

# The Biden Administration's Policy Towards Afghanistan: What Lies Ahead

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## Abstract

The article aims to examine the Biden administration's policy towards Afghanistan. In doing so, the paper argues that President Biden completed failed in analysing the ground reality in Afghanistan. The sudden collapse of the Afghan civilian government also exposed the US' argument that it had trained and equipped people of Afghanistan to defence their country. Finally, It has explained that the political instability in Afghanistan will have huge security repercussion for South Asia, if the Taliban is not dealt with effectively.

## Introduction

An atmosphere of insecurity and unrest has once again engulfed Afghanistan as the Taliban terrorist organization has regained full control of the country in the wake of the withdrawal of US troops. Twenty years ago, when then-US president George W. Bush launched a global war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda after the deadly Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, Washington's action was viewed as decisive in defeating the menace of terrorism. Alas, the manner of the US troop withdrawal, and the rhetoric that accompanied it, has only strengthen the Taliban. It is this context that this article aims to examine the impact of Biden administration's policy on Afghanistan.

Of course, the successive US President starting with President Barack Obama had considered to withdrawal US troops from Afghanistan. However, they could not succeed in their plan largely because of the continued fear of the return of the Taliban terrorist organisation to Afghanistan. It was the reason that US President Joe Biden saying that the US went to Afghanistan for nation building has appalled Washington's NATO partners and other allied countries. The question

was not why US forces were returning from Afghanistan, but how peace, security and development can be ensured there. The Taliban's success in unsettling Afghanistan's civilian government pushed the country toward an era of darkness, hopelessness, insecurity and misery. Sadly, the situation unfolded quickly in that direction, with the US and its allies helplessly observing the Taliban capturing the site of power. The Taliban's return to power has also jeopardize the regional security environment. President Joe Biden and other top U.S. officials were stunned by the pace of the Taliban's nearly complete takeover of Afghanistan, as the planned withdrawal of American forces urgently became a mission to ensure a safe evacuation.<sup>1</sup> The speed of the Afghan government's collapse and the ensuing chaos posed the most serious test of Biden as commander in chief, and he was the subject of withering criticism from Republicans who said that he had failed. Biden campaigned as a seasoned expert in international relations and has spent months downplaying the prospect of an ascendant Taliban while arguing that Americans of all political persuasions have tired of a 20-year war, a conflict that demonstrated the limits of money and military might to force a Western-style democracy on a society not ready or willing to embrace it. No U.S. military or diplomatic personnel are in Afghanistan as of June 2022.

### **The Return of Taliban in Afghanistan and Biden's Policy**

The Taliban announced the formation of a new government dominated by Taliban loyalists on September 7, 2021. The composition of that government and the Taliban's suppression of peaceful protests against its rule indicate the group has prioritized internal cohesion over outreach to other segments of Afghan society or similar gestures that might have been welcomed by the United States and other countries. Some anti-Taliban Afghan leaders have sought U.S. support and have claimed guerilla-style attacks against Taliban forces. However, the regional Islamic State affiliate may pose a more potent threat to the Taliban. U.S. policymakers have focused on a number of impacts of the Taliban's renewed rule, including the status of the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and U.S. efforts to counter these groups "over the horizon." Taliban actions have been detrimental for the status of women and girls in Afghanistan, a longtime U.S. policy concern, with girls prohibited from attending school above the secondary level and women's roles curtailed. The status of ethnic and religious minorities, as well as the tens of thousands of Afghans who worked for U.S. efforts and seek to leave the country, also remain closely scrutinized by U.S. policymakers. Since the Taliban

takeover, Afghanistan has faced intersecting and overwhelming humanitarian and economic crises, a result of challenges both pre-existing (such as droughts, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, and Afghanistan's weak economic base) and new (such as the cut-off of international development assistance, U.S. sanctions on the Taliban, and the U.S. hold on Afghan central bank assets). The Biden Administration and many in Congress seek to ameliorate these crises, but without taking any action that boosts the Taliban's position or that may be perceived as doing so. Pursuing these policies in tandem may prove complicated. More to the point, the Taliban's return to power has exacerbated one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world in Afghanistan, long one of the world's poorest and most aid-dependent countries. A number of interrelated factors, including the cut-off of international development assistance, U.S. and international sanctions on the Taliban, and the U.S. hold on Afghanistan's central bank assets, have all contributed to the economic breakdown that underlies the humanitarian crisis.

A number of Islamist extremist terrorist groups have for decades operated in Afghanistan, and the Taliban have related to them in varying ways. Al Qaeda (AQ) and ISKP are two of the most significant of these terrorist groups, and the Taliban's takeover is likely to affect them differently. U.S. sanctions on the Taliban (in place in various forms since 1999) remain, but it is unclear to what extent they are affecting humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan; the head of the Norwegian Refugee Council said in January 2021 that sanctions have "held back" their operations. Since the Taliban's takeover, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has issued several general licenses outlining the U.S. position and stating that U.S. sanctions do not prohibit the provision of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.<sup>76</sup> Still, the continued existence of sanctions might lead financial institutions or other actors to "de-risk" Afghanistan by refusing to engage in the country rather than risk violation of U.S. sanctions.

### **Regional Dynamics in South Asia: India's Concerns**

The vacuum created by the US withdrawal has provided an opportunity for China to expand its regional influence in managing Afghanistan's peace and security, thereby protecting its national interests, is China. In the past, China did show interest in the country, but it preferred that the US engaged in its internal affairs, as peace and security in Afghanistan helped China maintain its own security and carry out developmental activities in Xinjiang, which is adjacent

to Afghanistan. When the administration of then-US president Barack Obama in 2013 began peace talks with the Taliban, Beijing, which had already emerged as a major economic and military power in Asia, began to feel the need to reorient its policy toward Kabul to protect its interests in case of a US withdrawal.<sup>2</sup>

There are several reasons for China wanting a stable Afghanistan. First, political unrest, terrorist activities and violence could have a bearing on the security of Xinjiang. The region is dominated by the Uighur Muslim community, and there is a possibility that terror organizations, including the Taliban, could provide support to Uighurs fighting for independence from China. Thus, to prevent the emergence of Afghanistan as a training base for anti-China activities, it is imperative for the administration of Chinese President Xi Jinping to invest its political capital in stabilizing the country. Second, as one of China's aims is to replace the US' power in Asia and beyond, Beijing sees the withdrawal as a strategic opportunity to expand its foothold in South Asia, which could enable Beijing to challenge India's predominant position in the region. Third, as Afghanistan geographically connects China to the Middle East and beyond, the country assumes significant importance in the expansion of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. Fourth, as Afghanistan is believed to have the world's largest unexploited reserves of iron, copper and other natural resources, China also sees economic benefits in ensuring stability and development in the country.

China has emerged as Afghanistan's largest foreign investor, with investment in roads, railways and other infrastructure projects. Fifth, China's friendly ties with Pakistan would be aided by the close nexus between the Taliban and the Pakistani establishment if China had some role in managing the country. With its interests in Afghanistan and having realized the Taliban's importance in promoting security, China, alongside Russia and Pakistan, previously initiated peace talks with the Taliban. Beijing has also used the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to work with Middle Eastern countries to address peace, security and development in Afghanistan. While China continues to support Afghanistan's civilian government, it also sees a major role for the Taliban in the country's stability.

When Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi hosted a nine-member Taliban delegation led by chief negotiator Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in the northern city of Tianjin last month, he described the Taliban as an important military and political force, and opined that the Taliban should play an important role in Afghanistan's peace,

reconciliation and reconstruction process. On the other hand, the delegation assured China that they will not allow anyone to use Afghan soil against China. While the Taliban's onslaught does not hold promise for the future of Afghans, time will tell if China succeeds in filling the leadership vacuum, or if its involvement marks the beginning of the end of China's imperialist posturing.

Pakistan too is having close eyes on the changing political scenario in Afghanistan. In fact, sections of internal relations scholars argued that the return of the Taliban to power would strengthen Pakistan's position, given the close nexus between the Pakistani military and the Taliban terrorist group. This is evident from the fact that Pakistan is trying to make the best of the Afghan conflict's undesirable outcome. Islamabad has backed the Taliban for years, but it would have preferred them to regain political authority in Afghanistan via inclusion in a government with both international legitimacy and outside financial support. Senior Pakistani officials have held numerous meetings with the new Taliban government, both in Kabul and Islamabad since August 2021.

However, there are some indications that the Taliban's return to power may pose challenges for Pakistan. The Taliban's victory may provide a morale and perhaps material boost to Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, including the so-called Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-i Taliban-i Pakistan, or TTP, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization). TTP attacks against Pakistani security forces increased after August 2021, reportedly prompting the Pakistani government to seek the Afghan Taliban's mediation of several ceasefires, most recently in June 2022. Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by the presence of over one million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well as a long-running and ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile border, at which Taliban and Pakistani government forces have intermittently clashed in the past some months. Despite such differences, Pakistan is unlikely to abandon its Afghan allies. Still hopeful that the Taliban takeover will protect Pakistani interests in Afghanistan, Islamabad will likely keep treading lightly, continuing to act as the Taliban's key advocate in the region and beyond, while urging the Taliban to acquiesce in addressing international concerns.<sup>3</sup>

The re-emergence of the Taliban has certainly posed a huge challenge for India, which has always supported the "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled," process with participation of the elected government in Kabul. Ever since reconstruction work began in Afghanistan, India has invested over \$3 billion building roads, hospitals,

schools, providing training, arms and fighter aircraft to the Afghan armed forces. Taliban's arrival on the centre stage has not only put India's economic interests at stake in Afghanistan, it will also pose a huge security threat to India because Pakistan's prominence in Afghanistan will increase and Islamabad could use the Taliban against Indians there. Since Russia has also moved to improve ties with Pakistan and is more than keen to play an important role in Afghanistan's internal affairs, as evident from Moscow's own peace talks with the Taliban last year, the possible emergence of a strategic China-Russia-Pakistan axis along the Taliban, could jeopardise India's position. The Pulwama attack had only validated India's security concerns. Counter-terrorism experts in the US have argued that it had highlighted the utter failure of the Trump administration in pressurising Pakistan to act against terrorist organisations operating from its soil. They had also argued that the ISI must have helped JeM in carrying out the Pulwama attack. Afghanistan's elected government had also complained to the UN Security Council against Pakistan's recent engagement with the Taliban.<sup>4</sup> These challenges notwithstanding, A team of Indian officials met the acting foreign minister of Afghanistan to discuss bilateral ties and humanitarian aid in what was the first such visit to Kabul since the group took control of the country last year. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs earlier said in a statement the officials would oversee the delivery of humanitarian assistance and visit areas targeted by Indian-backed programmes or projects.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the United States says no foreign government is contemplating legitimacy for Taliban rule in Afghanistan, even as the insurgent-turned-Islamist group next month will mark the first year of its return to power in Kabul. Donald Lu, U.S. assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, told VOA in an interview. "Yes, some countries are beginning a very slow process of normalization of relations. No one is talking about formal recognition." The U.S. diplomat noted that international discussions instead were focused on seeking an engagement with the Taliban that can help improve the situation on the ground in Afghanistan in terms of the rights of women and girls, and security. "We, as partner countries, should also be working with authorities in Afghanistan to create a better world for Afghan people. We try to influence what is happening in Afghanistan for the betterment of the people of Afghanistan, but also a stable region."<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Be it as it may, there is no denying the fact that the Biden administration

failed to foresight the situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of its troops. At the same time, the return of the Taliban has also exposed the dubious of claims of the US administration that over these years the US has helped build Afghan armed forces. While an end to the misery of Afghan people is not in sight, it has to be seen how the Biden administration becomes able to protect the rights of the people of Afghanistan and regional security in South Asian and beyond.

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