

Reimagining Afghanistan

Geostrategic Engagement with Major Powers

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Abstract

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan can be considered one of the most significant events of 2021 whose ramifications will be felt in the years to come. The retreat of the US military has left a power vacuum in Afghanistan, causing a shift in regional geopolitics. In this scenario, Afghanistan as the geopolitical hotspot is now set for new great game politics, which has implications for the regional security.

In the light of this shift, this article analyzes the unfolding great-power competition in Afghanistan after the exit of the US military and its implications for the security of Afghanistan and beyond. The article also discusses the factors shaping the future relations of Taliban-led Afghanistan with the regional powers.

Being landlocked and poor in resources, Afghanistan is again at the juncture of an uncertain future. Its future is heavily dependent on how its neighbors reset their ties with it. Constructive engagement with its neighbors is imperative for rebuilding the country. The impending financial and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan can be prevented if the countries in the region develop mechanisms to help Afghanistan to overcome its socio-economic deficits. The foreign policies of the neighboring countries will affect the prospects of progress for Afghanistan. The withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan has brought the great power politics back in the region which has historically been called 'the graveyard of empires' and once served as the buffer states between the British and the Czarist empires.

Russian Policy toward Taliban-led Afghanistan

For Russia, fall of Kabul is an indication of decline of the American hegemony. The failed state of Afghanistan also indicates the crisis of American identity and the growing incoherence in the foreign policies of the Western democracies. Moscow thus sees this upheaval in its neighborhood as symbolic of new world order, which is multipolar in nature.

The decline of US hegemony can be attributed to its coming under pressure from assertive China in the Indo-Pacific. The resulting power vacuum has given an opportunity to the regional powers to shape the geopolitics of the Eurasian heartland.

For Russia, the policy toward Afghanistan is guided by several factors, the most important being the current instability in Afghanistan having spillover effects to the Central Asian states. Another factor is the nontraditional security threat arising from drug trafficking since opium cultivation is the chief source of funding for the terrorist groups of the region. Russia's policy toward Afghanistan is also guided by its much-desired role as net security provider in the Eurasian region. However, Russia has been in a conundrum over its objective of exerting influence in Afghanistan without getting itself involved with the domestic crisis of Afghanistan.

The threats emanating from the presence of transnational terrorist groups is a major issue of concern for Russia as it has been a victim of extremist activities in recent times and thus perceives these groups as significant threats to regional security. At the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), experts Sabine Fischer and Angela Stanzel say Russia and China are benefiting most "on the global level" from "the weakening that the West has been experiencing" since its withdrawal from Afghanistan. But they argue that neither Moscow nor Beijing have found solutions for serious regional security challenges they are

now confronted with. “From the Chinese and Russian perspectives, the withdrawal from Afghanistan is further evidence of the progressive weakening of the Western alliance.”¹

Recently, Russia called for the West to unfreeze assets from the Afghan central bank frozen by the US and the World Bank after the Taliban returned to power. However, in his statement, the Russian president cautioned that “there should be no hurry” to officially recognize the Taliban’s governance of Afghanistan.² Russia has still not removed the Taliban from its list of banned terrorist organizations. In the current scenario, the topmost priority for Russia is to fill the security void after the US withdrawal. Russia is keen to play the role of a mediator on issues related to Afghanistan and beyond. The new regional security concerns after the comeback of the Taliban have given Russia a strategic advantage to rebuild its influence in the Eurasian heartland.

Understanding China’s Strategic Engagement with Afghanistan

Afghanistan is critical for Chinese strategic interests for two reasons. The ethnic minorities of Xinjiang share ties with the ethnic groups of the neighboring regions sharing boundaries with China. China is particularly apprehensive about its Uighur minority teaming up with the Taliban. The second cause of worry for China is economic in nature, as instability in the region will adversely affect its massive project of China Pakistan Economic Corridor, a major component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has been actively engaging Pakistan to cover this part.

Pakistan, an “all-weather friend” of China, has a strong strategic advantage in Taliban-run Afghanistan. China and Pakistan have developed an axis of convenience to leverage the benefits from this arrangement. China and Russia also share a strategic alignment on the issues related to Afghanistan for a win-win situation for both sides.

At the latest summit at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization held in September 2021, China and Russia took coordinated stand where Afghanistan was on the top of the agenda.³ At the United Nations, Russia and China blocked a US resolution that proposed case-by-case exemptions to sanctions on Taliban.

Although both nations are skeptical of the current Taliban regime, the American military exit from Afghanistan is a reason for them to rejoice at this strategic victory. In the event of either of the two recognizing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the other will follow the suit.

China is also eyeing the mineral resources in Afghanistan and already scouting opportunities in Afghanistan to access the country’s lithium and copper deposits.⁴

As per recent developments, it can be said that China has decided to endorse the Afghan militant group's interim government by announcing an aid package of \$31 million US in September 2021 at a meeting of foreign ministers of neighboring countries of Afghanistan.⁵ In exchange, China wants the Taliban to not support the dissenting Uighur minority of the Xinjiang region.

In one of its statements, the Taliban regime termed China its “most important partner” and that it looks to Beijing to rebuild and develop Afghanistan and exploit its rich copper deposits as the country is on the verge of economic collapse. Supporting China's BRI project, the Taliban spokesperson claimed China to be its pass to the markets all over the world. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's address to the 2021 G20 foreign ministers' meeting called for the lifting of unilateral sanctions against Afghanistan.⁶

The leadership in Beijing is eager to establish its strategic foothold in the Taliban-led Afghanistan. Leading international negotiations over Afghanistan and hosting the Taliban leaders in Beijing suggest that China wants to play a proactive role diplomatically and politically in a post-American Afghanistan.

Assessment of American Post-Withdrawal Policy

An assessment of the American policy after its exit from Afghanistan indicates that the US policies are changing in response to the changing security dynamics of the region and at the global level. The core interests of the US now lie in containing China in the Indo-Pacific.

In his address to American citizens following the exit from Afghanistan, Pres. Joe Biden acknowledged the shift from Afghanistan to the Indo-Pacific and said that the “terror threat has metastasized across the world, well beyond Afghanistan.”⁷ US involvement with Afghanistan will be based on regional diplomacy, international influence, and humanitarian aid. He emphasized pushing for engagement with Afghanistan to prevent violence and instability.

Human rights are at the new center of US foreign policy. The US recently issued authorizations to ensure that the United Nations, the American government agencies, and aid groups can provide humanitarian relief to Afghanistan.⁸

The UN Security Council recently adopted a resolution proposed by the US facilitating humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, while keeping funds out of the Taliban hands. The US also announced additional steps for easing sanctions against the Taliban to allow aid, updating guidance to make clear that exports of goods and cash transfers are allowed if they do not go to individuals targeted by US sanctions.

After the withdrawal of the US Army, another significant development has been the creation of a western Quad, which includes the US, Israel, India, and the

United Arab Emirates.⁹ This group had its first meeting in October 2021 in which the foreign ministers of these countries met and formed a joint working group. Creation of this group is politically aimed at countering this deepening of the Sino-Russian alliance in the Eurasian region. The US is thus trying to adjust its strategy and policies, suggesting that it is looking for partners to respond to the changing strategic environment of the region after its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Taliban 2.0 and Neighborhood Response: Pakistan and India

The foreign policies of the neighboring countries of Afghanistan with respect to the post-American Afghanistan are also changing with the changing geopolitics of the region.

The comeback of Taliban in Afghanistan is a significant strategic victory for Pakistan. In the last two decades, Pakistan did not have friendly relations with the government in Afghanistan, and now the Taliban-led Afghanistan provides Islamabad a strategic leverage. Before the arrival of the US military in Afghanistan, the Pakistani regime supported the Taliban, and Pakistan was one of the very few states to recognize the Taliban government. During the last two decades, Pakistan has provided safe haven to Taliban leaders. Pakistan has been crucial in providing aid and assistance to the Taliban leaders, and now Pakistan will have the strategic leverage, especially regarding India.

Pakistan thus definitely wants to reset its ties with Afghanistan. Pakistan has been at the forefront of supporting the Taliban on international platforms. In his prerecorded message to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021, the Pakistani Prime Minister appealed to the international community to support the Taliban “for the sake of the people of Afghanistan” and “incentivize the Taliban to respect human rights and to form inclusive government.” In a recent summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held in December 2021, Pakistan reiterated this stand and urged for unfreezing of the frozen assets.¹⁰ However, none of the OIC members have recognized the Taliban-led Afghanistan.

As far as India is concerned, the policy makers are in a fix over how to approach the evolving geopolitics of Taliban-led Afghanistan. Lack of coherent policy regarding Afghanistan has left India sidelined. The wait and watch policy of India toward the Taliban 2.0 did no good to its strategic interests. The investment by the Indian government in regional connectivity projects like the Zaranj–Delaram highway project in Afghanistan is at stake. Amending its earlier policy, India is making its presence felt in Afghanistan. India has recently sent its first consignment of humanitarian aid for the Afghan people.¹¹

India hosted the senior national security officials from the neighboring states of Afghanistan to discuss the evolving situation of Afghanistan.¹² The participating countries, which included Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Iran, adopted the “Delhi Declaration.” The main issues of concern were terrorism and the prospects of the Afghan geography becoming a hub for extremism, drug trafficking, terror financing, and so on.

At the third India–Central Asia dialogue held in New Delhi last month, India called for providing immediate humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan and asserted that Afghan territory must not be used for sheltering, training, planning, or financing terrorist activities.¹³ The dialogue had in attendance the foreign ministers of all the five Central Asian states. The participating countries voiced their support for a peaceful, secure, and stable Afghanistan while underlining the need for respecting the sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of the war-torn country. The countries agreed to continue the dialogue process for the situation of Afghanistan. Affirming their consensus on the issues related to Afghanistan, the countries called out for the formation of a truly representative and inclusive government in Afghanistan.

However, Indian interests in Afghanistan must be viewed through the prism of security threats from Pakistan and China. The strategic advantage that India had with the previous government of Afghanistan is gone with the takeover by the Taliban. For a stable and better relationship with Afghanistan, India needs to constructively engage with the Taliban through humanitarian aid and assistance. The soft power in term of its goodwill among the Afghans is crucial to counter the increasing influence of China and Pakistan in the region.

Conclusion

The regional ambitions of the major powers and US-China geopolitical competition will be crucial in shaping the engagement of regional powers with Taliban-led Afghanistan. The challenges that Afghanistan face cannot be resolved through unilateral deals; rather, a holistic and coordinated approach is required from the international community. The regional powers must carefully devise their foreign policy regarding Afghanistan, as an unstable Afghanistan can have catastrophic ripple effects for the region. The time has come for the major powers to give precedence to regional peace and stability over ideological differences and opportunistic policies so as not to become engulfed by the escalation of the crisis in Afghanistan. ☀

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Notes

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