

Taliban II in Afghanistan: Stakeholders and their Engagement

Alok Kumar Gupta

Abstract

American presence in Afghanistan for twenty years were an eyesore for many. China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia always detested US presence in their proximity and wanted the US out of their backyard. Later, Turkey also joined this axis of US-haters. US withdrawal from Afghanistan has been quite chaotic. It has led to a visible shift in geopolitical alignments in the region as well as at global levels. On the other hand, it may have been beneficial for many like India which continued to invest and consolidate inside Afghanistan under the US security umbrella. Therefore, it makes it imperative to explore why some of the regional powers were against US presence in Afghanistan? Why India chose to work under the security umbrella of US in Afghanistan and ended-up investing nearly US \$3 billion over the last twenty years? How it is going to create benefits for regional powers like China, Pakistan, Russia, Iran and India? Author in the following sections of the paper has explored who are the stakeholders and what are the imperatives for their engagement with Taliban-II?

Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan

Taliban, the Islamic fundamentalist group consists of predominantly Pashtun. Nearly, 42 percent of Afghanistan population are Pashtuns. It ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until the US-led invasion in 2001 after the incident of 9/11 ousted it. The attack ousted Taliban and tried to install democracy and flush-out terrorist groups along with Taliban. However, Taliban returned to power in 2021 after regrouping in Pakistan and waging a sustained insurgency against US forces stationed in Afghanistan along with government of Afghanistan supported by US. Finally on August 15, 2021 Taliban took the reins of Afghanistan into its own hand and the last of American soldiers left its soil. Taliban occupied the institutions of power and governance in a swift offensive. United States has been withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan as per

the Peace Agreement of 2020 with the Taliban. However, the Taliban are now facing the challenges of forming a functional government alongside providing health, education, security and other economic opportunities to its citizens. Presently, Afghanistan is said to have been passing through the worst humanitarian crisis in its history. A poor and pauperised Afghanistan would be increasingly vulnerable to regional and global stakeholders in its stability and instability.

Major Concerns amidst Taliban's Takeover

Taliban has often been perceived as a radicalised organization. It has also been branded as terrorist organization. America waged 'war on international terrorism' mainly to oust Taliban from Afghanistan as it was suspected to have links with al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda was once upon a time, major threat to regional and international security and its chief Osama bin Laden was residing in the safe heavens of Taliban-I, whom US was searching for long as a mastermind of 9/11 attacks on twin towers. Afghanistan under Taliban was a safe haven for terrorists since its inception. It is this nature and notoriety of Taliban which continues to be the cause of major concerns for both regional and global powers. Given its history, Taliban may allow the soil of Afghanistan to be used against the security of any other country. Taliban is in dire need of resources which may necessitate exchange of resources for protection to al-Qaeda, and may be other terrorist groups active regionally and globally. According to reports, some of the members of the Taliban's interim cabinet previously worked with al-Qaeda and are believed to have maintained their ties in present as well.¹ This makes it further vulnerable to radical and terrorist groups. However, the Taliban's interim cabinet has been reiterating that Afghanistan's soil would not be allowed to be used against the security of any country.

Another major concern may be that other dreaded terrorist organization may endeavour to dislodge Taliban orchestrating violence and attacks on Taliban and its installations, either to capture power or not to allow Taliban to become stable. Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK) is one such terrorist organization which is at loggerheads with Taliban and has already started confronting Taliban.² China and Russia have been wary of terrorism spilling over into Xinjiang and Central Asia respectively. They have also refused to accept any refugees.³ India too is wary of Afghanistan becoming a safe heaven for terrorist groups. This has added an important dimension to the interests of stakeholders in Afghanistan.

However, the most important concern for major powers in and outside the region happens to be economic. The neo-liberal market-oriented

world has given precedence to economic interests of different countries over all other interests. Accordingly, this interest is being exploited in different ways by different countries. Therefore, Taliban has already sought to boost its diplomatic ties with countries in the region such as China, Pakistan and Russia driven by its economic interests. Taliban has requested these countries not to close their embassies and sever trade relations with Afghanistan. Fact remains that most countries would be interested to work with Taliban so far as their economic interests are concerned; but it is equally difficult to ascertain as to whether they would accord recognitions to the political regime of Taliban in Afghanistan? Hence, it makes it imperative to explore the stakes of these countries and what exactly they are up to groom their relations with Afghanistan.

USA—Is It a Stakeholder?

As mentioned above, it was United States which waged a war on international terrorism in 2001 in the aftermath of attack on its twin tower infamous as an incident of 9/11. In its major offensive with multinational forces against Afghanistan overthrew the Taliban in October 2001. Since then, Taliban were waging an insurgency against US-backed Afghan government. Taliban withstood counterinsurgency operations by NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the world's most powerful security alliance). The insurgency and counterinsurgency operations under three successive US administration led to decimation of more than 6,000 US troops and contractors and over 1,100 NATO troops. It also led to killing of nearly 47,000 civilians and estimated 73,000 Afghan troops and police officers between 2007 and 2021. Nearly 10,000 Taliban fighters are also believed to have died.⁴ NATO had stationed nearly 130,000 troops from fifty nations in Afghanistan in 2003 when it assumed the leadership of foreign forces. Finally, US-Taliban agreement was negotiated through 2020, in which US committed to withdrawing all US and NATO troops from Afghanistan provided Taliban stands on its commitment and cut its ties with terrorist groups. It was on August 15, 2021 that last of US soldier left Afghanistan and Taliban took over the reins of political power in its hands. US has also been imposing several sanctions on Taliban alongside sanctions by UN and Security Council. Thus, it took almost 20 years to America to replace one set of Taliban with another set of Taliban, that to paying a heavy price both in terms of life and material resources. Its entire endeavour to install a liberal democratic regime went in vain. Afghanistan military could not withstand Taliban's offensive. It is being

seen by many as gross failure of US in Afghanistan, a history which US would never wish to repeat.

USA now faces a very complex situation in South Asia. Its bilateral ties with Pakistan are in doldrums. It is at loggerheads with China over economy, South China Sea, expanding outreach in Indo-Pacific, Covid-19 Pandemic and host of other issues. It invested a lot in Pakistan which has been using American support to serve its own regional security interests. US-Pakistan ties that existed since the days of Cold War, seems to be getting recalibrated. A former ISI chief has boasted that Pakistan defeated the Soviet Union in Afghanistan with American Money and now it has defeated the US in Afghanistan with American money.⁵ There are greater probabilities that the resources that were being sucked towards maintaining its forces in Afghanistan, will now be available for implementing other foreign policy choices. One of the major endeavours of US in the contemporary world is to contain China's rise. Thus, the available resources could be redirected by US to deal with global and regional designs of expansionist and aggressive China.⁶ This shall be ascertained in near future as to what extent US is able to contain China, and boost its foreign policy choice in Indo-Pacific.

US strategic interests with India are continuously deepening which is being taken seriously by both its adversaries Pakistan and China. Under such circumstances India would move quite cautiously in its own proximity especially on any US misadventure in the region. Therefore, US for now does not seem to be stakeholder in Afghanistan and would continue to be indifferent in near future.

China as a Stakeholder

China has been looking for opportunity to invest all over the world. Afghanistan is in its own proximity and south of the Central Asian countries which are under the hypnotic spells of China's deep pocket as members of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Therefore, with Afghanistan in its fold China can extend its SCO endeavours to Afghanistan especially its mega connectivity projects BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). Thus, there are several reasons for which China becomes one of the major stakeholders in Afghanistan.

Firstly, as stated above China has ample monetary resources hence; it has been interested only to look for investment in Afghanistan. Afghanistan, even though it may continue to be unstable, its precious mineral reserves continue to be a compelling attraction for China, which it would wish to exploit, irrespective of the kind or regime in governance.

Secondly, as highlighted above China is pursuing its BRI connectivity project quite aggressively all over the world. Since, Afghanistan is in its own proximity how can it leave it. Since long, China wants to extend the CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) into Afghanistan. Taliban will continue to be in need of money to inject development to prove its governance and legitimacy. Therefore, extension of the Chinese CPEC project in Afghanistan would be in larger interest of both. It will bring greater sense of legitimacy to Afghanistan under Taliban; and China will get economic projects. Once China is able to bring Taliban under its debt diplomacy it will have greater control over the politics as well as polity of Afghanistan.

Thirdly, China is also aware of the fact that India is its rival and competitor in the region. It was owing to the support of US that India could expand its outreach inside Afghanistan and earned the goodwill of the people by delivering economic projects to them. China must have been wary of the fact. On the other hand, China has already made extensive inroads into India's backyard undermining India's interests and influence. Therefore, in the aftermath of US exit, Afghanistan is now an open turf for regional powers. China thus, made a well calculated diplomatic move to enter into negotiations with Taliban, especially when countries like India will find it difficult to enter into any kind of relations at the cost of their image of democracy lovers. Hence, it has provided a kind of golden opportunity to China to undermine Indian presence in Afghanistan and carve out major roles for itself.

Accordingly, China has been deepening its diplomatic ties with the Taliban even before Taliban took control of Afghanistan.⁷ China has been saying that it respects Afghan's right to decide their future, which could be interpreted to mean that it implies the victory of Taliban in Afghanistan as the will of the people. Therefore, China may be building its relations to build robust trade and business relations. Taliban is also badly in need of investment and revenues. Investment from any corner not tied to human rights standards are and will continue to be welcomed by Taliban. China under such circumstances will refrain from interfering into internal affairs of Taliban and probably Taliban too will reciprocate the same. China will thus expect that Taliban will not export terrorism in its Xinjiang region, which also shares a boundary with Afghanistan. Taliban will also refrain from accusing or castigating China for mistreating Muslims in its Xinjiang region, which most western countries are making hue and cry about. Taliban will expect that China must not make hue and cry about its human rights violations. Thus, both Taliban

and China are in need of each other and would complement as stakeholders. China's stakes are both economic as well as political, supplementing and complementing each other.

Pakistan as Stakeholder:

In the immediate aftermath of takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan declared that Taliban were, "breaking the chains of slavery."⁸ This was public show of support for Taliban for several reasons:⁹ (i) Pakistan has vested ideological interests in the Taliban. This means emphasizing and legitimizing Islamic nationalism over Pashtun nationalism. Pakistan has been inculcating Islamic nationalism in its Madrassas and Taliban are the product of that system; (ii) Pakistan has rejected the Durand Line, which separates Pakistani Pashtun-dominated territories from Afghanistan. The border region has been a bone of contention as Pashtun consider the region as their homeland and treat it as part of 'Pashtunistan'; (iii) A Pakistan-friendly Afghanistan will always serve the interests of Pakistan as it is in its immediate neighbourhood, to foment trouble in India or try containing India through Taliban.

Accordingly, the traditional wisdom in Pakistan has been that an Afghanistan under the rule of Taliban would be a boon for the security of Pakistan. Hence, it has been supportive of Taliban with expectations that it would help deny India which according to many in Pakistan is an existential threat to Pakistan.¹⁰ Such elements in Pakistan think, India must not be allowed to consolidate itself in Afghanistan. According to many experts, Pakistani security establishment continue to give financial and logistical support to the Taliban, including providing of sanctuary to Taliban militants in the past.¹¹

Pakistan, thus has been supporting Taliban with twin objectives of: containing Pashtun nationalism, and to counter India's growing influence in Afghanistan. However, the Pakistani establishment has been denying on continuous basis.¹² Ever since Taliban has usurped power in Afghanistan the erstwhile wisdom and thoughts of Pakistan seems to be largely dislocated and misguided. It has in fact backfired. Pakistan now seems to be less safe in the wake of Taliban takeover of political reins in Afghanistan. It has rather motivated Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which is regarded as Pakistan's Taliban to regroup, strengthen, orchestrate and stage the same takeover in Islamabad, that has happened in Kabul on August 15, 2021. Though, TTP seems to be overambitious but it has potentials to foment trouble inside Pakistan at the cost of political stability.

Iran as Stakeholder

It has been found that Pakistan and Iran are the two countries which exercises most of the influence in Afghanistan and are also the most at stake. Pakistan as discussed above may be treated to be the brainchild of Taliban, but now at the receiving end of its own creations. Iran on the other hand has always been looking to expand its influence with Taliban. It has been working with Taliban even though they have ideological differences. The convergence is driven by their common enemy, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK).¹³ Neither Iran nor Taliban would ever wish for expansion of the tentacles of ISK inside Afghanistan in any manner and to any level. Hence, they would work together. Iran is said to have provided material support and assistance to the Taliban at various stages of the conflict, which may have strengthened its relations with Taliban.¹⁴ Iran has provided military support and safe heavens to Taliban leaders in the past too. Iran is also a stakeholder in terms of pouring in refugees from Afghanistan as many Afghans would not prefer to live under the present Taliban. Iran uses these Afghans refugees for its own interests as insurgents in different parts of the region. Therefore, Iran has many things to gain from Taliban in Afghanistan.

Russia as Stakeholder

Russia has been lending its support to Doha talks where peace was being negotiated between US and Taliban. Russia also committed itself to the US-Taliban Agreement of 2020.¹⁵ It was on this occasion that both Russia and US reiterated that all Afghans, including Taliban ensure that Afghan territory will not be used as a base by any terror group for launching attacks on other countries. Probably, Russia agreed to this statement in view of its own problems related to Chechen rebels. Russia has engaged closely with Taliban leaders in the aftermath of Taliban takeover. Russia's own security and geopolitical interests are strong determinants of stability in Afghanistan and keeping Afghanistan free of armed conflict in the region. Russia thus has strong stake as a disturbed Afghanistan ridden with armed conflicts among splinter groups of insurgents would cause violence to spill over into Central Asia and cause destabilization close to Russia's borders. Russia too must be wary of ISIS (Islamic State) and especially its branch ISK. Therefore, its major concern would be to contain instability in Afghanistan so that extremist and radical ideology must not spread to Central Asian and onwards to South Caucasus and broader Russia. Russia has also been wary of drugs being smuggled inside Russia from Afghanistan. Central

Asian states enjoy leverage by providing electricity to Afghanistan and presenting cross-border trade opportunities.¹⁶ This will make Central Asian countries vulnerable to Taliban which may create security related issues in Central Asia to bargain electricity from them. Hence, all these issues make Russia another major stakeholder in Afghanistan, under Taliban. Russia is left with no choice but to keep monitoring Taliban's activities, overtures and engagement with Central Asian countries.

India as Stakeholder

India was faced with a unique situation in the immediate aftermath of Taliban takeover of Afghanistan as India was neck deep in Afghanistan diplomatically, politically, strategically and economically. It has created a huge diplomatic stake since the advent of democracy in Afghanistan.

Firstly, India was refraining from participation in Dialogues taking place at Doha between US diplomats and Taliban to strike a safe deal by facilitating inclusion of Taliban in the mainstream politics of Afghanistan and safe exit of American forces. Therefore, India was quite perplexed as to how should it react or deal with Taliban's takeover. India chose to maintain silence for a while.

Secondly, India made huge investment in dams, roads, and trade infrastructure in Afghanistan expanding its outreach almost in all provinces of Afghanistan. Therefore, it presented a complex situation as to how should India handle its economic stakes amidst Taliban's takeover and fall of democracy. India was largely working under the security umbrella of US thus far. Being a champion of democracy entering into explicit diplomatic negotiations with Taliban would have tarnished India's image.

Thirdly, India is said to have invested in Afghanistan about \$3 billion in development assistance since 2001, which has produced more than 400 projects including a dam, a highway, a paediatric hospital, and its parliament building. Amidst Taliban takeover, India has suddenly been locked out and lost in Afghanistan.¹⁷ India invested not only money but also substantial time and efforts towards rebuilding Afghanistan. Now most of these have already fallen into the hands of Taliban with no control of India.

Fourthly, India has largely been critical of Taliban for several reasons: firstly, that it always has the tag of terrorist organization; secondly, that it has been operating in connivance with many regional and international terrorist and extremist organizations; thirdly, that it has

been brought into existence and nurtured by Pakistan which has been notorious towards infiltrating terrorist outfits inside Indian border; fourthly, it has always been too close to India's regional rival Pakistan's ISI as stated above; fifthly, another great regional rival of India i.e., China too has expressed its intentions to work with Taliban; seventhly, it was Taliban that hijacked Indian Airlines plane to Kandahar in 1999 and bargained release of its terrorists; last and most important India has been a great champion of democracy and has always preferred to work with democratically elected regimes and Taliban is not a democratically elected outfit. Hence, any endeavour to work with Taliban may tarnish India's international personality.

Thus, India is faced with number of challenges in the immediate aftermath of takeover of Taliban in Afghanistan. Presence of Taliban-II in India's proximity may create many problems for India in future. Immediate aftermath of takeover posed the serious challenge of ensuring that its assets and investments in Afghanistan are not imperilled on account of in-fighting. Another major concern that emerged in the immediate aftermath was for Indian diplomats, personnel and citizens based in Afghanistan. This is because the American withdrawal was an expected event and since the time India came to know of it, India was decreasing its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. It was in April 2020 that Indian government flew home all Indian staff at its missions in Herat and Jalalabad, on account of security and COVID-19 concerns. India also closed its consulates at Kandahar and Mazar. Its Embassy at Kabul had issued stern advisories telling all Indian citizens that they must take commercial flights out of Afghanistan at earliest.¹⁸ This also smacks that either India had prior intelligence of the Taliban takeover amidst American withdrawal from Afghanistan; or it had well calculated on the basis of its analyses of the situations. Whatever be the reason, the fact is that India now is going to face with number of challenges in the future amidst presence of Taliban-II.

First, the presence of Taliban-II poses security risks as there are probabilities that it would galvanise regional militants, and anti-Indian terror groups. Groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammad which have been keeping bases and training grounds along the southern provinces that border Pakistan could further entrench themselves and carry out offensives against India.¹⁹ Therefore, the takeover of Taliban has maximised the threat of already growing radicalization and emergence of several pan-Islamic groups in India's neighbourhood.

Secondly, India has been facing hostilities at the LAC (Line of Actual

Control) vis-à-vis China and the LOC (Line of Control) vis-à-vis Pakistan. Therefore, another hostile government in Afghanistan would further complicate India's strategic options in the region. Taliban's control over Afghanistan also meant that Pakistani military and intelligence will have a bigger hand to influence outcomes for the country, which will attenuate India's role in development and infrastructure related work that India has been doing for the past twenty years.²⁰ India had earned huge goodwill of the people of Afghanistan for its role under the erstwhile democratic regime of Afghanistan.

Thirdly, India has invested quite a lot towards developing the Chabahar port to circumvent Pakistan in its commercial intercourse with Central Asian countries and beyond. Taliban takeover means gradually the trade through Afghanistan would be routed through Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan. This will make India's endeavour of developing a trade route through Chabahar becoming unviable. May be for this reason itself, that US and China have centred their connectivity projects from Central Asia through Pakistan, with the newly announced US-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Quadrilateral, and Chinese plans to link the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with the Trans-Afghanistan railroad and Belt and Road Projects.²¹

Fourthly, Indian projects that were going-on have gradually went under Taliban control. Projects such as Zaranj-Delaram Highway and Salma Dam are already into the hands of Taliban. Other projects like check-dams, schools and urban projects which are under construction are in doldrums now. Under such circumstances India has hardly any control or leverage to enter into bargain or negotiation with Taliban. India will continue to be at receiving end.

Fifthly, India may also suffer on account of in-flux of Afghan refugees. History is witness to the fact that under Taliban-I also there were erosion of women's rights and minority rights. The upside down turn of democratic regime led to brutal form of injustice meted out to vulnerable sections of Afghanistan populace. Afghanistan once again will face international isolation, meagre financial support with consequent humanitarian crisis. According to most reports Afghanistan is already under the severe spell of humanitarian crisis as of now. Hence, such a situation in Afghanistan will force its pauperised section to end up as refugee in neighbouring countries, with India being one of the favourable choices for such population.

Last and most important, India's policy of wait and watch that it has adopted may lead to its exclusion from the role played by major powers

in the future, regarding the fate of Taliban and Afghanistan. Hence, India will be excluded from the 'high table' where Afghanistan's future will be discussed. An example to this effect becomes evident when the present political dispensation of India accepted the Qatari invitation to join 'regional talks' with the Taliban in Doha. Surprisingly enough, India found itself cut out of the opening session that included the US, China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and the UK., as well as the Troika-Plus talks of Russia-US-China-Pakistan, and was instead included in the session with Germany, Norway, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Turkey.²² Thus, the same may continue in future as well.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, human rights abuses have been on the rise ever since Taliban usurp political power in Afghanistan. It has been ranging from public execution of score of peoples to threat to the life of journalists, activists, school-going girls, and women going to work and also otherwise to women in general. Amidst such a situation, the major challenge before the regional and global stakeholders is to provide humanitarian assistance to the ailing and suffering population of Afghanistan. The dilemma is that if they expand their assistance, they run the risk of allegations that they are trying to consolidate the Taliban in power and weakening leverage to influence their behaviour. UN Security Council has agreed to provide waiver for one year towards providing humanitarian assistance not to be treated as violations of sanctions.

Taliban has been making all endeavour to reach out to global leaders and regional leaders to manage not only legitimacy for itself, but also aid, help and humanitarian assistance for its people. It is trying to project itself as a reformed version of Taliban-I. However, in view of the geopolitical and geo-economic interest many countries may enter into deals with Taliban, without according due legitimacy to the regime. US may not be the stakeholder for now, but sooner or later it will enter into the fray. China and Pakistan are major stakeholder in present Taliban's Afghanistan, though for different reasons and different interests. India is at the crossroad with huge stakes in the country. Iran has its own interests on short-term and long-term basis. Russia too is a stakeholder but is presently occupied with war in Ukraine. All the stakeholders, are interested more on account of national-self-interest, rather than for the cause of democracy. Legitimacy to the Taliban's regime would certainly set bad precedent and motivations for many of the insurgent movements going-on in different parts of the globe. Under

such circumstances, these stakeholders need to come together and first work for the cause of democracy in Afghanistan, then try to promote their national interests.

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