempt to contain China. China is attempting to neutralize the ETIM threat leveraging its friendly ties with the Taliban and Pakistan. But it cannot be unaware of the blowback of the Taliban victory through the TTP in Pakistan itself. Nor can it be oblivious to the fact that tackling the ETIM will not be enough to secure Xinjiang or stabilize Afghanistan, and that if it really wants stability, it will have to

control all the allied extremist and militant groups active in the Af-Pak region and risk falling into the quicks and, as the Soviets and Americans had fallen into earlier. It could be misled by Xi Jinping's strategic ambition, China's experience in suppressing restive Muslim and ethnic concentrations within China in Yunnan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, its money power, and hubris into thinking that it can achieve its objectives in Afghanistan similarly. It will, however, be held back by its natural caution and calculations as well as lessons of history. In the end, it will either burn its fingers and recoil, or position itself for the long game and the future.

That long game could also open fissures between China and Pakistan and aggravate the rivalry between China and the US with predictable consequences. Chinese, US and Pakistani short and long-term objectives in Afghanistan and Central Asia are at cross-purposes. China needs stability to realize its long-term objectives in the region foreshadowing the Malacca dilemma by connecting to the Gulf. Afghanistan is therefore of some strategic importance to it. If the US had any positive strategic agenda other than crushing Al Qaeda, it has little to show for it. It has, in fact, provided net security to its rivals in the region for the last 20 years instead, a security that it has now withdrawn and left its rivals to fend for themselves. It is a negative, not positive, agenda.

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Pakistan has invested a lifetime in promoting instability in the region to neutralize an existential threat from Afghanistan and turn it to its advantage against India. It may wish to stabilize Afghanistan in its favour with the help of China, but it cannot overnight rein in its strategic investments in regional Islamist and extremist organizations. That contradiction, already surfacing in TTP attacks against Chinese targets in Pakistan, will only worsen.

But China-Pakistan tensions in Afghanistan and Central Asia need not work in India's favor. India-China strategic interests in Afghanistan will still be contrary. India will wish to maintain its traditional ties in Afghanistan with the help of a more like-minded post-2001 generation in power, while China will try to use whoever is in control to orient Afghanistan towards Central Asia and China with the temptations of the BRI.

The US: Image, Values and Fallout

The third major strategic fallout of the failure of the US mission in Afghanistan

will be on its image, standing, influence and response to what is nothing short of a debacle in Afghanistan to which successive US Presidents contributed but which President Biden and his team exacerbated with its poor decisions and even poorer handling. There are several strains to this: first, the US's definition of the mission in very narrow terms as a counter-terrorism mission against Al Qaeda and therefore the limited instruments it deployed to deal with it; second, its inconsistent and erratic implementation strategy and utter failure to understand the role of Pakistan in Afghanistan; and third, its tragic failure to live up to its core values of freedom and democracy that its intervention had encouraged. This could have far-reaching consequences for US power and the world.

When the US intervened in Afghanistan post 9/11 in its mission to crush Al Qaeda, it had the support and sympathy of the entire world, even Putin's Russia, and an unprecedented opportunity to rid the region of terrorism and Islamic radicalism. Yet, by limiting its mission to eliminating Al Qaeda as if it was just a boil that could be lanced rather than a cancer that needed therapy, it failed to forge alliances with all those in the region from Russia and the Central Asian Republics to India work on a cooperative strategy to contain Islamic radicalism in the region emanating from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

Second, the US failed to appreciate the pan-Islamism and political philosophy of the Emirate that provided the ecosystem in which the Al Qaeda and other kindred extremist outfits found hospitality in Afghanistan that continues until today. To do that, a certain amount of nation-building and investment in the region was unavoidable.

Third, by limiting itself to nation-building 'lite' as a way of dealing with Al Qaeda, it tried to find a cheap way of dealing with the phenomenon of religious extremism, 'spending' a lot of money in the war effort that lined the pockets international and local contractors and very little in helping Afghanistan stand on its own feet. This could have been done in various ways: by investing or enabling investments in its economy, mineral wealth, agriculture and livelihood sectors that could have generated revenues for the Afghan state; promoting trade that could have integrated Afghanistan to friendly regional and world markets, including India; funding, training and equipping a standing national army capable of defending its territory against its nemesis, Pakistan, rather than a few counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency units designed around its own CT mission;

and in building democratic institutions from the bottom up suited to Afghanistan, instead of palace intrigues in support of one or the other Afghan 'leader' of their choice. Instead, it pandered to Pakistani demands to keep Afghanistan weak, dependent, and susceptible to blackmail. This was partly out of its own dependence on logistics, bases, and ground lines of communication through Pakistan that the latter exploited to the hilt and partly because it has constantly undervalued Afghanistan's strategic value relative to Pakistan.

This was compounded by the US's erratic policies, attention deficit, and underestimation of the links between terrorism and the Taliban insurgency. This is evident from its shifting of attention prematurely from Afghanistan to Iraq (and getting embroiled in an even greater problem there) under President Bush; then changing from a counter-terrorism strategy to a counter-insurgency strategy drawing from lessons learnt from Iraq; and then 'drawing down' after a 'surge', to a 'training and equipping' mission under President Obama; and finally from a kinetic 'South Asia' strategy to a reckless exit deal with the Taliban under President Trump, to its chaotic consummation after a full review, under President Biden.

In the process, the US also failed to detect Pakistan's hybrid war strategy in Afghanistan or follow through its periodic epiphanies about the latter's duplicitous role vis-à-vis both Afghanistan and the US, hosting the Taliban that it had earlier raised in Pakistan in the 1990s, and radicalizing and providing safe havens, logistic, material, political and diplomatic assistance to it post 2001, and attacking US forces while getting compensation for its support for the war against terror in Afghanistan. After 9/11 in 2001, then Assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage conveyed a blunt message to Pakistan from President Bush, to cooperate in the 'war or terror' or be bombed back into 'the stone age'. Yet, President Bush fell back on Pakistan to conduct the war on terror in Afghanistan.

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During his campaign trail in 2009, candidate Barack Obama analyzed that Iraq was a 'war of choice', while Afghanistan was a 'war of necessity'; and that while the 'theatre' of the war in Afghanistan was in Afghanistan, its source, origin and 'locus' lay in Pakistan. That formed the basis of his 'Af-Pak' mandate for Special Envoy, Richard

Holbrooke. Unfortunately, once elected, he too succumbed to those that tried to drag in Pakistan's unfinished agenda in J&K as the reason for Pakistan's conduct in Afghanistan, indirectly justifying the use of terrorism against a third country on an essentially bilateral issue, and initially tried to expand the mandate of Af-Pak to include Kashmir. Although India pre-empted that move firmly, Pakistan was let off the hook again.

It was the same story with President Bush. In his August 2017 'South Asia' strategy, once again President Trump identified Pakistani duplicity as the root cause of the problem in Afghanistan, and India as part of a solution. But within a year, the Administration started courting the Taliban and Pakistan to help the US pullout of Afghanistan with a face-saving political solution that they never got. But it was President Biden, not Trump, who was left with fulfilling a final decision already precipitated by Trump.

These missteps and mistakes in US policy tell us a lot about the lack of a strategic view of Afghanistan by the US that resulted in the US providing net security to all its principal rivals and competitors in the region – China, Russia, Iran and even Pakistan (from the TTP) – for 20 years. It has now withdrawn and enabled the Taliban and its facilitators and partners and its regional and global rivals, to occupy. It now appears to be compensating for that strategic blindness by not just letting the region handle regional extremism by itself, but by deliberately setting the Taliban and a whole family of extremist organizations onto its rivals in the region, with Afghanistan, India and others as collateral. It is in effect moving from a CT, COIN, and Training and Equipping mission to an intelligence mission in the region with an eye principally on China, but also Russia and Al Qaeda.

But what is probably of greater long term consequence is the failure and betrayal by the US and the democratic world as a whole, of some of the core values of freedom, democracy, civil, political, and human rights that have underpinned modern civilization since the French Revolution through the American War of Independence, the two World Wars and the Indian struggle for Independence, in Afghanistan, to the advantage of those who champion one or other model of authoritarianism – one party rule, military dictatorships, theocracies or illiberal majoritarian democracies. It is ironic that this has happened so soon after the severe shock to democracy faced by the US itself, by its own right-wing insurrection at Capitol Hill just as President Biden was being sworn in, following which the latter had vowed to defend democracy at home and abroad. The

implications of this could be fateful for civil liberties worldwide as resistance movements in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Hong Kong struggle against dictatorships in their countries. Almost the entire region to the west of India up to the Middle East (barring Iraq ironically) is now in the grip of one or another form of dictatorship. As smaller countries seek security and models of governance to ensure their hold on power, the Chinese model looms larger and even attractive.

How far the US will go in defending these core values and what lessons the world will derive from its betrayal in Afghanistan is still to be seen. Its impact may not be immediate, but if the stealthy announcement of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) Defence Treaty is anything to go by, notwithstanding the first-ever in-person Quad Summit hosted by President Biden in Washington on September 25, the US seems to be falling back on the conservative Anglosphere to pursue its core security interests relating to China. This does not automatically mean that its various other strategic and security relationships with NATO, ANZUS, the Quad, East Asia, ASEAN, or India will necessarily suffer, but it is likely to raise doubts about where, in the final analysis, the rest of the world fits into the US security calculus.

As far as India is concerned, it will have to continue to build up its own capacities and leverage all its relationships depending on the nature of its threat perceptions, rather than be overly dependent on any.

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