

# The Afghan Conundrum

## Taliban's Takeover and the Way Forward

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**K**abul Fell—the headlines of the week shocked many, for the greatest war machine in history failed to take note of the Taliban's decisive onslaught, and yet again, another experiment of democratic engineering bit the dust in Kabul. Some call it “Saigon 2.0,” while others attribute the Taliban's swift victory to the lack of resistance by Ashraf Ghani's government. To some, the situation is a deliberate attempt by the United States to leave instability to China and Russia, while others call it the “biggest intelligence failure” in American history. Whatever the reasons, the Taliban has taken over Kabul, and the world must embrace and deal with an insurgent group holding power in the “Heart of Asia.”

With the declaration of the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, regional countries are debating their way forward to either recognizing the Taliban-led government or not. For the United States, the situation is rather challenging, as aside from the tough questions over the rationality of the “Forever War” and poorly managed withdrawal strategy by the Biden administration, Washington confronts a harder choice about the Taliban as well as how to manage the evacuation of American citizens and allies from Kabul.

### **The Takeover: As it Happened!**

Days before Kabul fell, the US intelligence assessment suggested that the city could fall within 90 days, but to the surprise of many, it took less than ten.<sup>1</sup> The intelligence failure, collapse in the will to fight, rampant corruption in the government forces, and withdrawal of US close air support and logistics are among major reasons for the swift collapse of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and for the fall of Afghanistan.

Unlike the past, the transition in Kabul has remained smooth with little resistance from the ANSF, which relinquished control of the entire country to the Taliban in a matter of a few weeks. The Taliban took over Kabul on 15 August, after two decades, and the stalemate of the Forever War has finally ended, with the American forces controlling only parts of the Kabul airport to rescue Americans and their Afghan allies.

Pres. Ashraf Ghani fled the country, while the Taliban, in the aftermath of their takeover, ostensibly granted amnesty to all who fought against the group in the past two decades. Though, the group issued an assurance to protect women's rights, given the Taliban's notorious past in terms of the theory/practice gap, many rights activists are skeptical of any such assurance until a practical demonstration is observed. Besides assurances of protecting women's rights under Shariah Law and offering them to join the government, the Taliban, in their first press conference, presented a gentler version of its governance plans, pledging freedom of press and expressing resolve to prevent Afghan soil being used by the terrorists against any state.<sup>2</sup>

### **What Does Taliban's Victory Mean for Regional Powers?**

For strategic reasons, the Taliban's victory seems to have emboldened regional powers, including China and Russia. The Taliban's presence in Kabul serves the strategic interests of China and Russia. The Taliban has assured China of not allowing extremist elements to foment trouble in Xinjiang, while at the same time reaping the prospective benefit from the reconstruction of Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Russia is interested in a similar deal that would protect Central Asia from the spillover of instability and extremism from Afghanistan. For this reason, Beijing has announced China's intent to establish "friendly" relations with the Taliban government, while Russia, which considers Kabul to be safer under the Taliban and is experiencing an inevitable *schadenfreude* seeing its rival's defeat, considers the Taliban the *de facto* authority with "no alternative" and will possibly recognize the Taliban government.<sup>4</sup>

Pakistan has "welcomed" the assurances from the Taliban to denounce the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and prevent the latter from using Afghan territory against Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> However, critics suggest that the Taliban's takeover could allow hostile terrorist groups—including the TTP—to intensify their campaign and terrorism in Pakistan. Therefore, Islamabad needs to carefully manage the Taliban's government in Kabul. India, which has traditionally condemned the Taliban and supported Ghani's government, faces an uncertain policy dilemma of continuing support for the exiled Afghan leadership or engaging the Taliban to secure New Delhi's investments and influence in the country. To this end, New Delhi is "carefully following" developments in the wake of the Taliban's takeover; nevertheless, India's approach is guided by Kautilya's statecraft and should not rule out reaching out to the Taliban.<sup>6</sup> Given the seeming flexibility shown by the Taliban in terms of human rights and strategic assurances to regional countries, including the United States, this could work well in gaining broader recognition

and legitimacy for the Taliban regime than it enjoyed during its previous reign during the 1990s.

### **Saigon 2.0 or the Greatest Intelligence Failure for the United States: A Case for National Reckoning**

For the United States, its hasty withdrawal has raised questions over Washington's commitment toward allies in the region. For instance, Derek Grossman, a defense analyst at the Rand Corporation, argues that allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific will not fault the United States for its withdrawal as such a departure was eventually inevitable, but the fact of a hasty departure and prioritization of the American interests over those of the Afghan people is gaining the attention among American allies and foes.<sup>7</sup> When America's adversaries sense that Washington is abandoning its friends, they begin taking advantage of the situation. For instance, Beijing has already begun portraying the United States as too "weak and unreliable" of a power to protect Taiwan—a notion that Washington has swiftly rejected.

For now, the United States has indicated that it will not recognize the Taliban's government until a commitment to human rights is demonstrated—and for good reason. Washington has failed to achieve US objectives that would justify spending \$2.3 trillion over the course of 20 years, but perhaps hawks in Washington are finding this difficult to accept. For instance, John Allen, a retired US Marines general and president of the Brookings Institution, called on Pres. Joseph Biden to reverse his withdrawal plan and proposed a "concerted military response" against the Taliban.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Bill Kristol, a neoconservative writer, agreed with General Allen and questioned if it was too late to "salvage" Afghanistan, suggesting that a surge of forces in Afghanistan might work as it did in Iraq. Regrettably, it has not; the fact is that the US mission in Afghanistan quickly crept into uncertainty soon after the United States dismantled al-Qaeda and shifted into nation-building. The Afghan forces trained under such auspices lacked for nothing in terms of training, weapons, and logistics, but the United States was unable to instill in these forces the will to fight. However, the same hawks who orchestrated this mission creep continued to exaggerate the potency of the Afghan National Defense Forces (ANDF) to forestall a withdrawal and found hope in the despair of a costly stalemate. The resulting collapse of the nation built with trillions of US dollars and thousands of American lives is a spectacle for all to behold, with many lessons learned that need to be examined over the next several years.

Therefore, as Stephan Wertheim puts it in the *Washington Post*, “You don’t get to lose a war and expect the result to look like you’ve won it.”<sup>9</sup> Washington should accept the strategic defeat in Afghanistan, learn from its mistakes, and use US leverage to sustain desired political conditions in Kabul. Unlike what happened in the aftermath of Vietnam, Washington needs a national reckoning to identify flaws and improve the US approach toward fighting the global war on terrorism.

Now, achieving the stated objectives and a withdrawal should not mean abandoning Afghanistan and repeating the mistake of letting the country become a breeding ground for terrorism. The Northern Alliance leader has already requested Western countries—especially the United States—to help fight against the Taliban. However, playing on the internal fragmentation is favorable only for the terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Instead, recognizing the Taliban-led inclusive government and strengthening the national unity in Kabul could better achieve the desired outcomes for the United States. This is because diplomatic engagement can increase the cost for the Taliban to host extremist elements or violate human rights, which will better serve American interests.

### **Breaking the Stereotype and the Way Forward**

In addition to concerns regarding human rights, major challenges from the fall of Afghanistan include the conduct of an inclusive national dialogue that should set the course for a sustainable political settlement in Kabul. However, although this is undoubtedly an unpopular perspective in Washington, breaking prevailing stereotypes about the Taliban as brutal, nonnegotiable, and primitive is necessary for a productive engagement and the protection of human rights, especially for women. The Taliban are not a product of medieval times but rather of the worst decades of the late twentieth century, when a brutal civil war engulfed the country following the Soviet withdrawal and amid a growing decay of hope for social and political stability. Britain’s Chief of Defense Staff General Nick Carter even cautioned against using the word *enemy* for the Taliban and stated that the Taliban are “country boys” and they live by a “code of honor.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, as he suggested, there is a need to listen to them, allow them to “show their credentials,” while at the same time assessing their governance based on the ground realities.

The Taliban’s insurgency was limited to a fight against the US forces and regaining power; after achieving these objectives, its promises of rebuilding Afghanistan and fighting terrorism needs a concerted effort of cooperation to ward off the bigger challenges. To the outside world, the prospect of terrorism launched from Afghan soil is the biggest concern so far. The suicide bombing at the Hamid Karzai International Airport—conducted by the Islamic State of Iraq and the

Levant–Khorasan Province (ISIS–K) that killed at least 175 people, including 13 US Marines—highlights the threat presented by the terrorist group.<sup>11</sup> In addition to this attack on US forces, ISIS–K also presents a challenge to the Taliban in terms of the latter’s authority and security. This attack demonstrated the fact that Taliban’s control of Kabul and other large parts of Afghanistan is not secure. Thus, delivering on promises to prevent terrorist attacks launched from Afghan territory will prove challenging for the Taliban, which many fear will again become the epicenter of regional, and global, terrorism. Therefore, instead of continuing the futility of adversarial relations toward the Taliban, the United States, together with its allies and regional powers, should work with the Taliban to deal with the bigger challenges, including dismantling ISIS–K and al-Qaeda. Gen Frank McKenzie, USMC, commander of US Central Command, has claimed that the United States relied on the Taliban for airport security and shares a “common purpose” with the organization.<sup>12</sup> The American withdrawal has formally come to an end with the departure of the last C-17 Globemaster from Kabul airport on 30 August, and the next phase of post-withdrawal assessment should be a constructive engagement with the Taliban on political and security matters, in addition to security guarantees regarding human rights.

Successful American negotiations in Doha demonstrated the fact that a regional consensus among regional powers—including China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran and backed by the United States—can convince the Taliban to move toward an inclusive political system that will provide a sustainable political settlement for the competing forces in Afghanistan. The Taliban’s outreach to former warlords with sufficient political bases, including Abdullah Abdullah, Hamid Karzai, and Gulbadin Hekmatyar, demonstrates an effort in such a direction.<sup>13</sup> This is because even the Taliban realizes that without taking potential opposition forces into account, resistance to the Taliban’s government could grow in the near term and possibly fester into a bloody civil war. Most important is the need of the Taliban to seek international recognition, and this is where the United States should lead all the regional countries in cashing in on the opportunity to bargain for flexibility in governance, especially regarding human rights and counterterrorism, which every stakeholder shares as mutual concerns.

## **Conclusion**

The hastiness of the US withdrawal came as a surprise to many in the region, and for this reason, the post-withdrawal dynamics in and outside Afghanistan are becoming increasingly uncertain. Despite the differences in positions on the situation, what the regional and extraregional powers including the United States share is skepticism toward stability under the Taliban and the consequences of

such for human rights, especially those of women. Regional powers—including China, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia—have already indicated the desire to work with the Taliban-led government. The Taliban seems unprepared for “the day after,” which provides regional powers and the United States a great leverage that could be used to achieve maximum concessions in terms of human rights and counter-terrorism commitments. Setting aside coercive diplomacy and incentives, the emerging threat of ISIS–K should be compelling reason for the United States to continue a constructive engagement with the Taliban to facilitate the fight against mutual challenges. At this point, the Taliban needs recognition and legitimacy for its rule, and the United States, together with European and regional countries, can use diplomacy to ensure the Taliban delivers in terms of such issues and work with the group to fight against terrorism.

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### Notes

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