

The Taliban and its Challenges to the Regional Security Architecture

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Abstract

The arrival of Taliban in Afghanistan has posed many serious questions to the global community. The new regime has minimum respect to human rights and has no reverence to democratic principles. They also have a fundamentalist ideology that may threaten the global order in the long run. The Taliban linkage to terrorist groups also poses hesitation on the sustainability peace in the region. This is a matter of concern for the security architecture of the region. There are many nations in line to support the new regime. But these supporters are not in a position to change the politics of the country or to influence the policy makers. It is found that the long-term intervention of foreign forces in the country also failed to create legitimacy for the previous regime. The flow of foreign aid was not properly channelised for the development of the county. They also failed to develop political infrastructures, thus leading to the arrival of Taliban at the helm of the affairs. It is argued that the international community should learn from its failures and look the Afghanistan case in a closer perspective. That needs positive interactions with the government and more concentration on the politics of the region.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, Terrorism, Global order

Introduction

Afghanistan occupies a strategic significance in the security architecture of Asia. Any changes in the state is a matter of concern not only for its neighbours, but also for the global order. The arrival of Taliban in the helm of affairs in Afghanistan should be examined in this context. Much of Afghanistan's modern history has been taken up with its political consolidation. There are many outside influences in the politics of the country and that also significantly affected domestic issue. But still Afghanistan was not a visible player in the world stage until the 1950s.

For centuries Afghanistan was best known for the foreign armies crossing her territory. In 1920's King Amanullah tried to open the country to modernization through contacts with Europe. But he was overthrown in 1929 by reactionary elements, and the modernization policies abruptly ended. In the late 1930s, British efforts to thwart Nazi Germany's efforts to gain an economic and political foothold in Afghanistan drew the country into international politics. Iran's strategic location prompted the Allies to remove its king, Reza Shah, in 1941 and to occupy the country. But Afghanistan kept its neutrality in the global conflict. Even with the Cold War initiatives of the Soviet Union to mint new communist regions, Afghanistan remained a lesser interesting state. However the death of Stalin and a containment policy of regional alliances brought a major reorientation in the politics of the region. Soviet union now called for mobilizing nonideological support through assistance to less developed countries, to wean them away from Western influences. Thus Afghanistan became a concern for Soviet union in the new policy. By the mid-1950s, Soviet leaders were offering substantial development and military assistance. Incidentally the United States responded with its own aid programs. In the case of Afghanistan, however, Washington was not taking the country seriously and this may be because of its association with Pakistan. In fact Pakistan maintained poor relations with Afghanistan, mostly because of the Afghan government's advocacy of a Pashtun ethnic state to be carved out of Pakistan. Unlike the other states in the region, Afghan governments remained formally nonaligned and for more than twenty years Afghanistan saw a degree of accommodation between the super-powers

During the 1950s and 1960s serious disputes erupted between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan was the only country to refuse to support Pakistan's UN membership. Pakistan on several occasions closed its border, creating serious economic difficulties for Afghanistan. The country's economy was denied access to the port of Karachi, the principal entry point for Afghan imports and exports. As increasing numbers of Afghans went to the West and India to study, they tended to maintain close relationship with the West. When King Zahir Shah decided to establish a new constitution, he assigned the task to the Western-oriented officials and they produced a document in 1964 that aimed at establishing Western-like institutions and democratic values. However the constitutional experiment soon met with a failure and a military-led communist coup occurred in 1973. Over the next five years, the Soviet Union established its influence over the country.

The jihad mounted from Pakistan during the 1980s, supported by the United States drew Pakistan into Afghan affairs. Pakistan enlisted in the geostrategic effort to keep Soviet forces tied down in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s participation also suggested the possibility of eventually liberating Afghan territory to provide strategic depth against India. But things went beyond the plan and Afghan mujahideen partiesbattled one another for power and brought the country to near anarchy. By 1996 the largely Pashtun-led Taliban had swept much of the country and captured Kabul.

The Taliban’s August 2021 takeover was swift, it happened not because the Taliban had massive popular support but because the former government evidently had so little. The political instability in Afghanistan has practically ruined the country and the country met with the lowest levels of human development¹.

Table 1: Trends in Human development in Afghanistan (1990-2019)

Sl No	Year	Life Expectancy at Birth	Mean years of schooling	GNI Per Capita	HDI Value
1	1990	50.3	1.5	2,478	0.302
2	1995	53.4	1.9	1344	0.331
3	2000	55.8	2.2	904	0.350
4	2005	58.3	2.6	1390	0.418
5	2010	61.0	3.2	1,917	0.472
6	2015	63.4	3.6	2128	0.500
7	2016	63.8	3.6	2,135	0.502
8	2017	64.1	3.8	2230	0.506
9	2018	64.5	3.9	2,217	0.509
10	2019	54.8	3.9	2229	0.511

(Source: UNDP Data²)

Understanding Taliban

The Taliban are a predominantly an Islamic fundamentalist group that returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021. The group was formed in the early 1990s and its creation is related to by Afghan mujahideen, who had resisted the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–89). It is alleged that they had the covert backing of the CIA and Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI). They were joined by younger

Pashtun tribesmen who studied in Pakistani madrassas. Pashtuns generally constitute a plurality in Afghanistan and are also a major ethnic group in Pakistan's north and west. In the initial post-Soviet era the movement attracted popular support as they promised stability and rule of law. In 1994 Taliban entered Kandahar to pacify the crime-ridden southern city, and by September 1996 seized the capital, Kabul, from President Burhanuddin Rabbani. Later Taliban declared Afghanistan an Islamic emirate, with Mullah Mohammed Omar, a cleric and veteran of the anti-Soviet resistance as 'commander of the faithful'. The regime controlled almost 90 percent of the country. They imposed a harsh brand of justice as they consolidated territorial control. Taliban jurisprudence was drawn from the Pashtuns' pre-Islamic tribal code and interpretations of sharia coated with Wahhabi doctrines. The Taliban government during their rule neglected social services and other basic state functions of state. On the other hand they brought strict implementation of religious instructions. For example the government required women to wear burqa, banned music and television; and jailed men whose beards it deemed too short.

In the year 2001 Taliban lost power due to the US intervention. After the US intervention the Taliban operated across the Pakistani border and when finally the US withdrawn from the country they took back the territory and power within a short span of time. The 20 years of war in Afghanistan was not an easy task for the world powers and resources were flood into Afghanistan from every part of the world to support the U.S.-backed Afghan government. Along with US the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was also highly involved in the conflict. During the course of conflict US lost 6,000 troops and contractors and NATO causality was over 1,100. It was also estimated that some 47,000 civilians died, and 73,000 Afghan troops and police officers were killed between 2007 and 2021. Tens of thousands of Taliban fighters are also believed to have died.

The deployment of forces in Afghanistan was also unprecedented. In 2011 around 100,000 US troops were deployed. At one point of time NATO stationed more than 130,000 troops from fifty nations in Afghanistan. Actually, for NATO this was the first operational commitment outside of Europe. Apart from NATO the UN also directly intervened in the scenario to suppress the activities of Taliban specifically after 9/11. The UN Security Council first imposed sanctions on the regime for harbouring al-Qaeda in 1999 and expanded the sanctions after 9/11³.

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The period of US intervention in Taliban has witnessed a heavy volume of funding to Afghanistan. But unfortunately, this funding was highly expensive and was spent with no transparency. The bulk of foreign assistance has gone into security-related activities. Since 2001, more than half (57%) the total assistance has gone to the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF). But strengthening security actually does not reduced the causality rates. Western aid agencies spend a large part of the international aid to Afghanistan on their own officials while young Afghans, beset by poverty and unemployment, fight for the Taliban. The NGO Action Aid uses the term 'Phantom aid' to describe the nature of foreign aid operations in the country. It means that the aid either returns to the US or remains there, and never reaches the Afghan people at all. Eighty-three per cent of US' aid to Afghanistan is "phantom aid" (Nasuti 2009), a term coined by the NGO. The result was weak infrastructures, low human development indexes and incidentally popular dissatisfaction. If the foreign investment was done wisely on social sectors, the strength of Taliban might have been weakened and Afghanistan might have opted more democratic form of governance.

Table-2: Foreign aid to Afghanistan during 2002-2008
(In Million Us Dollars)

Sl No	Name of Donor	Amount
1	US	22789
2	World Bank	2627.2
3	ADB	1740.58
4	UK	1455
5	Japan	1410
6	Germany	1226.04
7	Canada	1117.69
8	India	942.03
9	Italy	424.3
10	Netherlands	492.6

(Source: Compiled from Afghan Government website and other sources)

Taliban and the world order

Democracy is an ideal that stands for equality and freedom. It assumes a scenario of deliberations and political participation. It also postulates secularism as a governing principle of the state. The life and freedoms

of every citizen should be secured against external threats. In modern times one of the most potent threats to democracy comes from terrorism.

The establishment of Taliban government in Afghanistan is supposed to bring drastic changes in the world order. It has given a boost to terrorism even though the official version rules out any linkage with terrorism.

*Moreover, international observers remain concerned that the Taliban support terrorist organizations, particularly al-Qaeda, posing a threat to regional and international security. The United States invaded Afghanistan after it refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. Under the Taliban's rule, Afghanistan could become a safe haven for terrorists capable of launching attacks against the United States and its allies, experts say, despite Taliban statements that "Afghanistan's soil will not be used against the security of any other country".*⁴

It is to be seen that the former Afghanistan government was banking much on international aid. It is estimated that 75 percent of the government's public expenditures is covered by grants from international partners.

*Afghanistan is transforming into a black hole because billions of aid dollars are being spent without any remarkable positive effect on the standard of living of the people and the stability of the government. It is argued that a lot has been done in Afghanistan in terms of reconstruction, education, health facilities, industrialisation, etc; however, the reality is that the impact expected from the millions spent so far has not been achieved. In such a situation, where the economy has been highly devastated by war and is hugely aid-dependent, the government has also adopted a donor-driven strategy of a free market economy, which will intensify dependence on import and discourage domestic industrial investment(Fayez 2012)*⁵.

But when Taliban came back to power many Western countries have suspended aid and the World Bank has blocked the Taliban from accessing millions of dollars . This may create economic turmoil in the country in the near future. The result may be that Afghanistan may resort to new sources of income including arms-trade and terrorism.

The economic development of a country is the first step to its democratisation. Terrorism is not a national choice but an option for easy resources. In the case of Afghanistan the natural resources of the

country can be the means for the long-term economic development. Afghanistan is an untapped mineral-rich country and proper utilisation of the resources can alter the Afghan economy. The previously unknown deposits of minerals include copper, chromium, uranium, marble, salt, gold, silver, iron ore, cobalt and lithium, among others that have been discovered. Geological surveys are still incomplete and there is a possibility of more discoveries. It has been estimated that 5.4 million tonnes of lithium exist in the country. Mineral deposits remain untapped due to a lack of infrastructure, technical expertise.

However the change of guards in Kabul has badly influenced the prospectus of the country. The combination of declining incomes and increasing prices has driven a severe deterioration in household living standards. Extreme hardship has led to the widespread adoption of harmful coping mechanisms such as borrowing at high interest rates, the sale or consumption of assets, and reduced investment in human capital. This will have long-term consequences given Afghanistan's very young population. World bank reports;

Afghanistan's economic outlook is stark. Under any scenario, Afghanistan will face a smaller economy, significantly higher rates of poverty, and more limited economic opportunities for the 600,000 Afghans reaching working age every year. Human development outcomes are likely to deteriorate in the context of substantial disruptions to basic services and increased poverty. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, war, and associated sanctions may have significant exacerbating impacts via increased prices for imported food and fuel⁶.

Conclusion

The story of Afghanistan is supposed to be a lesson to the world leaders. It teaches that peace cannot be brought in by guns and by external interventions.. Nation making is a serious task that should be undertaken with the explicit consent and cooperation of the stakeholders. The US and NATO presence in Afghanistan didn't brought much changes at the end of the day. The billions of dollars that has flown into the country had not improved the life of the people. One of the major concerns in this context is the nature of the previous Afghan government. They failed to establish legitimacy in the society as the social infrastructures were very poor during their regime. The government failed to monitor the vast treasure of foreign fund that has flown to the country. The democratic and political infrastructures were also very weak. The interventions of external powers only helped to deepened the crisis.

As is often stated, Afghanistan stands in a dangerous neighborhood. Responsibility for much of the political instability and misery of its people can be traced to external powers seeking to realize their own strategic, ideological, and economic interests in the country. The close and more distant neighbors of Afghanistan have regularly intervened in its politics and economy. Foreigners have sometimes acted on behalf of domestic clients and have organized and armed them to dominate large portions of the country. Although renowned for resisting foreign intruders, Afghans cannot thus be absolved of responsibility for much of the fratricide and destruction that has occurred in recent decades. Still, the aggravating role of outside states, near and far, has also made civil conflicts more sustained and lethal.

The coming back of Taliban in Afghanistan poses many questions to the global community. One of the major issues here is the right of people, particularly human rights. Afghanistan is different in many ways from the country the Taliban last ruled in 2001. Women have been active participants in many parts of the society; protections for them, and ethnic and religious minorities, were enshrined in the country's 2004 constitution. The Taliban has actually that progress. A half of the population is not permitted to appear in public or to express themselves. This is not the world that has been envisaged when UN was established. The values of democracy are not properly established or acknowledged. Absence of public institutions and proper governance may also pose threat to the sustainability of the new government. Taliban's weakest point is its financial need. With the Afghan economy in free fall and swathes of the population facing a dire food crisis, gaining access to funds is a political and security priority for the Taliban⁸. The answers to these questions are truly complex and need a long term strategy.

An external interference is not an immediate probability in the current context. The next viable option is the international pressure tactics, particularly from the neighbouring states and partners. That can work better than the rules of 'sanctions and embargo'. It is to be understood that Afghanistan is not a lost nation. Rather it is a spoiled nation and can be brought back to its past glory with international support and positive interventions. Finally, it is suggested that economic development of the country can alter its story. Afghanistan needs international support to use its vast resources. Once the economic problems are solved half of the issue will be over for the country.

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