

Afghanistan under Taliban 2.0: Strategic Trends and Trajectories

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Abstract

In August 2021 Taliban seized power in Afghanistan soon after the US troops' withdrawal. The new Taliban regime has not yet been recognised by the international community including the US and the regional powers. New Delhi appears more cautious about charting a new Afghan strategy that would secure its vital national security interests without jeopardising the regional geopolitical environment that emerged in the post-pandemic era. India has been playing a constructive role for a stable and secure Afghanistan since the Taliban was ousted by the US-led War on Terror. The Russia-Ukraine war has drawn the great power focus into the European theatre. In this context, this article examines the emerging strategic and security trends and trajectories in the post-Taliban takeover and how they impinge on India's National Security.

Introduction

Taliban has returned to power by capturing Kabul in August 2021 after two decades of fighting a fierce guerilla war with the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Though the new Taliban regime has consolidated various provinces militarily under its rule, its economy is in shambles and depends on external aid or funding. Taliban regime under the leadership of Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada¹ is struggling to run the country. The Taliban administration is sternly implementing the *Sharia* practices, which

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prohibits women from access to education and jobs. After the Taliban took over the reins, New Delhi appears serious about charting a new Afghan strategy that would secure its vital national security interests. As an emerging power in the region, India's role in shaping the regional security architecture is inevitable. India has been engaging with the so-called Good Taliban much before they came to power in 2021. Indian officials and interlocutors had a series of meetings with Taliban leadership in Qatar and expressed India's stand and concerns.² New Delhi announced a development assistance of Rs 200 crore (\$24.3 million) for the Afghanistan in the Union Budget 2023-24.³

India is largely concerned about the terrorist groups operating from Afghan soil. The rise of ISIS-Khorasan Province (ISIS-KP) and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) poses security threat to India. The post abrogation of Art 370, India is focusing on territorial integrity and does not want any sort of fallouts in Kashmir with the external support to subvert peace and stability.

The New Taliban Regime

The new Taliban regime seems to have embraced the Iranian political Model of Islamic theocracy wherein the political legitimacy is derived from the religious leader rather than from the people. What puzzled everyone was the appointment of other ministers in the newly formed Cabinet to run the country which was once mired in a democratic process with rampant electoral malpractices. Given the fact, that the tribal customs and rules are largely respected and deep-rooted in the Afghan society, any sort of Western model of democratic practices were less popular among the masses.

Many of them in the Taliban cabinet are either figured in the UN-designated terrorist list or have bounties on their heads⁴. The most notable appointment is the interior minister in the new regime, Sirajuddin Jallaloudine Haqqani the head of the notorious Haqqani network that has been quite active in effectively resisting the ISAF since 2004. Sirajuddin is the most wanted terrorist by the FBI.⁵ It is pertinent to mention that it was the Haqqanis⁶ who provided shelter and training for the dismembered Taliban cadres during war on terror campaign. They have had strong ties with the Al – Qaeda leadership including Osama Bin Laden. There are reports which indicate that Haqqani escorted Bin Laden to Abbottabad,

where he was later killed in a US operation. Miram Shah in North Waziristan in Pakistan is the main base for the Haqqani.⁷ What makes interesting of his appointment to the interior ministry is his close association with Pakistan's deep state, which has been backing the Haqqanis for quite a long period at the same time being part of the US-led war on a terror campaign against the Taliban and other related terrorist networks⁸. Once a terrorist always remains as a terrorist. According to Jeffrey A. Dressler, "although the Haqqani network was subsumed with the Taliban under his Quetta Shura, they maintain distinct command and control, and lines of operations".⁹ During the period between 2002 and 2011, the Haqqani emerged as the core element of the revival of the new Taliban.

The other significant appointment to the cabinet is Mawlawi Muhammad Yaqoub, the defence minister and also one who used to control the finance department of the Taliban organization. He is the youngest in the new team and also the eldest son of the late Taliban chief, Mullah Omar. He is believed to be the next heir to take over the top leadership shortly. Though he was hardly seen in public he is quite popular among the ranks and files of the Taliban force. Rests of them are just a bunch of loyalists to either Haqqani or Yaqoub.

Given the fact that the International community had not recognized this new team so far, doubts were raised whether the new Taliban regime would continue to stay in power?.¹⁰ Taliban has been pursuing regressive economic policies such as keeping the women out of workforce and economic activities. The biggest challenge that the new regime faces is economic and the key economic indicators provide a dismal outlook about Taliban governance. According to a Reuters report, "Eighty per cent of Afghanistan's budget is funded by the US and the (other international) donors".¹¹ So, if the US and international donors cut their aid, the Taliban regime will plunge into a deep crisis similar to that of the early 90s. Adding to this misery, the Taliban's new finance minister, Gul Agha, again an UN-designated terrorist who was involved in terror financing in the past, has no roadmap to revive their economy or rebuild a self-sustainable economy. It is reported that the Taliban still rely on Opium export for revenue.¹²

Much of the Afghan central bank's \$10 billion in assets are parked overseas and the Biden administration has no plan to

release those assets in terms of investments, gold, or foreign reserves that were frozen after the Taliban take over in 2021.¹³ The US and the western countries may use this as a tool to leverage the current regime to pay adequate respect to women's rights and the rule of law and human rights issues. Even the Taliban leaders are very much aware of this fact and they are willing to negotiate with the US and other countries including the neighbors for economic aid. The hospitals in Afghanistan are facing an acute shortage of vital life-saving medicines and also there is a severe shortage of food grains. Unfortunately, Pakistan, the next-door neighbour of Afghanistan is also going through a severe economic crisis and is unable to even provide any sort of humanitarian assistance at this juncture. The only benign actor in the region which has been consistently supporting the needs of the people of Afghanistan is India.

Taliban 2.0 and the US – A Tactical Ally or Strategic Partner?

The US relationship with the Taliban 2.0 - the new leadership that emerged in the post-Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar has been transactional since the Obama Administration decided to withdraw its forces by 2014. The US-Taliban dialogue began in 2018 in Qatar where the Taliban had expressed their willingness to talk to the US for a road map for peace in Afghanistan. But the actual impetus was given to the peace talks during the Trump administration when he signed the historic 'peace deal' agreement with the Taliban in 2020.¹⁴ As per the deal, the Taliban has agreed not to allow Afghanistan soil for Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups and also to continue to work with the US for future cooperation in counter-terrorism efforts. As a result, the US has completely pulled out its troops by late November 2020 much before the US presidential elections. But, the Biden administration oversaw the implementation of the deal by the Taliban and by August 2021, the Taliban has slowly taken over entire Afghanistan including Kabul without any major bloodshed.

Taliban also held a series of talks with Moscow for garnering international support to recognise its regime.¹⁵ It appears Taliban 2.0 has chosen to play as a tactical ally of the US against terrorism and fundamentalism but the US continue to value the Taliban as a strategic asset in the region replacing Pakistan, which once used to enjoy non-NATO ally status with the US. The Ukraine

crisis has intensified the cold war sort of conflict between the US and Russia. In case of an open military conflict with Russia, the US will not hesitate to use its assets in Afghanistan against Russia or that matter against China. Taliban is slowly emerging as a potential US ally in the region. The killing of Al Qaeda leader, Ayman Al Zawahiri in the heart of Kabul indicates that the Taliban's' still supporting and providing shelter to Al Qaeda leadership.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the Western allegations against the Taliban for violating human rights and deteriorating woman's rights in the country remain unchanged. Interestingly, there is a not even single woman representative in the Taliban's new regime. Girls are not allowed to attend schools and colleges. More than seven thousand women were working in the Afghan security forces and now they fear for their lives.¹⁷ In 2022, a delegation was led by the Afghan Foreign minister to Oslo for a talk with Western government officials and Afghan civil societies. The delegation was urged on promises to uphold Human Rights in return for \$10bn Afghan money with the US.¹⁸ Reports are emerging in the Western think tanks that see the Taliban as a potential strategic asset to the US particularly to deal with the aggressive Russia and authoritarian China in the region. The future relationship will be guided by geopolitical factors rather than domestic civil liberties issues.

New Taliban Regime and China – Unholy Bonhomie?

China's relationship with the Taliban's new regime is somewhat tricky and complex. It initially betrothed by none other than its "all-weather friend" – Pakistan way back in 2015. According to a media report, "Chinese officials and representatives of Pakistan's spy agency – the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate - also attended the talks on May 19 and 20 in Urumqi, the capital of China's western Xinjiang region."¹⁹ China's interest was to prevent any sort of external support or propaganda against China on Uyghur Muslims' protest against Beijing's religious persecution. The first-ever formal meeting with the Taliban happened during the Taliban taking over Afghanistan. In 2022 a nine-member Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who headed the political office in Doha, Qatar met with the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in the port city of Tianjin.²⁰ Wang Yi said that the Taliban is "a pivotal military and political force in Afghanistan"²¹ China has also enhanced its engagement with the new Taliban regime over

the period and closely working to build a strong strategic partnership with the Taliban's new Afghanistan and Pakistan, which would facilitate China, a strategic inroad into the Middle East and fill the vacuum created after the withdrawal of US-led western troops. Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi's secret visit to Kabul in February 2022 heralded a new chapter in China's Afghan policy.²² Besides such bilateral thrust, Beijing is also playing a lead regional role in organising and participating in a series of foreign ministers' meetings of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries excluding India.

According to Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili "for China, relations with the Taliban are "not a luxury but a necessity," and China's sole interest is security"., said Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili.²³ It was evident in the SCO meeting held in 2022 where Chinese President Xi Jinping urged all the members to support Afghanistan's new regime to build a robust political structure.²⁴ This reflects China's active engagement with the Taliban regime to stitch a robust network. Interestingly, the Taliban also reciprocated China's overwhelming gesture to support and endorse the new Taliban regime by expressing their interest to join the ailing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under China's flagship initiative of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).²⁵ This is indeed an interesting geo-economic twist in the region that would favour China to leverage its geostrategic interests using Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as a base. China is aware that Afghanistan cannot be brought under direct rule of any foreign country.

Is China trying to fill the strategic vacuum in Afghanistan? According to John Calabrese, "For China, engaging the Taliban is more a matter of managing threats than seizing opportunities because Beijing's perennial concern remains Afghanistan to become a sanctuary for militant groups targeting Chinese territory, economic assets in the surrounding region, and/or diplomats and workers".²⁶

China seems to have heavily relied on Pakistan especially ISI for tactical maneuvering in Afghanistan and one cannot rule out Pakistan's quid pro quo to extract significant military support from Beijing. For China, "Mere geopolitical and economic imperatives do not define China's engagement in post-US Afghanistan and it is hard for Beijing to buy the new, more pragmatic, less ideological Taliban 2.0 narrative".²⁷ China's role is

still limited and largely rely on Pakistan's assets in Afghanistan. Given the changing geopolitical dynamics in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, the US and the West are redefining their role as net security guarantor and protector of democratic values of human rights and individual liberty and freedom. The Ukraine crisis is a big blow to China's ambition to become a global power in terms of rapid strategic realignments in Eurasia.

Conclusion

The Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan led by the Taliban's new regime finds it hard to run the government for two simple reasons: no recognition from the international community and any funds or financial support to deliver governance. It has been a challenging period for the new regime run by erstwhile hardcore terrorists to engage in a negotiation with the US and the European powers diplomatically to get international recognition. Taliban are very well aware that there is no ideological compromise for the sake of recognition. The US and other international powers including the regional powers would recognise the Taliban if they strictly adhere to international human rights and women's rights. Nevertheless, the Taliban's hoped that they would be recognised by their neighbours or regional powers to establish a formal relationship that would address the security concerns of the regional powers.

As far as India is concerned, there is no major change in her Afghan policy. It continues to support the people of Afghanistan through humanitarian aid and other support. India's core interests are very well articulated in the new regime. Taliban's stand on Kashmir for instance assures New Delhi's concern about Afghan soil being used for terrorist activities on Indian territories. India has also been weighing geopolitical options to recognise the Taliban shortly despite encouraging official-level of talks with the various administrations in the present regime in Kabul. The Ukraine crisis seems to have overshadowed the Afghanistan issue and the Taliban's human rights violations. Moreover, the Taliban also seems to have been cooperating with the US and other European powers to counter the expansion of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and to an extent, AQIS. However, the killing of Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahari exposed the Taliban's commitment to the peace deal with the US. Taliban still needs to rely on AQIS for finance and funds to run the government. The economy is in

shambles and no plan has been unveiled by the new regime to revive the economy. If the Ukraine crisis gets prolonged there is a possibility that Afghanistan could become a geopolitical hotspot for superpower contestation, especially the US-led west and the Russia-China and Pakistan. In such a scenario, India will be a fence sitter rather than a prime actor in the region.

The trends are manifold. First, the international community may not recognise the Taliban regime at least in the medium term. Recognising the Taliban's regime logically means recognising the UN-designated terrorists and endorsing their past terror records. Second, the Taliban slowly gravitated towards China and Russia to evade the human rights questions or preconditions put forward by the US and the western powers. Third, the Taliban are sensitive towards the international community's overall concern that it should not become a haven for terrorist organisations. Last, the collapse of the Taliban's already fragile government would mean total anarchy that would not only destabilise the entire region but also deters international peace and security. Afghanistan under the new Taliban rule seems to have achieved a certain amount of political stability but not security. For the Taliban, it is still a long way to go to get recognised by the international community.

Endnotes

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