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## The Collapse of the Afghan Government: Implications for the Indo-Pacific

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On 15 August 2021, the Taliban seized Kabul, and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (the US-backed Afghan government) collapsed. The instant disintegration of a political system that the United States and its allies had supported so vigorously over the past two decades came as a shock to observers around the world.

This new development gives rise to many questions. It is unclear, for example, whether the Taliban will readopt its governance style from 20 years ago based on its own interpretation of sharia. Will Afghanistan become a safe haven for international terrorist

organizations once again? What courses of action will China, Russia, India, and other regional powers take?

All the above questions need to be answered, but the critical issue concerns the security challenges facing the Persian Gulf and surrounding region following the Afghan government's collapse. In what follows, I place the Taliban's return to power within the framework of the Indo-Pacific and examine the transformation in the regional balance of power.

### The Fundamental Question of Legitimacy

There is no doubt that the Taliban's sophisticated military strategy and the Afghan National Security Force's weaknesses were the major factors behind the former's military takeover of Kabul. The fact that (now former) Pres. Ashraf Ghani fled the country when Kabul was under siege will no doubt go down in history as a disgrace. Decisions made by two successive US administrations regarding the withdrawal of troops were also critical factors in explaining the collapse of the US-backed government. However, to understand the root causes of Afghanistan's current political crisis, it is necessary to go back to the 1990s.

The early 1990s was a dark period

when various mujahideen (freedom fighters) factions were engaged in a power struggle. At that time, warlords took money from citizens on the street in the form of tolls, and assaults and looting were rampant in the city.<sup>1</sup> The Taliban of this era had the appearance of a political movement. The organization was a combination of mujahideen fighters and students who had studied at madrassas. This coalition began to work under the banner of saving the country from civil war and corruption, and in 1996, they declared the establishment of an Islamic state. Yet after the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001, the core of the new US-backed Afghan government was composed of former warlords and the technocratic diaspora.

The formation of this new Afghan government, which would last until the Taliban's return to power earlier this year, was not truly endogenous. Rather, it was largely the creation of outside forces. Even the process of electing the head of the interim government in June 2002 was heavily influenced by external pressures: it was on the recommendation of the US and Pakistani intelligence agencies that Hamid Karzai was given the nod.<sup>2</sup> Later, Karzai's and Ghani's tendencies to govern via tribal patronage networks led to widespread

corruption in the country.

Above all, it would be difficult to conclude that nation building in Afghanistan—supported by the United States, NATO, Japan, India, and other allies—has been successful. Rather, there is a sense of helplessness among those involved in this process. The United States has spent USD 2 trillion in Afghanistan since 2001, Japan has spent USD 6.8 billion, while India has spent more than USD 3 billion. Now, all these investments have come to naught.

## **Security Challenges Facing the Persian Gulf and Beyond**

The fall of Kabul poses a threefold security challenge for the countries of the Persian Gulf. First, there is a serious risk of a humanitarian crisis unfolding under the Taliban. Its interim cabinet, announced on 7 September, includes 17 individuals who are on the UN Security Council's sanction list, two of whom are on the FBI's most wanted list. It is highly unlikely that the organization will be able to establish an inclusive government in the future, and democracies will be inhibited from recognizing its interim cabinet as a legitimate government for the foreseeable future. The problem here is that nonrecognition means an asset freeze, which will deplete

Afghanistan's treasury for as long as it lasts. On 18 August, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said that Afghanistan would not be able to access IMF resources, including a new allocation of Special Drawing Rights reserves, due to the lack of clarity over the recognition of its government.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the World Bank announced that it was halting financial support to Afghanistan amid worries about the fate of women under Taliban rule.<sup>4</sup> The UN Development Programme has estimated that as much as 97 percent of the population is at risk of sinking below the poverty line by mid-2022 unless a response to the country's political and economic crises is launched without delay.<sup>5</sup> Failure to act would mean a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, one consequence of which would be that countries around the Persian Gulf would see massive inflows of displaced people, illicit drugs, and arms.

Second, whether the Taliban poses a threat to neighboring countries should be assessed carefully. Its fighters managed to capture a large number of state-of-the-art US-made weapons during the course of its takeover; if it gains airpower, that could be a game changer. For now, it is too early to speculate about the threat of Taliban attacks on other countries. As

mentioned above, the organization's main objective was to restore Islamic governance in Afghanistan; thus, it is unlikely that the Taliban poses a threat to neighboring countries—or at least, there would be no justification for such attacks. However, considering that the situation in Afghanistan is volatile, staying alert is advisable.

Third, the heightened threat of terrorism caused by the Taliban's return to power will likely necessitate future counterterrorism operations from outside powers. More than 20 foreign terrorist organizations are operating in the country, including al-Qaeda (AQ), the Islamic State—Khorasan Province (ISKP), and Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. It is particularly notable that many analysts believe that the Taliban has not cut ties with AQ. While it is true that the activities of international terrorist organizations have slowed down in recent years, it would be imprudent to take the increased threat lightly. In the future, the United States may even consider collaborating with the Taliban to counter the ISKP, especially if Washington judges that over-the-horizon airstrikes need a local partner.<sup>6</sup>

## **Transformation in Regional Balance of Power**

Afghanistan has regularly been

subject to the interference of great powers. In the nineteenth century, it was forced to play the role of a buffer state between the Russian Empire and British India; in the latter half of the twentieth century, in the context of the Cold War, it became the stage for a proxy war between the United States and Soviet Union; and in the twenty-first century, it became the front line of the US-led “global war on terror.” Because of its geo-strategic location, Afghanistan is a fault line of world order.

Now that the Taliban has achieved a military victory, it is certain that outside powers—perhaps including China and Russia—will attempt to fill the “power vacuum” created by the US exit. Indeed, both China and Russia have been establishing channels of communication with the Taliban for some time now. In addition, regional powers such as Pakistan, Iran, Qatar, and Turkey are vying to hold the casting vote over the future of Afghanistan. In particular, Qatar, as a host of peace talks, is thought to hold some leverage over the Taliban and is expected to play a crucial role in bridging the communication gap between the new government and foreign countries.

Viewed in a wider Indo-Pacific frame, how India (an existing regional power) and Japan (which

has not been involved militarily) plan to deal the Taliban may be important in shaping the new government’s actions. After all, the political future of Afghanistan will be important not only regarding the lives of its inhabitants but also as a test of the universal values contained within the supposedly “rules-based” regional order. The Taliban’s disregard for basic human rights cannot be tolerated within this framework and must be challenged if the framework is not to be exposed as toothless. At the same time, however, G7 countries and their regional partners have no choice but to continue engaging with the Taliban, perhaps using diplomatic recognition and humanitarian aid as bargaining chips. Alas, it seems unlikely that the most complicated and fundamental issues surrounding Afghanistan’s future will be resolved any time soon. ■

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> "IMF Suspends Afghanistan's Access to Fund Resources Over Lack of Clarity on Government," *Reuters*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Egan, "World Bank Halts Financial Support to

Afghanistan, Says It's 'Deeply Concerned' for Women," *CNN*, 24 August 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "97 Percent of Afghans Could Plunge into Poverty by Mid 2022, Says UNDP," 9 September 2021, <https://www.undp.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that the United States may coordinate with the Taliban on counterterrorism strikes in Afghanistan. See Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, "Milley: US Coordination with Taliban on Strikes 'possible'," *Associated Press*, 1 September 2021, <https://apnews.com/>.