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Afghanistan at Crossroads

AMB. SUJAN R. CHINOY

Introduction

Five months after the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan stands at a new inflection point. A new year has dawned without the fundamental situation in Afghanistan exhibiting any signs of change. The so-called interim government of the Taliban is in control of a nation of about 40 million Afghans that it does not truly represent except through the use of force. The new dispensation disregards the minorities, women and the democratic forces. The members of the Taliban cabinet are anything but moderate; several are known offenders of human rights with bounties on their heads put out by the United States (US) Government.¹ The irony is that the US, while seeking to mainstream the Taliban following its departure has not revoked the bounties and, in fact, now uses sanctions to pressurise the regime. The Russians, despite their long-standing contacts with the Taliban, still list the Taliban as a terrorist organisation.²

Developments in Afghanistan have a broader ramification for the region and beyond. The international community that was rooting for an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led system is still clamouring for an inclusive government in Kabul.³

Afghanistan stands at a new inflection point. While the Taliban has little desire or inclination to seek a negotiated settlement with opponents or to put in place an inclusive and representative government, the majority of Afghans, about 64 per cent, are under 25 years of age, who have got accustomed to a certain way of life and are unlikely to accept retrograde steps. The new dispensation disregards the minorities, women and the democratic forces. The biggest challenge for the Taliban today is to transform itself from an insurgency into a political group that is willing to settle internal and external differences peacefully through dialogue. The Afghan economy is in complete shambles and without external support it is difficult for the regime to manage. The developments in Afghanistan have a broader ramification for the region and beyond. Given its linkages with terrorist groups, the apprehension that it could emerge as an epicentre of terrorism remains. In the quest for a peaceful, stable and secure Afghanistan, the role of regional powers remains paramount.

1 “The U.S. branded the Haqqanis terrorists and issued \$5 million bounties. Now they’re in power in the Taliban government”, The Washington Post, September 11, 2021 at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/haqqanis-afghanistan-taliban/2021/09/10/71f82620-123b-11ec-baca-86b144fc8a2d_story.html

2 “Russia Lauds Taliban Efforts to Stabilise Afghanistan, Warns on Terrorism”, The Moscow Times, October 20, 2021 at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/20/russia-lauds-taliban-efforts-to-stabilise-afghanistan-warns-on-terrorism-a75353>

3 “The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security”, UNSC, September 2, 2021 at https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2021_759.pdf

The return of the Taliban has been widely viewed as a defeat of the United States and failure of the 20-year-long international effort to bring democracy and peace to Afghanistan. Taliban have claimed victory. Yet, there is no gainsaying the fact that the US and its allies have shed much blood and treasure over the past two decades. Not all of that was in vain. In the intervening two decades, the situation concerning women, the girl child and the minorities saw major improvement. Education was made accessible to girls in a conservative society in which the alternative condemned them to early matrimony and a life spent behind veils raising large families, with no gender equality to speak of.⁴

Taliban 2.0?

The Taliban takeover was through a sustained insurgency and does not represent a political settlement. The triumphalism that has accompanied the takeover flows from a conviction that the faith-based ideology of the movement stands vindicated. After all, the Taliban has seen off the world's mightiest military power, just as Afghans once did to the British and the Soviets. The Taliban have once again declared Afghanistan to be an "Islamic Emirate" just as they had done in 1996.⁵ Casting away the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan that existed between 2004 and 2020 demonstrates that the Taliban has little desire or inclination to seek a negotiated settlement with opponents or to

put in place an inclusive and representative government.

Within the Taliban there are, no doubt, factions that measure up differently on a scale of ideological purity, propensity for violence and willingness to accommodate the minorities or meet the expectations of the international community.

The Taliban today lacks strong centralised leadership as under Mullah Omar. The succession since his death has brought in a leadership that can only enforce its writ through the use of force. The tenuous character of factional power struggles within the Taliban, as between relatively accommodative Kandhari Taliban like Mullah Baradar and the vicious Haqqani clan, is increasingly apparent.⁶

There is a degree of uncertainty surrounding the Taliban's identity and character. The biggest challenge for the Taliban today is to transform itself from an insurgency into a political group that is willing to settle internal and external differences peacefully through dialogue. If the Taliban remain violent and intolerant, they will continue to invite the ire of the international community; if they were to emerge benign, they run the risk of condemnation by more radical factions and groups like the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), which allege that the Taliban have gone soft, are revisionist, and have reneged on the core beliefs that helped propel them to power.

4 UNDP (2020), "The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene", <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/AFG.pdf>

5 "Hardliners get key posts in new Taliban government", BBC, September 7, 2021 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58479750>

6 "Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say", BBC, September 15, 2021 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58560923>

The majority of Afghans, about 64 per cent, are under 25 years of age.⁷ They barely remember the earlier Taliban regime that ruled from 1996 to 2001. They only know a world shaped after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001. Twenty years is a long time, and the people of Afghanistan, especially in urban areas, have got accustomed to a certain way of life. Retrograde changes imposed by the Taliban will not be accepted meekly, as seen in the number of popular protests around the country, including by women's rights groups.

Failure of the Taliban to factor in the realities and lessons of history would tantamount to a huge mistake. Draconian crackdowns on dissenting civilians can, over time, when combined with appalling economic conditions, potentially snowball into a wider, popular revolt. Under such circumstances, even a civil war cannot be ruled out in the longer run.

The Taliban will have to make adjustments and accept the new realities. Failure to do so would imperil Taliban rule and deny them the full legitimacy they seek in the international community.

A Militarised Taliban?

The apprehension about the arms and equipment that fell into the Taliban hands is perhaps ill-founded. Last August, departing US forces removed or destroyed all major arms systems and equipment as per standard protocol. Yet, they left behind a great deal for the Taliban to salvage. In fact, in the final week of the withdrawal, it

was not uncommon to see Taliban guards at the Kabul airport outfitted in scavenged foreign gear, complete with M-16 rifles, helmet-mounted cameras and military-issue sunglasses to boot.

The Afghan Air Force was reckoned to have a nascent capability comprising a few A-29 light attack aircraft and a helicopter fleet that included Black Hawks and MI choppers. Apart from this, the cache included an assortment of Humvees, high-explosive rockets and different types of launchers and ammunition.⁸ This was an arsenal that might have added to the Taliban's firepower in dominating adversaries in insurgency operations or vanquishing them in a civil war, but is not enough to pose a threat to any neighbouring country. The Taliban lack fighter aircraft, tanks and artillery and are in no position to assault a trained military outside its borders.

Taliban Victory Inspiring Others

The return of the Taliban sparked off rejoicing among radical groups in Pakistan, Central Asia, China, Russia as also in Gaza, Syria and West Africa. An air of triumphalism permeated Jihadist groups everywhere, particularly those linked to al-Qaeda. They viewed the Taliban's return as a victory for Islamism and Jihadism, reviving hopes for the restoration of the Shariah.

The vacuum created by the departure of US and allied forces from Afghanistan will undoubtedly encourage radical groups,

7 "Young People", UNFPA, <https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/en/node/15227>

8 "Special Report: Pilots detail chaotic collapse of the Afghan Air Force", Reuters, December 29, 2021 at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/pilots-detail-chaotic-collapse-afghan-air-force-2021-12-29/>

militants and terrorists to seek a revival of safe havens in that country. Pakistan could well use its close nexus with the Haqqani Network and the IS-K to build new hideouts and training camps for India-centric terrorist groups in Afghanistan. This will enable it to deny the existence of terrorist camps on its soil.

After the departure of Soviet troops and the collapse of the Najibullah Government, followed by the outbreak of civil war in the early 1990s, Al-Qaeda had planted itself on to Afghan territory. Led by Osama bin Laden, it had a global agenda; it used Afghan territory to spread its tentacles for nefarious ends, culminating in the horrendous multiple attacks on the mainland of the US in September 2001.

Today, the IS-K too has a wider transnational agenda, albeit limited to the region. The Taliban, on the other hand, are not known to covet territory beyond Afghanistan, with the exception of historical irredentism eastwards. No regime in Afghanistan, not even the Taliban, has ever recognised the Durand Line that artificially divides the Pashtuns.

Economic Crisis

The Afghan economy is in complete shambles. The foreign grants, which accounted for 75 per cent of public

expenditure, have evaporated; almost 70 per cent of the budget of US\$ 6 billion in 2020 was for salaries; the yawning gaps have directly translated into queues before banks as the Afghani currency depreciated, inflation sky-rocketed and shelves emptied.⁹ Matters were worsened with the US freezing the Afghan Central Bank assets, amounting to US\$ 9.5 billion.¹⁰ In December 2021, the Taliban regime was obliged to work on an annual budget without the luxury of foreign grants.

The GDP of Afghanistan was 19.81 billion in 2020, growing at 2.7 per cent or so per annum.¹¹ According to the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) calculations, Afghanistan accounts for 85 per cent of the global opium supply. In July last year, at the end of the harvesting season, Afghanistan produced 6,800 tonnes of opium, registering an increase of 8 per cent over the figure for 2020. The opium business in Afghanistan in 2021 was worth between \$1.8 billion and \$2.7 billion.¹² With economic problems mounting and security lax, farmers in Afghanistan can be expected to increasingly turn to the cash crop of opium. Drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan is expected to emerge as a growing challenge for all neighbouring countries, including India.

9 “‘Brink of Collapse’: How Frozen Assets & Halted Foreign Aid Are Impacting the Afghan People”, Frontline, October 12, 2021 at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/taliban-takeover-how-frozen-assets-foreign-aid-impacts-afghanistan/>

10 “US freezes nearly \$9.5 billion Afghanistan central bank assets: Report”, Business Standard, August 19, 2021 at https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-freezes-nearly-9-5-billion-afghanistan-central-bank-assets-report-121081900034_1.html

11 “Indicators of economy in Afghanistan”, World Data, <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/afghanistan/economy.php>

12 “Drug Situation in Afghanistan 2021: Latest Findings and Emerging Threats”, UNODC, November 2021, at https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_brief_Nov_2021.pdf

The Taliban had once banned opium cultivation in 2000¹³, ostensibly acting out of puritanical zeal. In reality, it had used the illicit trade to finance its operations throughout the insurgency years. The Taliban's assurance that the ban will be reinstated is questionable. A large part of the rural population depends on opium cultivation for its livelihood. Areas under the sway of the ISIS-K, such as Nangarhar and Kunar¹⁴, are likely to turn even more readily to illicit opium cultivation and drugs production.

The most urgent task before the global community continues to be the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people in an open and transparent manner. The critical situation in terms of food, medicines and other daily necessities has been exacerbated by the harshness of the winter months. Since December 2020, some UN and other aid workers have begun to return to Afghanistan; their presence will permit not just the monitoring of the distribution of food aid and other assistance, but may also help to check the excesses committed by zealots and criminals on vulnerable sections of society.

Since the Taliban took over, Afghanistan has witnessed the rise in Daesh attacks, especially along sectarian lines. Internal violence in Afghanistan has exacerbated the economic hardships faced by the

people of Afghanistan.

The Taliban have given assurances of security for countries that wish to reopen their diplomatic missions in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Even so, not a single country has, as yet, officially recognised the Taliban regime, not even from among those which actively sought, and celebrated the American departure from Afghanistan. However, countries like China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan currently maintain their diplomatic presence in Kabul¹⁶, including at the level of Ambassadors. With the Taliban regime engaging these missions and according them diplomatic courtesies, and these embassies likewise reciprocating in day-to-day interaction, it amounts to de facto recognition of the Taliban regime by a clutch of countries with regional stakes.

United States

The US retreated from Afghanistan under the military pressure of an insurgency, and did so without achieving the full spectrum of the aims and objectives that drove it to intervene. Currently, the US has no appetite for Afghanistan; the withdrawal had bipartisan support since President Joe Biden was committed to fulfilling a promise made by his predecessor. There is no palpable incentive for the US to return to Afghanistan unless the homeland is

13 "Afghanistan: Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2001", UNODC, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/publications/report_2001-10-16_1.pdf

14 "Afghanistan: Who are Islamic State Khorasan Province militants?", BBC, October 11, 2021 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58333533>

15 "Taliban assures safety for envoys, embassies", The Hindu, January 2, 2022 at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-wants-oversight-over-food-aid-to-afghanistan/article38093717.ece>

16 Geeti Rahimi, "After 100 Days, Islamic Emirate Still Seeks Intl Recognition", TOLO News, 24 November 2021, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-175588>

threatened. Even in such circumstances, the US will have a number of other options short of putting boots on the ground, such as recourse to military action with the help of stand-off weapons and over-the-horizon-capabilities acting singly or in tandem with friendly regional powers.

Pakistan and China

It should come as no surprise if a Taliban government in Afghanistan were friendly towards China and Pakistan. The new regime in Kabul is likely to open the door to economic investments from China which has long cast its eyes on the mineral wealth of Afghanistan. China had bagged the contract for the Aynak copper mine in 2008, even though they did not do much thereafter. At the geopolitical level, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) may well receive a boost in Afghanistan under the Taliban, given China's interests in connectivity that could straddle the region, from Pakistan to Iran. Most countries under Western sanctions turn to China for trade and investment, and an economically enervated Afghanistan can be expected to do likewise under active encouragement by Pakistan.

China shares a border with Afghanistan through the narrow Wakhan Corridor, which abuts the restive region of Xinjiang. China is not inured to the instability in Afghanistan despite the Taliban's assurances and despite the traditional mediation by Pakistan to secure China's interests vis-à-vis the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The mere fact of the Taliban's victory and its enduring commitment to the re-establishment of an Islamic Emirate and Shariah rule could spur the Uyghurs to challenge China's

draconian presence in their homeland.

Pakistan will continue to support the Haqqani Network in order to mitigate the menace posed by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban. But there is a catch as well. If Pakistan promotes the further radical Islamisation of the Taliban, it runs the risk of a blowback from forces let loose, including within Pakistan, which are perhaps no longer under anyone's control. If Pakistan stimulates nationalistic passions among the Taliban, there is the risk of awakening Pashtun nationalism which could threaten the sanctity of the Durand Line and weaken the Pakistani state. Either way, Pakistan is bound to pay a price for its obsession with creating strategic depth in Afghanistan.

Russia & Central Asia

Russia has sought to mainstream the Taliban leaders all along. Even though Moscow has not recognised the Taliban, it has included them in the Moscow Format consultations since 2018. Uzbekistan, a diplomatic powerhouse in Central Asia, has repeatedly reached out to the Taliban, proving to be the most active among the Central Asian states. Tajikistan, perhaps still smarting at the abject collapse of the Tajik resistance in Panjshir, has criticised the lack of a representative government in Kabul. It has many causes for concern in the wake of the Taliban takeover. Of all the Central Asian republics, it boasts the longest border with Afghanistan, at 1,357 kilometres. Ominously, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Tajik Islamist groups have been imperviously operating on both sides of the border.

Other Regional Powers

Iran is at the junction of major drugs and people-smuggling routes out of Afghanistan. The economies of the border regions of the two nations are intertwined. Uncertainty in Afghanistan has already sent the Iranian Rial into a tailspin. A refugee influx across its 900-kilometre-long border with Afghanistan will add to the burden of hosting 3.5 million Afghans.¹⁷ Sectarian violence could also undermine Iran's interests.

An ambitious Turkey has operated its armed forces in Afghanistan under the UN, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and bilateral auspices since 2002. The Taliban have turned to Turkey and Qatar for technical assistance following the exodus of foreigners and trained Afghan manpower, resulting in agreements covering five airports.¹⁸ The growing footprint of Turkey and Qatar in Taliban 2.0 is reminiscent of the role played by Saudi Arabia and the UAE tandem in propping up Taliban 1.0.

In the quest for a peaceful, stable and secure Afghanistan, the role of regional powers remains paramount. Regional organisations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) can make positive contributions as can bilateral and plurilateral mechanisms for cooperation.

India's Stakes in Afghanistan

India is a major stakeholder in Afghanistan's destiny. India has no choice. India's historical ties with Afghanistan and

geographical proximity place a special responsibility on New Delhi.

As a close neighbour, India has keen stakes in ensuring a stable, secure and developed Afghanistan. For India, the situation in Afghanistan has major implications. The threat of a spill-over of malevolence radiating out of Afghanistan into Kashmir cannot be taken lightly. The Indian Army,

The situation in Afghanistan has major implications for India. The threat of a spill-over of malevolence radiating out of Afghanistan into Kashmir cannot be taken lightly. India's interests demand that Afghanistan remains a stable, secure and developed nation and abides by the international norms. The Delhi Declaration's call for "collective cooperation against the menace of radicalisation, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking in the region" is the right step. Prime Minister Modi has given fresh impetus to the regional dialogue and efforts to build lasting peace and security in Afghanistan. India is also providing humanitarian assistance that includes Covid vaccines under the vaccine Maitri plan and 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat. A proactive approach has enabled India to actively contribute to the task of building a regional consensus on the future of Afghanistan. India should continue its efforts to preserve the goodwill earned by India among the people of Afghanistan. This is in our strategic interest.

17 "UNHCR welcomes Italy's support for Afghan refugees in Iran", UNHCR, December 6, 2021 at <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/2021/12/06/unhcr-welcomes-italys-support-for-afghan-refugees-in-iran/>

18 "Turkey, Qatar enters into deal with Taliban on running airport of Kabul", Business Standard, December 25, 2021 at https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/turkey-qatar-enters-into-deal-with-taliban-on-running-airport-of-kabul-121122500124_1.html

no doubt, is fully capable of countering such threats. The priority, however, is to preserve the goodwill earned by India among the people of Afghanistan over years, through capacity-building and high-impact developmental projects at the cost of billions of dollars.

The Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan, issued at the end of the regional meeting held recently in New Delhi in November, was broadly along anticipated lines. There are several elements that clearly draw upon the language of the UN Security Council Resolution 2593 of 30 August 2021, adopted under the rotational presidency of India. These cover condemnation of terrorist attacks, emphasis on preventing the use of Afghanistan's territory for sheltering, training, planning or financing any terrorist acts, protecting the rights of women, children and minorities and providing humanitarian assistance.¹⁹

The newer elements in the Delhi Declaration pertain to call for "collective cooperation against the menace of radicalisation, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking in the region".²⁰ It is a remarkable common cause that was possible to forge precisely because Pakistan was absent from the table. It is well-known that all the participating countries have been challenged by one or more of these scourges, which the "deep state" in Pakistan has done little to

eradicate and in fact has actively nurtured. In the long run, there is a pressing need for a more inclusive dialogue among the key stakeholders.

Prime Minister Modi has given fresh impetus to the regional dialogue and efforts to build lasting peace and security in Afghanistan. While receiving the participants attending the Delhi meeting on Afghanistan in November 2020, he had succinctly outlined four key aspects that require focus: The need for an inclusive government in Afghanistan; a zero-tolerance stance about Afghan territory being used by terrorist groups; a strategy to counter drugs and arms trafficking from Afghanistan; and, addressing the increasingly critical humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.²¹

The priority, however, is to preserve the goodwill earned by India among the people of Afghanistan over many years, through capacity-building and high-impact developmental projects at the cost of billions of dollars. This is reflected in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remarks at the G-20 Summit in October 2021 in which he alluded to the "friendship that the people of Afghanistan have for India". In fact, both at the G-20 Summit and the SCO Summit held in September last year, Prime Minister Modi unequivocally indicated India's readiness to deliver humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people in an

19 "Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, November 10, 2021 at https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34491/Delhi_Declaration_on_Afghanistan.

20 Ibid.

21 "Joint Call on Prime Minister by National Security Advisers / Secretaries of Security Councils attending the "Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 10 November 2021, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34496/Joint_Call_on_Prime_Minister_by_National_Security_Advisers_Secretaries_of_Security_Councils_attending_the_Delhi_Regional_Security_Dialogue_on_Afghani.

unhindered manner. The silver lining is that the Taliban are open to the idea of Indian assistance. India, like others, is keen to ensure that assistance flows to the people of Afghanistan through the UN.

On 11 December last year, the Indian Government ferried 1.6 tonnes of essential medicines to the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul on a special charter flight that also transferred 85 Afghan nationals who were held up following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.²² The same flight had also evacuated 104 individuals, mostly Afghan Sikhs and Hindus, from Kabul to New Delhi a day earlier. As part of its “Vaccine Maitri”, India recently donated 500,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the Indira Gandhi children’s hospital in Kabul and has pledged a further 500,000 doses in the near future as part of its humanitarian aid for the people of Afghanistan.²³ India has also committed to provide 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat.²⁴ Hopefully, Pakistan will realise that it is its moral duty to facilitate such assistance by India to the Afghan people.

A proactive approach has enabled India to actively contribute to the task of building a regional consensus on the future of Afghanistan. It is up to the Taliban to ensure that their regime becomes a responsible one, in tune with the expectations and aspirations of the Afghan people and the global community.

Conclusion

Taking over a country by force is one thing but governing it effectively is quite another matter. Through the recent campaign to seize temporal power, the Taliban have revealed a proclivity for violence. They will now have to credibly demonstrate a capacity for governance. They will have to display moderation if they wish to be accepted as a member of the global community and secure the support of the people of Afghanistan.

About Author

Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy is a former Indian diplomat and the Director General of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA). He has earlier served as India’s Ambassador to Japan, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Mexico and the High Commissioner to Belize.

22 “India supplies next batch of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, January 1, 2022 at <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34737/India+supplies+next+batch+of+humanitarian+assistance+to+Afghanistan>

23 Ibid.

24 Rezaul H. Laskar, “India Sends 500,000 Covid-19 Vaccines to Afghanistan”, Hindustan Times, January 1, 2022, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-sends-500-000-covid-19-vaccines-to-afghanistan-101641034260142.html>