

Afghanistan Holocaust in Global Politics: Intervention, Struggle, Withdrawal and Regional Responses of Southeast Asian Countries

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Abstract

Afghanistan has evolved as the breeding land of terrorists since the post-cold war era and the birth of the Taliban under Osama Bin Laden has led to immense terrorist aggression in Afghanistan and also all around the globe. After the US intervention in Afghanistan following the 9/11 incident, the Taliban regime stagnated followed by the assassination of Osama Bin Laden under President Obama's regime. Unfortunately, with US's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 under Biden's administration, the world saw the fall of the Ashraf Ghani Government and the Taliban resumed its control over Kabul on August 15, 2021, which shocked the whole world. With the Taliban back in administration, there is a rising concern among the countries around the world especially the countries of Southeast Asia, due to historical links of various extremist groups with Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda and generated the rising fears of militant movements being reinvigorated with fresh support. As against such backdrop, this article tries to provide the immediate reactions of Southeast Asian countries on account of the sudden withdrawal of the United States and allied its forces from Afghanistan turf and how these countries responded to the emergence of newly emerged Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Introduction

On 15 August, the Taliban peaked their drive for power in Afghanistan by taking Kabul, the country's capital, for the first time since they ruled most of the country from 1996 to 2001, shaking into the third decade of conflict. While withdrawing American soldiers from Afghanistan terrain, President Joe Biden on 16 August 2021 in a speech said: "I want to speak today to the unfolding situation in Afghanistan: the

developments that have taken place in the last week and the steps we're taking to address the rapidly evolving events. We went to Afghanistan almost 20 years ago with clear goals: get those who attacked us on September 11th, 2001, and make sure al Qaeda could not use Afghanistan as a base from which to attack us again. Our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been preventing a terrorist attack on American homeland".

He further mentioned:"We are focused on what is now possible in Afghanistan. We will continue to support the people. We will lead with our diplomacy, international influence, and humanitarian aid. We will push for regional diplomacy to prevent violence and instability and continue to speak out for basic rights of the Afghan people," Finally, Joe Biden said:" I am clear on my answer: I will not repeat the mistakes we have made in the past — the mistake of staying and fighting indefinitely in a conflict that is not in the national interest of the United States, of doubling down on a civil war in a foreign country, of attempting to remake a country through the endless military deployments of U.S. forces. I know my decision will be criticized, but I would rather take all that criticism than pass this decision on to another President of the United States — yet another one — a fifth one. Because it's the right one — it's the right decision for our people. The right one for our brave service members who have risked their lives serving our nation. And it's the right one for America".²

Over the years, Afghanistan appeared to be a cockpit of great power political ground and was ravaged with violent repression of political power syndrome. The sudden withdrawal of U.S.-NATO forces against the backdrop to counter the sanctuary of al-Qaeda and other transnational jihadist groups led to huge political and strategic uncertainty with the emergence of the Taliban government. Given its geography, history, and natural resource endowments, Afghanistan has been and will continue to be of great interest to proximate regional powers, including Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran. Often labeled the 'graveyard of empires,' Afghanistan has an extensive history of foreign intervention from the British in the 19th and early 20th centuries (1839-1842, 1878-1880, 1919),³ the Soviet Union and the United States in the late 20th century (1979-1989)⁴, and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the 21st century (2001-2021). The post-ISAF years will certainly encompass other powers, whose interests vary diagonally the magnitudes of strategic importance, international relations, security, trade, extraction of raw materials, and humanitarian assistance. Over the years, the core objectives of the ISAF mission expanded to include counterterrorism, counterinsurgency (COIN),

stabilization, nation-building, and democratization. Over its twenty years, the war cost the United States more than \$2 trillion (USD) and caused total estimated death ranging between 238,000 and 241,000 people in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan.⁵ Moreover, the US casualties for the war included 2,218 deaths with 1,833 killed in action, 285 'non-hostile deaths,' and 20,193 people wounded in action.⁶ The total cost of the war for the United Kingdom was £27.7 billion, where total UK casualties include 456 killed, 2,209 wounded in action, and 7,807 hospital admissions.⁷

The dramatic resurgence of the Taliban government led most of the regional powers to recalibrate their approaches and influences in protecting their interests in the country. At the geopolitical level, Beijing sees the U.S.-NATO withdrawal as both an opportunity as well a strategic challenge. On the one hand, China has always been uneasy about the presence of U.S. military bases so near to its west. The withdrawal gives China the chance to exert its influence more freely in Central Asia. On the other hand, China is concerned not only about the regional security vacuum left in the wake of the international troops' departure, but also about the heightened pressures it may face in the Indo-Pacific arena, as a Washington freed of Afghanistan devotes its energies and resources more fully to areas to China's south and east. However, unlike Pakistan many neighboring and regional countries (e.g., Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China and Russia) had clearly warned the Taliban that they would not establish positive relationships with a Taliban-dominated government in Afghanistan, if they were in any way simply allowing the export of jihad and terrorism. None wants chaos in Afghanistan or state collapse. Beyond that, Pakistan would like to have a friendly government in Afghanistan but also wants to keep the United States happy with the hope of improving relations with Washington. Even within the Pakistani establishment, there are different views on which of these two primary aims should be prioritized. Prioritizing Islamabad- Washington relations would likely lead to lower levels of Pakistani influence and control in Kabul in the future, and vice versa. For now, Pakistan has tried to prevent the Taliban from sliding toward a military solution as a reaction to the obstacles met on the diplomatic path.⁸

Besides this, so far as regional interests are concerned there are strong and differentiated regional power interests from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran and certain questions are cropping up which will shape the prospects of Afghanistan and they are- first, the withdrawal creates new opportunities for influence and control for Russia; secondly,

the withdrawal is a net gain but not unequivocal victory for China, which has new opportunities to extend its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), address regional security threats, engage in significant economic activities, and challenge the ambitions of the United States; thirdly, the withdrawal represents the least optimal outcome for India and its troubled relationship with Pakistan, but there are opportunities to engage with AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and finally despite the ongoing tensions with the Taliban, Iran may take advantage of the withdrawal in its international posturing towards the United States. Against such a backdrop, the main purpose of this article is to highlight the immediate reactions of Southeast Asian countries on account of the sudden withdrawal of the United States and allied its forces from Afghanistan turf and how these countries responded to the emergence of newly emerged Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Reactions and Approach of Southeast Asian Countries

The predicament of insurgency, low-intensity conflicts, the issue of terrorism, and other threats to internal security to the socio-political structure of Southeast Asia is not a recent phenomenon. These problems largely start due to ethnic conflicts, poverty and underdevelopment, domination of the ruling party on the minority community, center-periphery, religious factors (mainly the growth of Islamic fundamentalism), historical legacy, opium and drug-related crimes, military repression, etc. These disturbances mainly cropped up as a response to the unwillingness of many Southeast Asian governments to recognize the right of minority's self-determination. These internal security problems have often led to outbursts of inexorable secessionist tide, followed by terrorism and low-intensity conflict. In Southeast Asia, insurgencies and low-intensity wars, terrorist activities, and ethnic social unrest are often used by ex-freedom fighters, by dissidents, by guerrillas, by political activists of left or right, by ethnic and religious groups, by drug trafficking organizations, by ex-military personnel and by regional and extra-regional powers. This social unrest is in the form of guerrilla war and violence and its effect frequently varies from one country to another in the region and thereby often challenges the very foundation of statehood that underscored Southeast Asian countries' post-colonial national identity. After 11 September 2001, the internationalization of the concept of low-intensity conflict, terrorism, and transnational crimes has become important and dynamic themes of regional politics in Southeast Asia. In recent years, the countries of Southeast Asia are facing the threat related to the issue of terrorism in multiple ways and how to tackle this problem in the post-September 11 world would

remain a big strategic challenge not only for the sake of regional security but also for the long-term viability of the regional organization (ASEAN) itself. The militant attack by ISIS in a mall in January 2016 in Jakarta has once again brought the issue of terrorism in the limelight on the security domain of Southeast Asia. Moreover, the emergence of the Taliban government has also made a ripple effect for extremism in the Southeast Asian region due to historical links of various extremist groups with Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda and generated the rising fears of militant movements being reinvigorated with fresh support. As against such background, the emergence of the Taliban government, following the sudden withdrawal of the United State and allied forces from the turf of Afghanistan has created a severe deep-rooted impact on the countries of Southeast Asia, and different countries in this region reacted quite outspokenly since the reactions of the wave vary to a large extent from one country to another based on their individual local, national and regional interest.

Reaction of Indonesia

Among the countries of Southeast Asia, Indonesia remains the worst suffer on the issue of terrorism in the past years and the reaction of Indonesia was quite vocal as well as mixed in nature. As the largest populous Muslim country in the world, its government has been careful in determining its stance on the Taliban's annexation of power. On 16 August 2021, the Foreign Ministry of Indonesia stated: "Indonesia is closely monitoring the swift development in Afghanistan and hopes for an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led political settlement. Peace and stability is no doubt what the Afghan people and the international community truly wish for and the mission of the Indonesian Embassy in Kabul will still be carried out by limited essential staff, with close surveillance on the safety and security in Afghanistan".⁹ The *Jakarta post*, in an editorial published on 16 August 2021 reacted and regretted very sharply following the sudden withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and wrote: "After the pullout of American troops, Afghanistan looks set to reenter a dark age as the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban appear to regain control of the country. While other predominantly Muslim or Islamic countries are embracing the tenets of modernization and civilization that are in line with Islamic teachings and values, there are fears that Afghanistan under the Taliban will revert to the "stone age".¹⁰ The newspaper further wrote: "The immediate implications of the Taliban's return for other countries, including Indonesia, will be an exodus of refugees fleeing the Taliban regime with all consequences, including security threats. For a long time, Indonesia has had the

ambition to act as an honest broker of peace in Afghanistan. It is clear, however, that good intention alone is not enough — or perhaps goodwill is not realistic at all”. Finally, the editorial concluded that “A lesson we can learn from Afghanistan is no matter how strategic a country is, in the end, it should stand on its own feet. Controlling power through violence and brutality in the name of religion will not bring peace and prosperity — only terror. We feel very sorry for the Afghan people. But as Biden has said, it is up to the Afghan people to decide the future of their nation”.¹¹

Besides this, like many other predominantly Muslim countries, Indonesia has refrained from openly recognizing — or denouncing — the resurging Taliban of the majority ethnic Pashtun as the absolute ruler of Afghanistan. The 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) urged the Taliban not to use Afghanistan as a backyard for international militancy or a haven for “terrorists”. Fear of more terrorist attacks is spreading across the world because the Taliban is globally perceived as a host of all known terrorist groups. The success of the Taliban in kicking out the United States and its allies, after occupying the impoverished Central Asian nation for 20 years, will be inspiring for those who share the same ideology of terror, based on certain grounds. First, the Taliban’s victory will be a powerful inspiration for terrorist groups in the two territories. Second, the Taliban will become a nationalist Islamist party and will not accommodate the presence of foreign militants and are distrustful about the Taliban’s real targets. Third, no one knows the future economic development road of Afghanistan, since, in the last 20 years, Afghanistan’s economy was mostly supported by the US and its allies, while the Taliban’s main revenue mostly came from opium plantations.¹²

On 2 September 2021, the Indonesian government categorically wishes peaceful, stable, prosperous Afghanistan and on September 14, 2021, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi announced US\$ 3 million worth of aid to Afghanistan for humanitarian assistance and development and mentioned three important points and they are: “Indonesia continues to expect an inclusive government, a guarantee that Afghanistan will be not used as a training ground for the activities of terrorist groups that threaten the security and stability of the region and the entire world, and the importance of respecting women’s rights.”¹³

Moreover, as per the recognition of the Taliban government, in a statement at Arab News, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry’s director-general for Asia, Pacific, and African affairs, Abdul Kadir Jailani, said:

“As Indonesia and the rest of the international community await an official announcement by the new Taliban regime, Indonesia expects there to be an inclusive government and in this regard they need to have a political settlement based on the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned principle, to establish an inclusive government, and for this, Indonesia underscores the importance of respect to human rights, especially the rights of women and the minority groups,”¹⁴ and stressed that Indonesia’s definitive stance would only be conveyed when the situation in Afghanistan became clearer. Interestingly enough, on 13 January 2022, the Director-General of Information and Public Diplomacy minister, Teuku Faizasyah, in a statement categorically said that “Indonesia does not recognize Taliban government in Afghanistan and we would like to reaffirm that until now, no country has recognized Taliban’s governance in Afghanistan”. However, he mentioned that the shipment of the aid of Indonesia on January 9, 2022, was a form of humanitarian assistance and he explained to distinguish between facilitating humanitarian aid and essential matters and recognition of the Taliban’s occupation of Afghanistan.¹⁵

However, the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan’s turf largely inspired various militant groups in Indonesia and the reactions are mixed in nature. Muhammad Taufiqurrohman, a senior researcher at Jakarta-based security think-tank Centre for Radicalism and Deradicalization Studies, on 26 August 2021 expressed that several militant and conservative groups have been celebrating the Taliban takeover on social media and private online chat groups. He said that “the Taliban takeover has given a morale boost to jihadists and Islamists in Indonesia to continue their struggle to establish an Islamic government and impose Sharia law in Indonesia,” He further said that “some of these groups have been pushing for Indonesia to adopt a strict Islamic law, while others strive to secede from the country and form their Islamic government. Indonesia is a secular country where the majority of people practice a moderate form of Islam. Some have stated their intention to travel to Afghanistan. They want to learn from the Taliban, learn military (strategies) from them and want to use the skills they have acquired to topple the regime in Indonesia,” and warned that the Indonesian government should not take these statements lightly.¹⁶

Some other experts predicted that the Taliban takeover could pave the way for the recurrence of the regional terror network Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). This group has a historical and emotional connection with the Taliban. They share the same ideology with the Taliban of establishing an Islamic government in their respective countries. This group was

among the first organizations to send militants to a military training camp in Afghanistan after the Taliban first took control of the country in 1996. The training camp was run by the global terror network Al-Qaeda, an ally of the Taliban, and led by the slain terrorist Osama bin Laden. After their return, JI militants launched a series of deadly terrorist attacks armed, including the 2002 Bali bombings which killed 202 people, within Indonesia with the knowledge and skills they have learned in Afghanistan. Another expert Noor Huda Ismail of S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, emphatically said: "There are many factions within the Taliban, and not all see eye-to-eye. If there is infighting between the factions, the weaker faction will likely seek help from foreign fighters." ¹⁷

Interestingly enough, there were mixed reactions by Islamic State-aligned groups and where some Al-Qaeda-aligned groups in Indonesia have not shied away from expressing solidarity with the Taliban. These links are likely solidified through both personal networks and institutional affinity given shared history and ideology. Jemaah Ansharu Syariah (JAS) through its spokesman, Abdul Rochim Ba'asyir, son of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, co-founder of Jemaah Islamiyah, expressed that Muslims in Indonesia to support this "momentous victory" of Afghanistan's freedom from "a puppet government". Khalid Sheikh Mohamed, the operational planner for Al-Qaeda was the first one to issue an official congratulatory statement to the Taliban take over in Afghanistan. ¹⁸

For a long time, Afghanistan has had a psychological hold on Al-Qaeda-aligned Jemaah Islamiyah, who had recruited and sent several batches to Afghanistan for training during the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1970s and 1980s. Among them, Riduan Isamuddin alias Hambali, the mastermind behind a string of bombings and attempted attacks in Southeast Asia and the organization's key linking man to Al-Qaeda who facilitated Afghanistan training. These common combat experiences in Afghanistan have left an indelible mark and established them as an alumni network of Southeast Asian Afghan fighters. Furthermore, Taliban takeovers in Afghanistan are not supported by all other Islamic State (IS) supporters in Indonesia. The fact remains that the majority of the Indonesian pro-IS online community has constantly categorized the Taliban as *murtad* (apostates), for the ensuing reasons. First, in terms of religious practice, many Indonesian IS supporters regard Taliban as *mushrik* (polytheist), and refer to the Taliban's religious practice of visiting graves to pray for the deceased as an example of *shirk* (idolatry or polytheism), as explicated in the "*Muqoror fit Tauhid*" (Curriculum of Tauhid) handbook. Second, certain Indonesian

pro-IS supporters on social media believe that the Taliban's governance is not at all a true Islamic State since that it is based on nationalism and condemned the Taliban for conducting peace negotiations with the United States and pledging to not fight the "Crusaders" (i.e., the U.S. and its Western allies). Some supporters in Indonesia have vehemently echoed by stressing a claim that the Taliban had killed a local ISK commander who was imprisoned at Pul-e-Charkhi, the largest detention center in Afghanistan, from which the Taliban released thousands of prisoners on August 15, 2021. Finally, some other Indonesian supporters have described the Taliban as pro-Shia and protective of the Shia community, despite its Sunni foundation.¹⁹ Besides this, the Taliban's return to power has also received a mixed and positive reception from some mainstream figures of Indonesia. Former vice president Jusuf Kalla, a mediator in the Afghan peace process, argued that the Taliban has changed and become more moderate. The Head of international relations for Muhammadiyah, Muhyiddin Junaidi (also a member of the Indonesian Ulama Council), welcomed the Taliban takeover and dismissed exclusive concerns that it would inspire radicalism in Indonesia, and urged a more cautious "wait-and-see" policy. The Islamist opposition party, PKS, also generally welcomed the Taliban takeover, noting that the movement is anti-ISIS. Such sentiment is expressed against the backdrop of prior dealings between the Taliban and prominent Indonesian leaders.²⁰ Another sympathetic Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) leader is Abdul Manan Ghani, who has urged the Indonesian public not to feel threatened by the Taliban. He stressed that the Taliban follows the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence and acknowledges the authority of ulama, unlike puritanical "Wahhabi" movements. In this respect, Ghani said, the Taliban is inherently different from Salafi-jihadist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)²¹. Thus, the barring different IS groups existed within Indonesia, the Indonesian government reaffirms its commitment to Afghanistan peace process, especially whether the Taliban will undo the progress made since 2001 in boosting gender equality and opportunities for Afghan women and girls and that volatility of the situation in then milieu which may create more harm than good and decided not to allow the al-Qaeda to operate as openly as it did in the past.²² This outlook was reflected, when Indonesian Foreign Affairs Minister Retno Marsudi, in a press statement in an Extraordinary Session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), held in December 2021, at Islamabad, Pakistan, said: "Indonesia's position has always been consistent, wanting to see Afghanistan be peaceful, stable, and prosperous."²³ Thus, the overall reactions of

Indonesia of the new Taliban regime were more vocal and mixed in nature.

Malaysia's Retorts

Like Indonesia, the Taliban's resurgence has also received diverse responses from Malaysians and the immediate impact on Malaysia is arguably further social polarity. The government of Malaysia has taken a very vigilant attitude in deciding its official stand on the Taliban government since the Taliban's victory may have a ripple effect on entire Malaysia's security landscape. The Foreign Minister of Malaysia Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, on 1 September 2021 in a press statement said "the government was closely following all events in the country, particularly in Kabul. We received reports from various sectors and we will be making our stand soon. We are still making our assessment on the situation in Afghanistan."²⁴ This late response of the Malaysian government happened since there was a change in leadership within Malaysia which coincided with when the Taliban toppled President Ashraf Ghani's government. Two weeks later, the newly assigned foreign minister, Saifuddin Abdullah, took a cautious approach and said that "Malaysia will observe the developments in Afghanistan before recognizing the Taliban". This above statement was also endorsed by Zambry Abdul Kadir, the secretary-general of the former coalition in power, Barisan Nasional (BN), who suggested that 'the Malaysian government to take a wait-and-see approach based on the international community's reaction'.²⁵ The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS; Malay: Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) is an Islamist political party in Malaysia, which is not a jihadist organization and a leading political party that has participated in Malaysia's electoral system since 1955, after three days following the fall of Kabul, Mohd Khalil, PAS's International Affairs and External Relations Committee chairperson, uploaded a congratulatory message to the Taliban on various social media platforms and argued that if China, a Communist country, could establish a relationship with the Taliban, Malaysia should do the same as a nation with a majority Muslim population. Later on, facing public denunciation, PAS removed the message from its social media pages. Besides this, on Aug 25, *Harakah daily*, the PAS mouthpiece, carried an editorial in which PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang stated that 'the Taliban has changed for the better and we must not believe the negative portrayal of the Taliban by the Western media'.²⁶

This was ostensibly intended to humiliate Malaysia into action. However, logical counterarguments included how Malaysia, unlike China, has

no immediate geopolitical concern that necessitates a diplomatic relation with the Taliban since Malaysia and Afghanistan are situated in different regions.²⁷

This stand of PAS was widely condemned by the common people who expressed that a mainstream party in Malaysia is openly supporting the Taliban when it's the past track record of human rights abuses, on the ground that the current Taliban is now a different entity than when it ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until the 2001 American invasion. Providentially, this stand of PAS was appreciated by the Taliban,²⁸ while other people have publicly criticized the Taliban have been called Islamophobes for holding such opinions. Thus, Malaysia has witnessed a splitting effect on its citizens while some supported PAS and the Taliban takeover as part of a larger global movement to implement "Islamic rule" to replace the supposedly inferior liberal democratic system and PAS and Taliban are not at all two peas in a hull. The Malaysian government, arguably considered a progressive Muslim country has immediately called for an emergency meeting of OIC and decided that it can only make an official stand if the Taliban administration has been recognized by international groups such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). This statement was made on 12 January 2022, when the foreign minister of Malaysia, Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, while delivering his New Year's speech to Foreign Ministry officers, when said: "We can do it through an international platform like the OIC and if they make a decision, it will ease Malaysia's (position) decision to recognize Afghanistan."²⁹ Besides this, both Malaysia and Thailand officials downplayed a Japanese warning of possible suicide bomb attacks in Southeast Asia when Japan's embassies in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok urged their citizens residing in these nations to "strengthen their vigilance against terrorism" and take precautions.³⁰

Response of Philippines

The reaction of the Philippines government to the ongoing situation in Afghanistan has mainly emphasized humanitarian succor. There is as such no official statement regarding its outlook towards Taliban's return in Afghanistan, although it made full alert in the Mindanao region to guard against extremism and the Philippines' police chief, Gen. Guillermo Eleazar in a statement said: "I assure the public that the police and military will not allow a spillover of the Afghan conflict."³¹ What the Philippines government did, was it immediately started repatriating its citizens on a mandatory basis from Afghanistan and

firmly pledged that it would accept refugees from Afghanistan. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) ordered the evacuation of around 130 Filipinos in Afghanistan after Taliban forces took hold of the capital Kabul and promised monetary support for the United Nations (UN)-led humanitarian operations in the country. The Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. in the United Nations called for a stop to alleged human rights violations and defended the US against criticisms raised at that point of time that it had failed in its response and “abandoned” the country.³² Furthermore, the Presidential spokesperson, Harry Roque of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) of the Philippines, in a statement said “I do not know what will be the decision of the government when it comes to the Taliban regime, but in the field of international law, recognition is not an element of statehood,” and urged Filipinos to coordinate with the Philippine embassy in Pakistan, which has jurisdiction over Afghanistan, to facilitate their repatriation. He further added: “The recognition is just a declaration that a state and a government are recognizing this is a message that we are ready to have bilateral relations with that country. We leave such matters to the DFA.”³³

The Philippines government felt that the Taliban victory in Afghanistan could inspire radical Muslim groups in Southeast Asia to take up arms once more against their governments, and its government officials are on alert for potential violence. The only statement that was made by the Philippines government, when the Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana told the Philippine News Agency on 27 August 2021 stated “Taliban or no Taliban, we have always considered local extremism as a big concern.”³⁴

This non-committal attitude of the Philippines government towards the newly formed Taliban government in Afghanistan has not been favorably looked upon by the Philippines intellectuals. Security analyst Rommel Banlaoi, chief of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR), in an online forum said “should the Philippines make an official stand — whether to support the new government or not — it will be a test on the so-called independent foreign policy of President Rodrigo Duterte’s administration”. He further added: “Our decision on Afghanistan will be a test to Duterte’s independent foreign policy. We already had a position in the past that defied our ally when we recognized the state of Palestine.”³⁵ Bobby Tuazon, Director for policy studies at the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG) of the Philippines, in a statement on 19 August 2021 said: “the Taliban declared that the war

is over, they deserve to be given a chance to govern. They indeed deserve international support because many countries are already talking with the Taliban.” So far as the terrorist links of Taliban are concerned, he further said: “The Taliban is not a terrorist organization and currently, they cannot afford to support atrocities on a global scale. The war is over. They want peace. They want to develop Afghanistan because that’s the only way by which Afghanistan will continue to exist. If they continue to war, they will lose. They know that. Eventually, they will lose. Terrorism will not win.”³⁶ Thus, the response of the Philippines government is not so vocal, like Indonesia and Malaysia, but it is regularly watching what is going on in the evolving situation in Afghanistan under the leadership of the Taliban and has made significant improvements in its counterterrorism measures against the local Islamist militant groups existed in their domestic turf and decided not to allow entry to Afghans fleeing from fear of persecution in the Philippines.

Singapore’s Riposte

The response of the Singapore government is slightly different from other partners of ASEAN and Singapore tries to follow ‘the wait and see’ policy regarding the Taliban government. On 16 August 2021, the Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan in an interview at local media stated it clearly that “We will have to watch this very closely. Terrorism and extremism are clear and present dangers in our region, with or without Afghanistan,” and stressed that “It would be a tragedy if it becomes a sanctuary or hotbed of extremism and terrorism. ... Let us wait and see, but extremism and terrorism remain clear and present dangers to all of us in Southeast Asia.”³⁷ Also, it has been felt by many scholars of Singapore that the threat level to Singapore remains low, given the Taliban’s focus on re-establishing total control of Afghanistan and strengthening its sphere of influence in Central Asia. However, Faizal Abdul Rahman of S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Centre of Excellence for National Security and visiting fellow Noor Huda Ismail of RSIS, both said the Taliban’s gains could be newfound motivation for Southeast Asian extremist groups, as well as home-grown extremists who share similar ideological beliefs. The Taliban’s victories have and will continue to inspire Islamists in the region to emulate the group’s tactic of seizing power without using democratic means and its victory has security repercussions, especially boosting the spirit of the jihad among pro-Islamic state type of projects in the region including Indonesians, Malaysians, and Singaporeans.³⁸

However, as an immediate reaction, in an interview to *CNBC* on 26 August 2021, Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said: "At the end of the day, the Taliban is in charge, they've got to take responsibility for the people. One other lesson ... is that foreign interference doesn't work. In the end, the destiny of a people lies in the hands of its people, and its leaders".³⁹

The Foreign Minister also said: "The outcome in Afghanistan was "inevitable," but the speed at which the events unfolded was surprising. The U.S. had gone to Afghanistan following the Sep. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. It was "clear" back then that Afghanistan was a "haven" for terrorists, noting that local terror groups in Singapore also had links to al-Qaeda. He further told *CNBC* that terrorism remains a clear and present danger in Singapore and also the entire Southeast Asian region. I wouldn't relate it directly to the United States' presence or absence in Afghanistan, but the point is within Southeast Asia, this is a clear and present danger. And if anything, over the past two decades, I think it has grown. Some cannot take this for granted."⁴⁰ The minister said he hopes Afghanistan doesn't revert to becoming a haven for terrorists. While asked in the same interview that whether he thinks the Taliban is now "reformed," the minister replied "he's not in a position to assess that". But he pointed out that the Taliban is likely now made up of a new generation of people compared to two decades ago. "You do realize 20 years means it's a new generation. The people who are speaking on TV now on behalf of the Taliban were probably little kids, so I think you will have to judge them by their actions," said Balakrishnan.⁴¹

Meanwhile, in a written reply to Parliamentary Questions on the implications on security in Singapore and the neighboring region in the given situation in Afghanistan, K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law of Singapore, said: "We are watching the unfolding developments in Afghanistan closely. While there is currently no information of a specific terrorist threat to Singapore arising from the situation there, we are concerned if it would provide fertile conditions for transnational militant organizations such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to regroup or establish safe havens there, in the same manner, that they had exploited other conflict zones like Syria/ Iraq. These terrorist groups can also be expected to propagate an ideological narrative based on the American withdrawal, to draw recruits there. We will continue to press ahead with our SG Secure efforts to strengthen Singapore's vigilance, preparedness, and resilience on terrorism".⁴²

Interestingly enough, before the Taliban came into power in

Afghanistan, Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan, on 28 June 2021, while speaking at a ministerial meeting of the 83-nation Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, held in Rome, expressed deep concern and underscored that a robust security response is essential and highlighted Singapore's efforts to counter terrorism through close community engagement and domestic security response preparedness and deeply expressed its support for global efforts to ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by stating that "while the terror group no longer controls territory, it continues to retain a diffused global presence and remains a threat" and pledged that "Global terrorism does not respect borders, and can only be defeated through collective action. We are committed to continuing to work closely with the community and religious organizations to identify radicalized individuals with coalition members",⁴³ and proposed public vigilance is key for the detection of radicalized entities.

In fact, before this meeting held in Rome, the Internal Security Department (ISD) of Singapore in a report released on 23 June 2021, expressed its concern and categorically emphasized that self-radicalized actors are mostly influenced by extremist materials online are the main domestic terrorism threat facing by Singapore. In this report, it further mentioned that there is currently no specific nor credible intelligence of an imminent terrorist attack against Singapore, but the terrorism threat to Singapore remains high, since 'globally, terrorist activities have persisted amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, with terrorist recruitment and propaganda efforts stepped up online'. But, due to strong counter-terrorism measures and COVID-19 travel restrictions, the movement of terrorists in the region has greatly mired. Moreover, the report further stated: "We have to stay vigilant and take a firm stand against any rhetoric that promotes hatred or animosity towards other communities, and draw the line at the pursuit of any violent action, regardless of how it is justified."⁴⁴

Cambodia and Vietnam's Squelch

The reactions of Cambodia and Vietnam were not as vocal, as the other partners of ASEAN. Following the internal turmoil in Afghanistan immediately after the US withdrawal of troops in August 2021, there were no official reactions of Cambodia. Phay Siphon, spokesman for the Council of Ministers of Cambodia in an interview with *Khmer Times* expressed deep concern over the fate of the Afghan people under the threat of the return of the Taliban and other Islamist groups in a war-torn country some 4,448 kilometers northwest of Cambodia and

felt that the consequence may be similar to Cambodia after the US withdrew its forces from the country in 1975, allowing the Khmer Rouge to topple the US-backed government and plunge the country into genocide. He said: “The situation in Afghanistan is also the same. The Islamists may take revenge against the US for invading Afghanistan. We don’t want to see more suffering of the Afghan people. Of course, Cambodian people do not want to see bloodshed happening in another country.⁴⁵ After the US withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) which is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia, requested the Cambodian government to grant visas to organization staff in Afghanistan of 300, who are Afghan citizens and their families for a temporary period. In a press statement, Interior Ministry spokesman General Khieu Sopheak announced that “The Cambodian government has decided in principle (to accept temporary refugees) based on humanitarian factors only,” like what it did regarding Rohingya refugees, exclusively based on three main points and they are that “Cambodia will accept no more than 300 Afghan refugees as well as providing visas on arrival to the refugees and allow them to use their ID cards as travel documents and while exempting refugees from other Covid-19 prevention measures for entry in Cambodia, they would still to comply with other health rules (testing and quarantine, etc.) imposed by the government when they enter”.⁴⁶ The Cambodian government felt that despite public statements by the Taliban leadership, there should be little doubt that the pursuit of human development goals in Afghanistan has been handed over to a terrorist organization. The regime has already demonstrated a propensity for atrocities and hostility toward civil society and their recently established cabinet is not inclusive nor representative of their promises of reform. Public beatings of innocent civilians, reprisal attacks on former supporters of the Afghan republic, and the change in women’s abilities to live and work free from repression show that the worst scenario is yet to come.

Vietnam, a major partner of ASEAN over the years, enhanced cooperation with other states of ASEAN, both bilaterally and multilaterally of implementing its commitments to counter terrorist threats and has implemented various measures to enhance the institutional capacity, including through strengthening the legal framework and establishing a National Steering Committee. At the regional level, as a party to the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism, Viet Nam has proactively and responsibly worked with other countries through ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the ASEAN+1,

ASEAN+3, East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus (ADMM+) to prevent terrorist activities through information sharing and capacity-building. Vietnam actively participated to work closely with the ASEAN Member States in the implementation of the ASEAN Action Plan to prevent and counter the rise of radicalization and violent extremism (2018-2025). Bilaterally, Viet Nam has signed various cooperation agreements with various countries on the issues of mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, extradition, and combating transnational crimes and committed to contributing to the common efforts of the international community on the prevention of money laundering and terrorist financing. At the global level, Viet Nam has been party to various UN instruments related to countering terrorism. Viet Nam stands ready to work with members of the United Nations to implement the Security Council Resolution 2396 (2017) on the strengthening of measures to counter threats posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and Resolution 2496 (2019) on preventing and combating the financing of terrorists.⁴⁷ However, the response of Vietnam concerning Taliban emergence in Afghanistan was not so much vocal. Vietnam is the only Southeast Asian country sitting on the U.N. Security Council and urged peace in Afghanistan. As a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, it “calls on relevant sides to avoid using force and ensure security, order, critical infrastructures, lives and assets for Afghans and foreigners, particularly women and children and to guarantee humanitarian access when necessary,”⁴⁸ In an emergency Security Council 8834th meeting on Afghanistan following the Taliban’s seizure of the capital city, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, On 16 August 2021, sent a firm message that the world body will not abandon the people of the war-torn country, and its personnel will stay and continue to deliver critical services. He said: “The world is following events in Afghanistan with a heavy heart and deep disquiet about what lies ahead and urging all parties, especially the Taliban, to exercise utmost restraint to protect lives and ensure that humanitarian needs are met”. In this meeting, the Vietnam representative Dinh Quy Dang expressed serious concern about reports of civilian casualties and the repercussions of events unfolding in Afghanistan in neighboring countries. The utmost priority is to protect civilians, especially the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children, he stressed, urging the Taliban to respect international humanitarian and human rights laws. He also called for ensuring the safety of personnel working for the United Nations and other international organizations, as well as aid workers. All parties must engage in dialogue, seeking national reconciliation and long-term peace.

Urgent measures are needed to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe, he said, urging the United Nations and its partners to redouble their efforts.⁴⁹

Immediately after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, Vice President Kamala Harris visited Singapore and Vietnam on August 25 and stressed the United States' commitment to Asia, trip critics have slammed as tone-deaf given the parallels with the superpower's evacuations from Saigon and Kabul. Pham Quang Vinh, Vietnam's former Ambassador to the United States, told *AFP* that the country was watching events in Kabul closely. "The U.S. has recommitted itself now to this region but if something happens in Afghanistan again, for example, if terrorism comes back... will the U.S. continue to focus here?" Vietnam has sought to forge its path between the two superpowers and on August 24 Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh met the Chinese Ambassador and categorically stressed Hanoi would not "align with one country against another".⁵⁰ This means that the Vietnam government has taken a non-committal stand concerning the Taliban's Afghan triumph since the threat of radicalism and terrorism in the turf of Vietnam is less in nature. Besides this, unfortunately, no media and any newspapers of Vietnam failed to write a single line on the Vietnam government's stand on the entire issue which took place immediately after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, and only some newspapers, like *Nhan Dan*, the *Vietnam Times*, etc. have illustrated the events and failed to mention any individual news media opinion.

There are only a few Vietnamese American communities, who are settled abroad have made some comments on the issue. For example, Dinh Van, 73, a former paratrooper with South Vietnam's infantry turned lathing technician operating heavy machinery, now lives in Houston, Texas, told Voice of America (VOA) Vietnamese: "I think the U.S is largely to blame for the collapse. The Afghans are a U.S. ally. The U.S. should have made a proper judgment about its ability to withstand an attack from the Taliban and should have planned the withdrawal a bit longer. Now the Taliban is getting all the weapons left by the U.S. I find that regrettable."⁵¹ Phan Binh Minh, who worked for the Vietnam News Agency in South Vietnam, now retired from her service, expressed her views to the VOA Vietnamese and said: "the political circumstances of the wars in Afghanistan and Vietnam are different, there are similarities in the fall in Kabul and Saigon." Looking at the scene in Kabul, I sympathize with the Afghans because they must be in a lot of fear and suffering."⁵² Dinh Xuan Quan, another Vietnamese American, regularly kept in touch with old friends in Afghanistan via the still-functioning internet. He said: "I tried to find them and give them the

news, and recalled the bewildering days in Vietnam before, April 30, '75." He further said: "Vietnam was once a colony of France, while Afghanistan is not a colony of the United States," and pointed out that the Taliban are anchored by religion, and the North Vietnamese communists who govern Vietnam are atheists. PIVOT, a self-described progressive Vietnamese American community organization in the United States, in a statement, said: "There will be plenty of time to debate U.S. foreign policy, military strategy and the question of who 'lost' Afghanistan. But now is not the time. It is our responsibility and moral obligation as Americans" to protect the Afghan people. As the Vietnamese American community has demonstrated, war refugees who are resettled in this country become valuable contributors to the life and culture of this great nation."⁵³

Despite these opinions of the Vietnamese community settled abroad, the fact remains that this non-committal stand of Vietnam probably because it may not go against the growing regional strategic interest with the US government against the backdrop of China's growing assertive policy on the South China Sea issue.

Brunei and Thailand's Response

At the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits meeting under the chairmanship of Brunei Darussalam held on 26 October 2021, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dato Erywan Pehin Yusaf, via videoconference, said "We remained steadfast in our commitment to combat transnational crime and welcomed the adoption of the Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on Combating Transnational Crime and Post-COVID-19 Pandemic on 29 September 2021 by the 15th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), which signified our collective efforts and cross-sectoral coordination to address transnational crime in the post-pandemic era. We also stressed the importance of the full and effective implementation of the Work Plan of the ASEAN Plan of Action to Prevent and counter the Rise of Radicalization and Violent Extremism (Bali Work Plan) 2019-2025 to address the threat of radicalization and violent extremism in the region holistically and inclusively".⁵⁴ However, unfortunately, there has been no official reaction of the Brunei government regarding the emergence of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Even, the newspapers of Brunei kept quite mum on this issue.

Similarly, Thailand over the years has faced a secessionist movement in the Muslim dominant southern part of Thailand in the Pattani region, which sought the establishment of a Malay Islamic state, encompassing

the three southern Thai provinces. This campaign has taken a particularly violent turn after 2001, resulting in an intractable insurgency problem across southern Thailand and the imposition of martial law. Separatist groups, most notably the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Koordinasi (BRN-C), have begun to use increasingly violent tactics, and there have been dreads of links between the BRN-C and foreign Islamist groups, such as Jemaah Islamiyah who are known to have committed atrocities across ASEAN – including the Bali bombings back in 2002. Jemaah Islamiyah is known to have cells throughout the ASEAN region and are linked to Al-Qaeda. Currently, this secessionist movement has been taken over by hardline jihadis and pitted against both the Thai-speaking Buddhist minority and local Muslims, who have a moderate approach or who support the Thai government. Like Brunei, there is no official reaction from the Thai government concerning the emergence of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Even, the newspapers of Thailand kept quite silent on this issue, except for one news item published by *Bangkok Post* on 16 August 2021, under the heading “Taliban in control of Afghanistan, panic in Kabul”⁵⁵ Similarly, there are no official responses from the countries like Laos and Myanmar.

Thus, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan has a butterfly effect mainly on the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, The Philippines, and Thailand and has set the panic bells ringing thousands of kilometers away in Southeast Asia. The region is home to millions of Muslims. The Islamist group’s victory has sparked fears among the Southeast Asian governments that this development could inspire radicalization in the entire region. The deep-rooted radicalization in the ASEAN countries was further revealed after the rapid rise of ISIS in 2014. Thousands of Muslim youths from these nations traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and some of them even formed their militia under the banner of Katibah Nusantara in Syria’s Shaddadi, which comprised of hundreds of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) from Malaysia and Indonesia. Furthermore, ISIS had also inspired the Islamist radicals to carry out terrorist attacks in the region. For instance, consider the April 9, 2016, attack on Philippine security forces in the southern island of Basilan that was carried out by groups claiming allegiance to ISIS. January 14, 2016, attack on Indonesia was another major instance that marked the arrival of ISIS in the ASEAN. Some self-proclaimed followers of ISIS had set off bombs at a Starbucks outside the Sarinah mall and at a nearby police outpost, and gunfire had broken out on the streets at Jalan Tamrin in the heart of Jakarta.⁵⁶

Therefore, the Taliban's triumph in Afghanistan placed the entire Southeast Asian region into two core challenges. The first is that this could spur a massive influx of refugees into these developing nations, which could exacerbate its financial woes. The second biggest challenge for the Southeast Asian governments would be to rein in the ensuing ideological impact on the region. In this region, there are a considerable number of extremist and militant organizations, and for worse, the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan could stimulate them to replicate the Taliban's model in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The regional governments apprehended these threats quite severely and fighting the growing radicalism has remained the top priority of the ASEAN nations in fact, in a meeting foreign ministers agreed on "the importance of a collective and comprehensive approach to address terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism and radicalization."⁵⁷

Conclusion

Summarily then, the sudden withdrawal of America cum NATO troops from the turf of Afghanistan added moral injury to military failure to many countries in the globe, including the countries of Southeast Asia. This departure from Afghanistan raised a big question about American dependability and assurance as an ally and security partner. The impairment has been done, and this could play into the hands of Chinese leadership who revel in sowing seeds of doubt regarding the United States' untrustworthiness and may provide space both to China and Russia to act as a preferred partner to counter regional insurgencies⁵⁸ in the Southeast Asian region. Lack of a comprehensive policy toward Southeast Asia in line with contemporary US interests and to advance its relations with this region in the face of a rising China would be essential and if not, then the US leadership may pay the price of its strategic and political mistakes.

The recent tumble of Kabul to Taliban control has generated dialogues regarding the influence on the jihadist milieu in Southeast Asia. The Afghan crisis is no doubt a wake-up call for the ASEAN. The region is still battling with the Covid crisis and if the Afghan crisis is not dealt with skillfully, this may create further instability and security crisis in the whole region. However, it is too early to predict whether the Taliban will foster its relationships with transnational terrorist organizations,⁵⁹ which are existed in Southeast Asia and beyond. But for all the grand narratives and political calculations, it is clear that the countries of Southeast Asia's reactions to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan

remain quite severe on account of their past experiences. They consider the Islamic State threat and jihadi expansion may accelerate if the multiple Islamic terrorist groups declare a fragmented territory of their own in any parts of Southeast Asia where they already enjoy safe havens and may inspire the Islamist and jihadist groups to constantly strive for the ideological goal of creating an Islamic State by imitating the Taliban's model. However, it is not entirely clear the degree to which any of this rhetoric and discourse will be followed by action since the road forward to international diplomacy looks rather foggy, uncertain, and bumpy.

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