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# VIF Expert Groups Reports



Edited by Naval Jagota



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## Editor's Note

Vivekananda International Foundation organized seven expert groups through webinar on events and topics affecting India's interests worldwide in the month of September 2021 with the dominant theme being Afghanistan. The expert groups provide layers of understanding and contextualized the present discourse from the past for the future. The diversity of the expertise of each of the members of the expert groups brought rich flavor and knowledge on the topic through their varied professional backgrounds (military, diplomacy and academia). This issue contains reports of the Afghanistan, West Asia, China, Pakistan, Europe, US and Indo-Pacific experts' group discussions.

The month was kick started by a diverse and informed group to understand the complex developments in Afghanistan and its impact on India. Discussants brainstormed on various issues such as the fragmented structure of the Taliban government, the geopolitical and the geo-economic power play in Afghanistan between the regional players (Pakistan, China and Russia) and the Western powers and options for India to engage in Afghanistan.

European Union (EU)-Russia relations have gone through their share of highs and lows. At the turn of the 21st century, Russia under the new leadership of Vladimir Putin had expressed its 'European Choice.' Two

decades later, the country is at the peak of isolation from the West and has turned towards Asia (China). Post 2014 events in Ukraine, the chain of economic sanctions and countersanctions has continued. However, the divergences go beyond Ukraine. The European study group deliberated on the various factors that have contributed to the divergences in EU-Russia relations as well as to understand the possible trajectory of the relationship.

The driving force behind the Indo-Pacific construct has been the dependence of East Asian economies on security of energy flow from West Asia. Withdrawal of US from Afghanistan is likely to lead to a turmoil in West Asia with serious implications on the security of energy flow. The geo strategic and security scenario in the region would depend on the level of US military presence in the times to come which in turn would be shaped by America's intentions in West Asia now that the Global War on Terror in Afghanistan has folded and US dependence on West Asia for energy has waned. The expert group on Indo-Pacific discussed the implications of US withdrawal from Afghanistan to assess its impact in the Indo-Pacific.

In the West Asia Experts Group meeting the discussion was focussed on "The Battle for the Soul of Islam dealing with the global competition between Middle Eastern and Asian states for Muslim Religious Soft Power". The key speaker in the session was Dr. James M. Dorsey, Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

The Pakistan expert group discussed Pak-US, Pak-EU, TTP, Afghanistan-Ground Situation- political (nature of Govt/Infighting), military (TRF, Pak role), economic and Indian priorities, options, role, impact on security.

The swift takeover by Taliban post the US withdrawal has raised several questions. Foremost among them is whether the Taliban regime will be

a stable regime? Second, has the Taliban really transformed? Third, what would the future US policy towards Afghanistan and the surrounding region entail? Finally, in the wake of US withdrawal, what are the stakes for Iran, Russia and China? These and other related questions were deliberated during the US expert group meeting.

The VIF-PF round table discussion were on China's strategy towards Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region. The discussion was centred on the effects of the intensive geopolitical inroads that China has made in creating through BRI, as well as what aims does China have in South East Asia and South Asia.

The coordinators and researchers associated with these Expert Groups have put unfaltering efforts to coordinate the meetings and collate the notes for the reports in this issue.

**Naval Jagota**

**New Delhi**

**October 2021**

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### EU-Russia Relations

Prepared by Dr. Himani Pant

*European Union (EU)-Russia relations have gone through their share of highs and lows. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia under the new leadership of Vladimir Putin had expressed its 'European Choice.' Two decades later, the country is at the peak of isolation from the West and has turned towards Asia (China). Post 2014 events in Ukraine, the chain of economic sanctions and countersanctions has continued. However, the divergences go beyond Ukraine. To deliberate on the various factors that have contributed to the divergences in EU-Russia relations as well as to understand the possible trajectory of the relationship, the Vivekananda International Foundation organised a discussion on 14 September 2021. The opening remarks were made by Dr. Arvind Gupta and the discussion was moderated by Amb. Anil Wadhwa. The participants comprised of distinguished members like Ms Kadri Liik, Amb P.S. Raghavan, Prof Gulshan Sachdeva, Zachary Paikin, Prof K.P. Vijayalakshmi and Gp Capt Naval Jagota.*

### EU-Russia Relations

Given their cultural and historical and cultural linkages, geographical proximity, mutual interdependence in the energy sector, trade and investment linkages as well as their global ambitions, the EU and Russia

worked closely in the 1990s as well as early 2000s. From a European perspective, the conceptual foundation of the EU-Russia relationship has unravelled following a non-liberal democracy path undertaken by Russia over the years. All the initial goals and discussion formats were established under the assumption that Russia was on the path to become more westernized which would make it a like-minded partner for Western countries and the EU. When that turned differently, the relationship lost its conceptual foundation. Russia, on the other hand, has been apprehensive of Western influence and policies in what it considers its sphere of influence or Near Abroad. The Eastern Partnership Initiative of the EU as well as NATO's expansion have been major contributors to this uneasiness. Following the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the partnership entered a phase of heightened tension and continues to remain in a deadlock to this day. It is important to note that while the issue of Ukraine has been a catalytic factor in deteriorating the EU-Russia relationship, it may not be the deciding factor in carving the future trajectory relationship. It is now clear that the Minsk agreements have not worked and may need to be renegotiated. However, given the current geopolitical scenario and their respective preoccupations, the situation in Ukraine is likely to continue.

### **Factors affecting the Relationship**

There are several reasons for the existing stalemate in EU-Russia relationship. First, is a general lack of strategic culture or strategic compass in the EU. This manifests itself in important ways, foremost among which is the fact that the interests of member states on Russia do not align. While the EU wants to be a global player yielding substantial influence regionally/locally as well, the interests and aspirations of different member states have contributed to an incoherent policy. The fundamentally different security perceptions among member states are difficult to reconcile with one another, leading to a vicious cycle. The countries of the old Europe

such France, Germany, Italy etc. have a number of international interests which do not necessarily coincide with EU's interests as a whole and they have sought some engagement with Russia owing to its size and global influence. This is often opposed by new eastern European members of the Union. This incoherence manifests itself on some key issues where EU and Russia could actually talk and engage in selective engagement. As recent months have shown, any outreach towards Russia has been met with backlash from within. A related factor is that the EU has not really been an independent player in determining its relations with Russia. Its decisions have often followed the course of US attitudes to Russia.

### **Future Scenario**

As both the EU and Russia undergo their own domestic transition and adapt to new circumstances in a post-Covid world and overall geopolitical scenario, the stalemate in their relationship is likely to continue. Given their divergent interests and the divisions within the EU countries over engagement with Russia, the European agenda of Russia in the coming years is likely to remain scant. However, the possibility of cooperation on isolated issues such as climate change, Afghanistan, etc. remains. The EU and Russia can also play an important role in some of the neighbouring areas and also in many of the hotspots where Europe has ambitions to play. The 2015 Iran deal has shown that both sides have the potential to cooperate on areas of mutual interests despite being at the peak of isolation. A similar approach is therefore possible in the coming years. The US outreach to Russia to have a more stable and predictable relationship could also have a stabilising effect on the EU-Russia engagement. However, the possibility of a new, big, conceptual relationship akin to the 1990s is low and the relationship would at best be low key and pragmatic in the coming years.

## **Conclusion**

The trajectory of EU-Russia relations is an important aspect for India given the importance it accords to its relations with both the EU and Russia. Given the rise of China and various security threats it entails, a stable EU-Russia partnership would be favourable for India. On the EU's part, it needs to find a strategic compass and an internal equilibrium of political, economic and social aspirations within Europe while dealing with Russia as well as other partners. As the situation post 2014 has shown, Russia has grown closer to China following its isolation from the West. While it is not possible to split Russia from China completely, there is an alternative or a middle ground which entails finding convergences with Russia on certain issues to prevent further isolation.

# US withdrawal from Afghanistan: Its impact in the Indo-Pacific

Prepared by Amruta Karambelkar

*The VIF Experts Group on the Indo-Pacific met virtually on 15 Sep 2021. The meeting was moderated by Vice Adm Anil Chopra (Retd), and the key attendees and contributors were Dr Arvind Gupta, Mr Akshay Mathur, Mr Anil Devoli, Amb Anil Trigunyat, Amb Anil Wadhwa, Amb Deepa Wadhwa, Dr Harinder Sekhon, Amb Skand Tayal, Gp Capt Naval Jagota, and Cdr Shashank Sharma.*

## Background

The driving force behind the Indo-Pacific construct has been the dependence of East Asian economies on security of energy flow from West Asia. Withdrawal of US from Afghanistan is likely to lead to a turmoil in West Asia with serious implications on the security of energy flow. The geo strategic and security scenario in the region would depend on the level of US military presence in the times to come which in turn would be shaped by America's intentions in West Asia now that the Global War on Terror in Afghanistan has folded and US dependence on West Asia for energy has waned. The expert group on Indo-Pacific discussed the implications of US withdrawal from Afghanistan to assess its impact in the Indo-Pacific.

## **Implications on Maritime security in Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman - impinging on the energy security**

A strong US military presence in the Middle East has been de facto guarantor of stability in the region and security of energy supply for the economies of East Asian states as well as for India. The fifth Fleet of U.S. Navy and the task forces of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) based in Bahrain have been instrumental for maritime security in the region.

The developing security situation post US withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to have a severe impact on India's energy security as also on other major economies in the Indo-Pacific. There could also be an adverse impact on the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project and its integration with the Chabahar port.

There is also fear of Israel and Iran conflagration once the US control in the region wanes. The US however continues to retain a substantial influence over Israel and it may not be possible for Israel to intervene in Iran militarily without overt and covert support of the US. Biden administration is actively pursuing JCPOA with Iran and is unlikely to encourage any military intervention by Israel.

The strategic requirements of War on Terror and securing energy resources may have waned for the US but it continues to have political interests, investment and business interests in the region. The American arms industry and tech industry have large stakes in the region. Many American multinationals including financial services, energy companies, IT companies etc are also headquartered in Dubai, Bahrain and Kuwait. Further, interests of their allies in the region, Israel in particular, would also be an important factor for sustaining American presence. Maintaining counter balance to Russian and Chinese influence in the region is also an important consideration for sustaining US presence in West Asia.

Notwithstanding the future security scenario in West Asia, India as well as the other major economies dependent on energy from the Middle East region should look at diversifying their energy sources from Latin America, Africa, US, Russia etc.

With the burden of sustaining operations in Afghanistan removed, the US will have access to greater capital for investments/ FDI's and allow it to focus in other areas. This may augur well for the Indian market and economy as USA is a major source of FDI's in India .

### **Implications for Russia-China relations vis-à-vis influence in Central Asia**

Both Russia and China are concerned about the fallout of US withdrawal on security in Central Asia and Xinjiang regions respectively. Largely both countries are likely to increase investments and work complementarily in these regions. A fall out between the two countries is not foreseen as Russian interests are served well by Chinese economic investments in the region. In another scenario, how Afghanistan under Chinese influence is able to guarantee security of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and how Taliban treat the Tajik minorities in Afghanistan could be a bone of contention between China and Russia as the latter is a primary stakeholder in security of Central Asian republics. Another potential area of conflict of interest could be the proposed rail route from Uzbekistan to Gwadar via Afghanistan being funded by China. This would hurt Russian interests being a transit country today.

In the long term however, the increasing migration of the ethnic Chinese in the Russian Far East and the inevitable conflict of interests in the Arctic is likely to rake up differences between the two countries.

## **Implications for US security pacts in the Far East with Japan, ROK and Taiwan in light of perceived dilution of American power and credibility**

Under the Biden Administration Japan has shown greater confidence in their relations with the US though at the regional level they are exploring relations with other countries like Vietnam, Taiwan etc to have independent options in the region. The countries in the Indo-Pacific appear to be in favour of US withdrawal and do not see it as loss of American credibility. They expect that US would now be able to focus on its core areas i.e. the 'Indo-Pacific' and 'dealing with China'. Apart from the focus on security they expect the US to provide opportunities for greater economic integration and play a greater economic role in the region to reduce their dependencies on China. Australia is also expected to continue to work with the US in the Western Pacific as also with Japan to prevent China from undertaking projects in the proximity of Australia that are strategically threatening in nature.

### **QUAD**

The QUAD initially came into being as *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue* with the aim of balancing growing Chinese influence in Asia Pacific. However it has not been able to culminate into a military alliance. It is largely a grouping of like minded democracies with members largely engaging in multifarious non-security issues. The QUAD in its present form does not provide adequate deterrence against China. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan also raises questions about credibility of US and the future of QUAD.

The expanding scope of the framework and engagement on issues of common interest, if dealt with strategically could however work to provide a suitable balance to China. For example, the framework can be used to

build a resilient global supply chain in India that offers an alternative to China. India could also benefit by gaining technology and niche equipment.

Despite the security element of the framework being subdued, it has caused consternation in the Chinese camp as can be seen from their frequent outbursts against QUAD describing it as an Asian NATO. A significant maritime security role however has been clearly signalled by QUAD by adopting the MALABAR naval exercise and substantially increasing its scale, scope and complexity. QUAD is also attracting other like-minded navies like the French navy which adds to its deterrence value. The frequent leadership summits of QUAD members also serves as a major signalling event adding to the discomfort of China. The general perception is that QUAD is a military grouping under the cover of an expanded mandate - particularly a naval grouping actively addressing interoperability issues through large scale exercises.

A key question that arises is whether the US will provide support to India in the event of a conflict with China. The US is likely to be in a long term contestation with China in the domains of technology, cyber, military power, trade etc in order to retain its primacy in the world order. Thawing of its relations with China is therefore unlikely. In an event of an India-China confrontation, US support in terms of finances, equipment, intelligence and info-sharing can be expected with a fair amount of certainty even if direct military support is not provided. Japan on the other hand is more likely to find common grounds with China owing to its dependence on China's market and economy.

Whether the framework in its present form is an adequate military deterrent against China is questionable. A weak deterrence could very well lead to a confrontation with China. The focus on maintaining an adequate military deterrence against China must therefore be maintained

in the grouping.

## **Chinese assertiveness in South China Sea and ASEAN**

Adding to its aggressive posturing in the South China Sea, China has recently notified new maritime rules warranting vessels carrying radioactive materials, bulk oil, chemicals and a host of other dangerous cargo to report details of the cargo upon entry into Chinese territorial waters. These rules are expected to increase tensions in the region if China strictly enforces these in the disputed South China Sea and the Taiwan straits. It could lead to miscalculations and inadvertent incidents at sea considering US navy operates actively in the region as part of their FONOPs.

An added aspect is that shipping companies would likely comply with this Chinese regulation to avoid trouble. This would lead to indirectly legitimizing the Chinese control over South China Sea. There is a need to strongly oppose this move by China to avoid conflagration in the region. QUAD may not be a suitable forum for raising this issue with the US itself not being a party to the UNCLOS. This issue can find traction in forums like ASEAN and East Asia Summit.

## **Conclusion**

The credibility of the US and its ability to control events has been diminishing over the years. Presence of US had been the binding force in Afghanistan. In the vacuum post US withdrawal there is no clarity or jointness among stakeholders states in dealing with the situation. Iran and Israel may get emboldened which could lead to increased tension between the two countries. Any further reduction in US presence may lead to disorder in the Middle East region. There is almost no US influence in Eurasia where Chinese influence is on the rise and Russian influence has been consolidated through the Collective security treaty organization

(CSTO) of post-soviet era Central Asian States. Withdrawal of US from Afghanistan gives a fillip to a new world order in which China and Russia exercise increased influence, particularly in Eurasia. Meanwhile the QUAD needs to prioritise 'security' - its *raison d'être* - and send a clear signal through a joint statement.

## The Battle for the Soul of Islam

Prepared by Hirak Jyoti Das

*The West Asia Experts Group Meeting was virtually held on 17 September 2021 by the Vivekananda International Foundation, the discussion was focussed on “The Battle for the Soul of Islam dealing with the global competition between Middle Eastern and Asian states for Muslim Religious Soft Power”. The key speaker in the session was Dr. James M. Dorsey, Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies; members attending and contributing were Amb Anil Trigunayat (Coordinator); Lt. Gen Ravi Sawhney (Retd); Lt. Gen. Ata Hasnain (Retd); Amb D P Srivastava; Amb Satish Chandra; Amb Sanjay Singh and Prof Kingshuk Chatterjee.*

### **Battle for the Soul of Islam**

The contest occurring currently among the Middle Eastern and Asian Muslim powerhouses is not based on the future of caliphate but rather a battle for religious soft power to garner geopolitical influence, power and dominance. The competition would determine which Muslim majority state or states will be recognised as leaders of the Islamic world.

The main competitors fall into two categories i.e. firstly, states that promote strictly tailored version of Islam and the principles are defined by

the political needs to propagate the autocratic model and secondly, states that rely on interpretation of faith defined by civil society and principles of humanitarianism, liberalism, secularism and human rights. It also involves legal re-contextualisation and openness to reforms to address problematic and discriminatory notions within texts of Islamic Jurisprudence.

The primary actors in this struggle have sought to impose how to govern the religious and political life of believers in the region. The said struggle is occurring in the backdrop of rise of nationalism and capitalism and widespread disintegration of norms, values and traditional world views that historically served to anchor individuals and provide meanings to their lives. It is likely that there would be no clear winner in the battle for the soul of Islam. The outcome is however likely to play a significant role in determining the prospects for peace and security across of the world.

In the first phase of the battle for the soul of Islam, it was largely uncontested and dominated by Saudi Arabia's religious and soft power efforts. In the second phase, Saudi dominance was challenged by the revolutionary regime in Iran. The third phase is highly complex not only due to the entry of the new players but it also involves rivalries within rivalries. It is complicated by several rounds of coupling of political and religious, soft and hard powers.

### **Saudi Arabia's Religio-Political Dominance**

In the post-Second World War period, Saudi Arabia occupied a dominant position in the Islamic world and in 1960s and 1970s; it carried out top down, state-run and well-funded public diplomacy campaign to promote ultra-conservative ideas in religious, cultural and media institutions across the world. In the recent years however, the volume of Saudi funding has dropped.

Saudi Arabia's primary focus in terms of religious soft power diplomacy has shifted with the rise of the Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. The current drive is based on projecting the kingdom and its religious discourse as tolerant and forward looking and shedding its past image of promoting intolerant and supremacist worldview. The present approach is carried out through demonstrative acts such as expansion of women's rights, creation of entertainment industry, diluting the influence of clergy etc. These measures have been undertaken to compliment Crown Prince's perceived political requirements and economic initiatives. The Crown Prince has pushed for inter-faith dialogues and non-religious education with emphasis on science and languages. However, the removal of racist, supremacist and violent languages against non-Muslims and Shiites in school textbooks has been slow.

### **Religious Soft Power under Islamic Republic**

The battle for the soul of Islam accelerated after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Iran has used its theocratic and revolutionary model to establish itself as an Islamic powerhouse and challenge Saudi political influence and global outreach. The Saudi-Iran rivalry has engulfed Middle Eastern, North African region and non-Arab Muslim world.

While both Saudi Arabia and Iran have indulged in sectarian politics, the concept of religious soft power is distinct for the two leading Muslim powers. Saudi Arabia's thrust is driven by geopolitics and gaining religious influence. In case of Iran, the influence is largely driven by hard power and providing weapons and funding to militant groups. Iran has also attempted to target religious communities and address their social and spiritual issues.

## **The New Players in the Third Phase**

The new players such as Turkey, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Indonesia have posed itself as alternate religious soft powers to serve their geopolitical interests. These states are competing for various freedoms, rights and preferred political systems. The UAE and Indonesia have utilised notions of tolerant Islam to gain religious soft power. The soft power has been used as tools of public diplomacy as well as for pursuing economic reforms. On domestic level however, these states have failed to fully implement political, social and religious tolerance, pluralism, gender equality, secularism and human rights. The third phase is marked by religious establishment remaining subservient to ruling authority.

## **UAE's Promotion of Tolerant Islam**

The UAE has formally emphasised on tolerance and individual social rights. It has posed itself as a moderate Islamic state by establishing diplomatic relations with Israel; hosting inter-faith dialogues and allowing establishment of non-Muslim place of worship. The UAE's constitution despite adhering with the Islamic law for its citizens has allowed certain liberties for non-Muslim residents.

The UAE is better placed than Saudi Arabia that suffers from reputational problems on global level. At the same time, the UAE's policy aligns with Saudi Arabia to counter Iran and Turkey that propagates a political interpretation of the faith as well as containing the growing popularity of Political Islam post-2011 Arab Spring. The approach by the UAE is based on non-political politicised Islam.

The UAE has utilised check book diplomacy, investments, arm twisting and military power to counter Islamists and shape religious and political environment in the Islamic world. The UAE has been able to promote

state-controlled Islam that styles itself as tolerant, apolitical and preaches absolute obedience towards the ruler without legally addressing outdated, intolerant or supremacist concepts embedded in the faith.

### **Nationalism and Islamism within Turkey**

Turkey's religious soft power has a raw nationalist edge based on drive for restoring past imperial glory. Turkey has insisted that its geography, history and religious cultural agency empowers it to become a regional hegemon. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has rejected cosmopolitan expressions of Turkish Islamism and pushed for heightened religiosity to meet its domestic and geopolitical objectives. The religious affairs department in Turkey plays a key role in foreign and development aid policy. Turkey similar to the UAE has pursued a mix of hard power and soft power to fulfil its objectives. Turkey has advantage to spread its influence in the Balkans due to historical connections; Central Asia due to shared culture and Europe due to diaspora. Turkey can be categorised as an ahistorical Political Islam oriented competitor.

### **Political Humanitarian Islam in Indonesia**

Indonesia with the largest Muslim population is the new player competing for religious soft power in the Islamic world. Nahdlatul Ulama, one of the largest Muslim organisation in the world has emerged as credible force in boosting Indonesia's soft power. The Indonesian government plays a rather passive role and allows the group to promote its objectives. The government benefits from its deep ties with the organisation as well as the movement's ability to gain access to corridors of power in world capitals.

The group has adopted political humanitarian Islam that recognises the universal declaration of human rights and promotes notions of tolerance. The group has displayed willingness to re-contextualise the faith by

eliminating problematic categories. The group since its formation noted that the changing context of reality necessitates the creation of new interpretations of Islamic Law. The group also has political organ that participates in national elections. It offers a leg up as compared to the UAE and Saudi Arabia where political parties are banned. The group also maintains extensive networks with European political parties.

To conclude, there is need for international actors to conceptualise the battle for the soul of Islam as a global struggle. The failure of western governments to incorporate these considerations into their foreign, defence, counter terrorism policies and public diplomacy efforts has serious consequences. The risk associated with this failure includes neglecting vital opportunities to strengthen rule-based international order. Therefore in order to formulate an accurate understanding, there is an urgent need to facilitate cooperation with Muslim majority states to conceptualise the ongoing battle for the soul of Islam and bring together political and religious leaders, mass movements, intellectuals and activists.

# Pakistan's relationships and the Afghanistan's ground situation

Prepared by Aakriti Vinayak

*A meeting of the Pakistan Study Group (PSG) was held via video conferencing on 20 September 2021. The main items on the agenda were: Pakistan- Pakistan-US, Pakistan-EU, TTP, Afghanistan- Ground Situation- Political (Nature of Government/ Infighting), Military (NRF, Pakistan role), Economic. The Meeting was attended by the following: Shri Arvind Gupta, Amb Satish Chandra, Ms Shalini Chawla, Shri Rana Banerjee, Shri CD Sahay, Amb Gautam Mukhopadhaya, Shri Sushant Sareen, Amb DP Srivastava, Amb Amar Sinha, Amb G Parthasarathy, Lt Gen Ravi Sawhney(retd), Lt Gen Ranbir Singh, Shri Tilak Devasher, and Gp. Capt. Naval Jagota.*

## **Pakistan-US, Pakistan-European Union**

USA and European Union are mounting pressure on Pakistan for its role in the current developments in Afghanistan. There has been a dramatic exchange of statements between Pakistan and **the** US. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken acknowledged at a congressional hearing that Islamabad had played a dodgy role that involved hedging its bets constantly about the future of Afghanistan, and in light of this, the US would re-assess ties to formulate what role Pakistan needs to play in the region. The statements by **the** US on Pakistan's double dealing comes in

the backdrop of immense domestic pressure **it is** facing with regards to the hasty withdrawal and also on Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. Pakistan **meanwhile**, is continuing with its narrative of victimhood. Imran Khan recently made a statement that the United States' war against terrorism was disastrous for Pakistan and accused Washington of using Islamabad like a "hired gun" during their two-decade presence in Afghanistan. US policy with regards to Pakistan is largely going to be transactional. It could pressurise Pakistan through sanctions, squeezing aid, pushing Pakistan to the blacklist of Financial Action Task force (FATF) etc. **Whether it does so or not remains to be seen.**

On September 14, **the European Parliament passed a** resolution blaming Pakistan for assisting the Taliban in fighting the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF) in the Panjshir Valley led by Ahmad Massoud. In Europe there are deep concerns about security and terror proliferation. There remains immense pressure on Pakistan. However Pakistan will continue playing the victim card, it will also keep the façade of talking about peace and inclusive government with the Taliban.=

## **TTP**

Since September Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) has claimed responsibility for several terrorist attacks specifically targeting security checkpoints. TTP had expressed its happiness over the victory of Taliban as the victory of Islamism. TTP's chief Noor Wali Mehsud in his first exclusive interview said he has a good relationship with Afghan Taliban and its gains will help them as well. He also stated "our relations with the Afghan Taliban are based on brotherhood, sympathy, and Islamic principles. **He also talked about making the erstwhile tribal areas independent.** Pakistan is concerned about the resurgence of TTP, which can ignite nationalism **among the** Pashtuns. It is also concerned about the intensifying attacks on the Chinese projects.

## **Afghanistan**

Since the Taliban has wrested power it has been building a narrative of a “moderate Taliban” to gain recognition from **the** international community. However, Taliban **have** formed an overwhelming ethnic, all-male government and is anything but inclusive. A large number of its members are on the UN global list of terrorists. The Haqqani Network has emerged as the most powerful group in the new Taliban government. There is a clear Pakistani stamp on the Taliban cabinet. However, **the** Taliban is facing three important challenges: -Internal fissures; Financial **meltdown**; **and international** pressures especially the concerns of Pakistan and China with relation to TTP and ETIM. The economy of Afghanistan remains in dire straits. 75% of Afghanistan budget hitherto has been foreign aid sourced. UNDP has predicted that 97 percent of Afghans could plunge into poverty by mid-2022. There is a looming humanitarian crisis in **the** making in Afghanistan.

## **Russia, China, Iran**

Russia is hedging its bets in Afghanistan. There remains confusion on how to proceed to best promote its interests. China though initially was happy over the Taliban victory in Afghanistan is now slowly coming to terms on the repercussions it will have on its security especially with reference to Xinjiang and the rise of ETIM. Though diplomatically high-level engagements with Taliban continue there is a serious rethinking going on in China. Iran has stated that Afghanistan should establish a broad and inclusive government reflecting the interests of all ethnic groups in the country. Tajikistan has also adopted a tough stance against the Taliban government and has also given its support to the resistance movement in Afghanistan.

## **Indian Priorities/Options/Role, impact on security**

- There are grass root concerns about the fallout of the situation in Afghanistan on the internal security situation in India, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and the hinterland.
- As far the recognition of Taliban led government in Afghanistan is concerned India continues with its wait and watch policy. In the recent SCO statement Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that the new Taliban government in Afghanistan is not inclusive, adding that the change in regime in Afghanistan happened without negotiation.
- India should ramp up its efforts to induce west to impose sanctions on Pakistan. Both at the diplomatic and the track two levels India should develop a narrative of Pakistan's role in supporting Taliban. India should also recalibrate its policies by enhancing collaboration and cooperation with regional countries like Iran and Tajikstan. Lastly our policies should be empathetic towards the "people of Afghanistan".
- **In this context, the issue of granting e-visas to those Afghans who are friends of India needed to be resolved quickly.**

# Developments in Afghanistan

Prepared by Dr. Himani Pant

*To deliberate on the situation in Afghanistan post US withdrawal, the Vivekananda International Foundation organised an interaction on 22 September 2021. The opening remarks were presented by the VIF director, Dr. Arvind Gupta. The discussion was moderated by Amb. Arun K Singh and saw in attendance distinguished participants including Prof. Vali Nasr, Lt Gen Ravi Sawhney (Retd), Lt Gen Anil Ahuja (Retd), Vice Admiral Satish Soni (Retd), Prof KP Vijayalakshmi, D. Harinder Sekhon and Gp Capt Naval Jagota.*

## **Background**

The swift takeover by Taliban post the US withdrawal has raised several questions. Foremost among them is whether the Taliban regime will be a stable regime? Second, has the Taliban really transformed? Third, what would the future US policy towards Afghanistan and the surrounding region entail? Finally, in the wake of US withdrawal, what are the stakes for Iran, Russia and China? These and other related questions were deliberated during the meeting. The following points emerged from the discussion:

- The US has never viewed South Asia in general and Af-Pak region in particular through a geopolitical/geostrategic lens. Their arrival in the region was built on the foundation of raising a war on terror, following 9/11. This approach led to a misplaced geostrategic objective for the US which did not have long term goals.
- For the US, China is a Pacific rather than a West Asia issue. The US has conceptual issues in understanding that the Af-Pak region is as important to fighting terrorism as it is to countering China. With its withdrawal, the US has created conditions for China to own the corridor from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea.
- These conceptual issues have contributed is an inherent contradiction in the American policy. While the US has sought to prioritise China in their foreign policy, it has created opportunities for the latter by moving out from Afghanistan. In addition, if the US insists on sanctioning Iran and keep India out, it would basically be relinquishing that whole area to Chinese control. The Chinese, on their part, have now increasingly begun to look at West Asia through big partnerships.
- The American foreign policy from Obama to Biden has gradually been shifting to Asia and it has sought to extricate itself from the Middle East. There is a realisation that as dangerous as terrorism is it should not have been such a high-cost venture. Over time, the US establishment has felt that they were more successful in countering terrorism by engaging in narrower anti-terror initiatives.
- Under Trump, the domestic political conversation on terrorism transformed. It was felt that the existential threat to the US does not come from the Middle East but from Mexico and Guatemala.

As a result, the issue of Afghanistan was side-lined.

- The Biden administration appears to be as unilateral as the Trump administration. The lack of a NATO voice during withdrawal and lack of consultations is a case in point.
- The U. S. treated Doha agreement as an armistice and did not negotiate with the Taliban properly. The fact that the existing Afghan leadership was not part of the talks also created further complications.
- The criticism that has followed the US withdrawal raises questions for the administration's future post 2022 and 2024. The impact of developments in Afghanistan may have some impact during the election. Any escalation of tensions in Asia would bring a much greater focus of stories that have to do with building America's capabilities in Asia. It is important to note in this context that the Taliban is not a homogeneous organisation and has several divisions. As a result, there are reservations about its stability as well. In the event of its collapse due to its own factions as well as growing backlash, it would create further problems for the US policymakers.
- The latest version of the Taliban could best be described as more pragmatic and tactical. While it is not liberal, it is capable of making tactical decisions.
- The key issue to watch is the economy in Afghanistan. Over the years, almost 70 percent of its budget came from abroad. Unless the Chinese invest in the Afghan economy, the Taliban is going to face difficulties in meeting the payroll and other expenditures.

## **Conclusion**

The US needs to recalibrate its Asia policy. An Asia strategy caught up to the East and other conceptual issues leading to unnecessary demarcations may lead to further complications for the US policymakers. The swiftness of Taliban takeover as well as other developments have reflected the US miscalculations. A coherent approach towards Asia as well as towards countering China would require a wholesome approach which is able to balance China. Given India's own stakes in Afghanistan and security concerns with China, the US approach would also carry significant implications for India.

# China's strategy towards Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region

Prepared by Kota Mallikarjuna Gupta

*A Joint webinar was organized by the Vivekananda International Foundation and the Prospect Foundation on 27 September 2021. Dr. Arvind Gupta, Cmde Gopal Suri, Prof Srikanth Kondapalli, Lt Gen Ravi Sawhney (Retd), Lt Gen Ranbir Singh (Retd), Lt Gen Rakesh Sharma (Retd), Air Marshal Diptendu Choudhury, V Adm Satish Soni (Retd) and Gp Capt Naval Jagota attended the meeting from the Indian side. Tan-sun Chen, Dr I-chung Lai, Dr Ying-yu Lin, Dr Hon-min Yau, Gen Che-ping Chang, Dr. Mumin Chen and Dr. Norah Huang participated from the Prospect Foundation. Dr. Arvind Gupta and Dr I-chung Lai delivered the introductory remarks. The discussion was in two sessions, the first was: China's strategy towards Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region and the second one was PLAN, PLAA and PLARF in IOR.*

## China in the Indo-Pacific Region

The salient points that emerged from the discussion were:-

- The growth in the strength of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), poses a greater threat to countries in the vicinity in that it no longer makes an issue of land border problems only. As the PLA Air force (PLAAF) and PLA Navy (PLAN) become increasingly strong, China takes advantage of the escort missions to

the Gulf of Aden to project its power into the Indian Ocean and launch joint military exercises with countries in the region during the transit of the escort fleet.

- China's cooperation with Pakistan is in military equipment production as also in military drills, with the annual Shaheen (Eagle) exercises between Chinese and Pakistan air forces being a most important indicator of the growing ties between the two countries. The 2019 Shaheen exercise took place in Southwestern parts of Pakistan close to the sea, simulating responses to the presence of U.S. and Indian warships off the coast of Pakistan and covered traditional air-to-air combat maneuvers but also cooperation between PLAN planes and their Pakistan Air Force counterparts.
- Another neighbor is Myanmar, whose strategic location offers an alternative land bridge for China to access the Indian Ocean, shares a 2,204 KM border with it. China invested huge resources in strengthening its military cooperation with Myanmar with over 90 percent of Myanmar's military vehicles supplied by China in addition missiles, radar, naval vessels, and aircraft are also supplied.

### **Chinese military technology in the Indo-Pacific**

- The test-firing of a Dongfeng-series missile in August of 2020 focused attention on this system because it was the first time that the Beidou-3 system was put to use in a missile test. With the guidance of the Beidou-3 system, the PLAAF is expected to make more progress in these areas. It counts on the Beidou system to realize its goal of reaching all corners of the country and carrying out raid and strike missions.
- China's newly-commissioned nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) represents the PLA's nuclear deterrence capability. It is the main cause for the PLA to keep sending planes

to an area southwest of Taiwan virtually on a daily basis in recent months. That area owns an underwater environment suitable for submarine operations, one of few locations in the Taiwan Strait for such purposes.

### **Discussion on two oceans**

- Chinese have had similar discussions to the current Indo-Pacific discourse, the closest thing would probably be China's two-ocean strategy, or "Liangyang Chuhai" strategy. The earliest recorded discussion was in Hu Jintao's era when the CCP discussed how to secure its energy security from South East Asia. China needed to enhance its strategic control of essential facilities along the Indian Ocean in order to secure its sea line of communication.
- China is also expanding its sphere of influence over the Indian Ocean. Although superficially, China seems to deploy different tools in these two oceans, there are many commonalities rather than differences in terms of its strategic approach. China's two-ocean strategy could more likely be influenced by Julian Corbett's argument that a pure navalism will not secure ocean supremacy but advocates that a maritime strategy could be successful only with the support of joint operations from elements other than at sea. The domestic discussions of China's two-ocean strategy have emphasized the need of establishing a landline of communications to connect the Southwest part of China with the Ports of Gwadar, Hambantota, Chittagong and Kyaukpyu in order to circumvent the environmental challenge in the control of the choke point in South East Asia. China's two-ocean strategy to the Indian Ocean would also suggest the importance of synergy between land and sea.
- Countries like Pakistan, Myanmar and Cambodia are gaining importance in China's calculations. Today its focus on the Indian

Ocean is no longer about sea control but also more practically about how to exploit it. The mountainous region between India and China was traditionally considered as an obstacle for China's advancement to the south, but today its seafaring strategic capabilities provide it the means to overcome for exploiting the sea passage provided by the Indian Ocean.

## **About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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