Afghan Crisis
A Harbinger of Instability in South Asia

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In a historical turn of events and before the 31 August deadline set for a complete drawdown of American forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban rapidly captured one city after another and eventually seized Kabul and control over the whole of Afghanistan within a week. On 15 August 2021, Afghanistan’s elected government collapsed before the Taliban’s resurgence. The Afghan president and some ministers fled to neighboring Tajikistan, while other officials escaped to Pakistan.1

After two decades, the Taliban returned to power through brute force. Chaos and fear engulfed the city of Kabul and surrounding areas, with tens of thousands of people stuck and trying to escape harm’s way. The collapse of Afghanistan left the Afghan people in distress and servitude under the Taliban’s rule. The Afghanistan crisis threatens to embroil the entire region with chaos and mayhem. The question then arises: how will the Taliban’s return to power impact the rest of South Asia?

America’s Longest and Costliest War

Pres. Donald Trump set in motion the US exit from Afghanistan, and the deadline for America’s departure was set during the Doha Peace Agreement in February 2020. Pres. Joe Biden has cited this as his primary reason for adhering to the promise of the US withdrawal and following the peace agreement negotiated by his predecessor, while also ascribing doing so as being in the best interests of America’s domestic politics and national security. Additionally, over the past 20 years, this war has cost America a hefty $2 trillion dollars and the lives of 2,448 troops and personnel, with 20,722 wounded. Third, the threat of international terrorism is emanating less from Afghanistan than from North Africa and other parts of the world.2

Shockingly, the Taliban took the offensive in the first week of August 2021, capturing provincial capitals in short order. The Taliban hardly faced any resistance from Afghan security forces or from the Afghan tribes. The fall of Kabul was thus a foregone conclusion long before the predictions of the international community and intelligence agencies.
Perpetuate the Ideology of al-Qaeda

The meltdown of the Afghan civilian government could foreshadow severe implications for South Asia at large. The resurgence of the Taliban will reboot fanatic ideology and fundamentalism in the entire region and could propagate to Southeast Asia region as well. The Taliban could revive its links to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups in the area. The new regime will provide fresh air and breeding ground for radical elements and separatist groups in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Myanmar and may export its radical Deobandi influence among the regions’ Muslim populations. The Taliban has close relations with the fundamentalists of Pakistan—a relationship that would help the Taliban spread its religious ideologies in the region. The interconnectivity among regional ethnic groups and porous borders among South Asian countries would be favorable for infiltrating and spreading the Taliban’s fundamentalist ideology.

Over the past 20 years, the Afghanistan–Pakistan (Af–Pak) confluence has been among the most dangerous places globally and has proven to be a safe haven and incubator for terrorist groups in the area. The Global Peace Index rated Afghanistan the most unstable/dangerous country for the past four years. The return of Taliban rule and the organization’s support to militant groups in the Af–Pak region will put the South Asia region at greater risk and pave the path for increased violence and fear. The humanitarian crisis spurred by the organization’s return to power is another concern, as illustrated by the ongoing situation at the Kabul airport, which has been flooded with people wanting to flee the country and seeking safe passage to neighboring countries.

Taliban’s Demand for International Recognition: A Legitimacy Question?

In 2021, the Taliban is obviously making a concerted effort to appear much different from the Taliban of 2001. Based on media reports, Taliban leaders have been trying to pose as the architects of a peaceful transition of power and seeking legitimacy. The Taliban 2.0 aspires to the image of a legitimate political movement rather than a terrorist group. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the Taliban, has been working strategically and diplomatically for a political negotiation and settlement leading to international recognition of a new Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Taliban leaders urged the international community to recognize them and wished for peaceful relations with other countries. The Taliban also declared “amnesty” across Afghanistan and is currently allowing women to work in schools and hospitals. The group also stated that it would protect women's
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rights—under the framework of Islamic law. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated that Afghanistan’s territory will not be used as a staging ground for attacks “against anybody or any country.”

The reactions from Pakistan, China, and Iran have displayed a bit of certainty in making friendly relations with the new Taliban regime. In contrast, Russia’s decision will be based on the “conduct” of the Taliban. The European Union and United States emphasized the centrality of the basic rights and protection of the Afghan people in their future relations with Kabul.

Notably, it is very difficult to trust the Taliban when looking back on its past support to al-Qaeda and its abysmal record of human rights violations. Additionally, the manner in which the Taliban seized control at gunpoint does not illustrate any distinct change in the organization’s character. Significantly, the international community needs to monitor the activity and the pledges made by the Taliban leaders for the basic rights and security of the Afghan people. The Taliban must be made to “walk the talk” and not just “talk the talk” in terms of adhering to international norms and laws.

Conclusion

Now with the resurgence of the Taliban, the threat of terrorism is escalated, not only the nations of the region but for European countries and the United States as well. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley remarked, the situation provides an opportunity for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups to reconstitute in the failed state of Afghanistan. Now, it is time to constitute a greater counterterrorism force and intelligence-sharing body with allies and partners to face the potential threat of radical and fundamentalist ideology of the Taliban and its supporters, which will be the focus of a follow-on article from this author.

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Notes


