

The Fall of Afghanistan

The Fault Lines and the Future

VASU SHARMA

The events that unfolded on 15 August in Afghanistan are an indicator of the fragile nature of the security environment in the landlocked country. The fall of Kabul and the subsequent transfer of power to the Taliban were a reminder of how unpredictability and uncertainty are the central characteristic of the Afghan quagmire. Amid the takeover of Kabul, it becomes necessary to investigate where the fault lines lie and what the future and outcome of the National Resistance Front (NRF) and Taliban negotiations might be.

While the majority of criticism is focused on the United States' hasty withdrawal, there were further complexities that allowed for the Taliban takeover the presidential palace in Kabul. First among these is Beijing's acceptance that the Taliban will ensure China's safety from groups like the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement. Second, the diplomatic efforts and negotiations rendered no concrete outcome or mediation between the Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban. Third, the possibility of lowered morale of Afghan forces or certain back-channel understandings between the Taliban and commanders of Afghan security forces that in turn culminated in zero resistance or fight against the Taliban in several instances. Fourth, Uzbekistan's refusal to allow Afghan troops or refugees from crossing its 144-kilometer border with Afghanistan. Fifth, while there were instances of coordinated efforts between local militias and Afghan national forces, such coordinated efforts lacked the ability to completely resist the Taliban.

For Afghanistan, this takeover is dramatic, since the 20-year presence of US troops ends with the re-emergence of Taliban as the most powerful force in the country. While the Panjshir Valley has emerged as a bastion of resistance, three individuals who were expected to resist the Taliban failed to offer the expected results. Many believed the "Lion of Herat," Mohammad Ismail Khan, would keep the Taliban from seizing the country's third-largest city, Herat. However, the Taliban captured him on 13 August, and the city fell after two weeks of fighting.¹

Abdul Rashid Dostum, the former first vice president of Afghanistan and a marshal in the Afghan National Army (ANA), is one of the oldest and most notorious US allies in the war against the Taliban. He met former President Ghani in Mazar-e-Sharif just few days prior to the fall of the city.² However, his local militia were expected to resist and restrain the Taliban along with ANA forces.

However, Mazar-e-Sharif fell as another domino before the Taliban insurgents, who were seen entering Dostum's palace.³

General Atta Mohammad Noor, former governor of Balkh province, was also a prominent anti-Taliban figure. In an interview shortly before the fall of Mazar-e-Sharif, Noor mentioned that his mobilizations were in support of Afghan national forces and assured that "the captured districts will soon be re-taken."⁴ After the fall of Mazar-e-Sharif on 14 August, via Twitter, Noor indicated that he and Dostum were nearly trapped by the Taliban but were successful in escaping.⁵ As of now, the status of these two fiercest enemies of the Taliban remains unknown, but there have been reports that indicate the two are forming a group to negotiate or talk with the Taliban.⁶

Amid the August offensive of Taliban and the fall of Kabul, the Panjshir Valley is the epicenter of the would-be anti-Taliban resistance. The National Resistance Front, led by Ahmad Massoud—son of the renowned Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud—is believed to have gathered several commanders, officers, and pilots from security forces of the erstwhile Afghan government. The NRF also includes former Vice President Amrullah Saleh, former Defence Minister General Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, and Ali Maisam Nazary, the current spokesperson and head of foreign relations of the NRF.⁷

However, reports indicating the NRF is conducting talks with the Taliban further creates complexities and uncertainty regarding the country's future. On 25 August, a 12-member NRF delegation led by Almas Zahid met with a seven-member Taliban delegation led by Mohammad Mohsini Hashimi in Charikar, Parwan province. While the conclusion and outcome of these talks is unclear, as of now both the sides have proven their ability to discuss, despite the NRF wanting to discuss the structure of the future government and the Taliban planning to discuss the issue of Panjshir and its resistance.

From these developments, four major questions arise. First, does the NRF have the political leverage to negotiate with Taliban without the support of regional or extra-regional stakeholders? Second, in such a scenario, which country would support the NRF in the face of possible threat perception from the re-emergent Taliban? Third, would the NRF be able to hold the Panjshir Valley against Taliban, while the latter has already established diplomatic ties with neighboring countries? Fourth, while the future of Afghanistan remains uncertain, might a new stakeholder arrive, or could a past stakeholder re-emerge?

While it becomes necessary to monitor the trajectory of the rounds of discussions between the NRF and Taliban with the withdrawal of the United States, Afghanistan once again seems to be slipping back into uncertainty. With each

passing week, a new layer of complexity seems to unfold in the Afghan quagmire, and the newest crater of its uncertain future is being dug deeply.

Vasu Sharma

Vasu Sharma is a second-year postgraduate research scholar in the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India. His areas of research interest lie in the regional security environment of South Asia with foci on Afghanistan, India's foreign policy and orientations, and nuclear deterrence in Southern Asia.

Notes

1. Raju Gopalkrishnan, "Afghan commander Ismail Khan captured as Taliban seize Herat," *Reuters*, 13 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.
2. "Abdul Rashid Dostum meets Ashraf Ghani; who is the former warlord, why is he talking to Afghan president?," *First Post*, 12 August 2021, <https://www-firstpost-com.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.firstpost.com/>.
3. Alia Shoaib "Videos show Taliban fighters capture the opulent palace of a US-allied warlord, ransacking property and drinking from gold tea set," *Business Insider*, 15 August 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.in/>.
4. "'National Mobilisation Will Push Back Taliban': Gen Ata Mohammad Noor," *Voice of the Nation Organiser*, 9 August 2021, <https://www.organiser.org/>.
5. Kabul Bureau, "Afghan militia leaders Atta Noor, Dostum escape 'conspiracy'," *Reuters*, 15 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.
6. Devjyot Ghoshal, "Veteran Afghan strongmen to form new front for negotiating with Taliban," *Reuters*, 29 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.
7. Campbell MacDiarmid "What chance does the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan have against the Taliban?" *The Telegraph*, 24 August 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/>.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.