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THE RE-EMERGENCE OF TALIBAN IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPACTS ON THE INDO-PAK GEO-STRATEGIC POLITICS

Abstract

Afghanistan is rightly acknowledged as the 'graveyard of empires' and it is unclear who coined this historical phrase, but historical events have proved it right. America's longest war, just short of 20 years, ended with the withdrawal of America with heavy human and financial losses in Afghanistan. Taliban acclaimed this withdrawal as a 'great victory' and they swiftly regained control over Afghanistan in few days. During the American occupation, Afghanistan became the centre of Indo-Pak rivalry, both countries executed their hostile geo-strategic agendas in Afghanistan. Ashraf Ghani's pro-Indian government enhanced the mistrust of Pakistan. The Indian heavy investment opened a new horizon of friendship between India and Afghanistan. But this Indian investment sunk with the American withdrawal and re-emergence of the Taliban. The neighbouring countries were directly or indirectly affected by war and crises in Afghanistan. After this new change, Iran, Central Asia, Russia, India, China and Pakistan has changed their diplomatic approach towards Afghanistan. This new Taliban's regime in Afghanistan has totally reshaped the Indo-Pak geo-strategic politics in Afghanistan. In this article, historical, descriptive and analytical methods have been utilized. All the information is arranged in chronological order and according to its occurrence.

Keywords: **American Withdrawal, Indo-Pak Rivalry, Re-emergence of Taliban, Afghanistan and Asia.**

Introduction

The Taliban took over the blisteringly fast control of Afghanistan, which has stunned the world academia and diplomacy experts worldwide. A hasty withdrawal of America and its allied troops from Afghanistan has embarked a new chaos in South Asia. In this scenario, the mayhem and uncertainty prevailed in the minds of Afghans and South Asia. It is a fact that military strategies have an important motivation in warfare. Directly and indirectly, these strategies have great impacts on the regional and international politics. The situation for South Asia is no different from the mid-90s. The positive thing is that the Afghanistan crisis has been solved through dialogue and without any bloodshed. Now the Taliban not only controlling Afghanistan but also holding the juncture of economic connectivity between South and Central Asia. In this article historical, descriptive and analytical methods have been utilized.

The Taliban is a Pashto word that means 'students' or 'seekers', they emerged after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Basically, they were the resistance force against the Soviet occupancy. This movement was inspired by the Deobandi Islamist school of thought and their main ideology was to establish an Islamic Shariah rule in Afghanistan 'based on Deobandi fundamentalism.'¹

The Taliban believes in the militant Islamism and Pashtun socio-cultural norms, now coined as Pashtunwali, the traditional lifestyle of Afghans or Pashtuns.² According to their religious understanding, they did not consider legal drug trade, ransom, extortion, trafficking of heroin and kidnapping. They became able to establish their totalitarian Islamic rule under the leadership of Mullah Omar in Afghanistan from 1994 to 2001. They transferred the Afghan capital from Kabul to Kandahar in 1996.³

The Taliban held control of Afghanistan until America decided to take revenge of the 09/11 attacks in December 2001. During this period, they held power over most of Afghanistan and enforced an illiberal interpretation of Islamic laws. The brutal interpretation of their Islamic thoughts and actions were condemned internationally. The first Taliban government remained in many prominent controversies, like, ban on paintings, photography, women working, minority rights violations and destruction of the historical sites of Bamiyan. Their rule was only recognized by three countries, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.⁴

During the American occupation, they fought against the American-backed Afghan governments and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) led by NATO. The role of Pakistan is widely alleged of having provided financial and moral assistance to the Taliban, but Pakistan denied these all allegations and declared

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that after 9/11 it had dropped their support. The other factor is widely accepted that the emerging role of India in Afghanistan was badly affecting the interests of Pakistan. India was the only country in South Asia that recognized the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan during the 1980s.⁵

In the post-Taliban period 2001 to 2021, till the withdrawal of America, revered as the historic Indo-Afghanistan relations. During this period India heavily invested in Afghanistan, especially, in the field of construction and infrastructure of the country. The Indian government constructed around '200 private and public schools', '1000 scholarships' and 'sponsored 16000' Afghan students. The relations between the two countries received a major boom when both countries decided to sign a strategic co-operation agreement. According to the Indian Government's claim, they invested around 3 billion US Dollars in the field of construction and 2 billion US Dollars in the assistance of the Afghan government.⁶

In April 2017, the Afghan Ambassador to India acknowledged that India was the largest regional and fifth globally donor to Afghanistan. Basically, India started this donation in 2001 when she provided 650-750 million US Dollars in aid to uplift the humanitarian needs and economy of Afghanistan.⁷ India played a vital role in the development of Afghanistan, especially, in the field of military training, road and infrastructure development, border management, dams and ports construction. In 2005, India started its diplomatic influence for the Afghan membership of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In 2007, this effort brought fruit and Afghanistan finally became the 8th SAARC member.⁸

India also played a vital role to construct the Afghan Parliament with the cost of 220 million US Dollars. In 2015, this renounced parliament was inaugurated by Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi and Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani. After the decline of Ghani's government and American withdrawal, the whole Indian investment sunk into chaos.⁹

The South Asian policy practitioners and strategists have diverse insight to understand the American policy in South Asia. Joe Biden administration is still on wait and watch policy, and they are not in hurry to handle the Afghan question. The American withdrawal brought a new challenge the evacuation of their civilian allies or supporters.¹⁰ The abrupt takeover of the Taliban, prior to the evacuation, turned the whole situation into chaos and human suffering. During Taliban and American negotiation, this plan can be easily executed to presumably avoid the worst situation.¹¹

Strategic calculus of India and Pakistan

Indian authorities approached Taliban leadership during the Doha Talks, held between America and the Taliban. The Indian Ambassador, Deepak Mittal, to Qatar met with them and it was the first official meeting with Sher Mohammed Abbas Stanekzai, the head of Taliban office in Doha. During this diplomatic contact, the Indian Ambassador discussed the issues of safety and security, especially, for Indians and their projects in Afghanistan.¹²

The Taliban leadership assured him that these issues would be addressed positively and they will not allow someone to use their soil against any county. Apart from this assurance, the Indian think-tank is not satisfied and they are using their media as a propaganda tool against the Taliban. The Indian media constantly using the word "terrorist" or "Jehadi" for Taliban and this attitude prompting the shift in the Indian policy.¹³

There is an understanding among the Indian policymakers that the Taliban working under the influence of Pakistan and Iran. This myth was denied by the Taliban and they declared that no dictation from outside. No doubt, Pakistan has a long history of relationships with them and sponsored them on many crucial junctures.¹⁴ India has a view that the Taliban are pro-Pakistani and anti-Indian in their approach, this allegation was denied many times by Pakistan and the Taliban. Pakistan is also seeking security assurance from the Taliban, especially in the case of Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the anti-Pakistan militant, which has performed many terrorist attacks in Pakistan. This group is seeking asylum in Afghanistan to achieve their agenda with the Taliban's support. This organization is a most feared element for Pakistan and it has ideological links with the Afghan Taliban.¹⁵

Moreover, this year up to June, TTP has performed more than 53 attacks in Pakistan. In this context, Pakistan would work with the Taliban to gain their support to handle TTP. The Pakistani authorities have also offered the Afghan Taliban to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and definitely, it will open up the link with Beijing. Taliban's leadership is keenly interested in coming to prominence at the international level or in the international community.¹⁶ It is widely believed that the nexus between Pakistan and the Taliban will bring peace in Afghanistan. But, India is uncomfortable with the Taliban's representation in Kabul and still have no guaranty of her heavy investment in Afghanistan.

Basically, it was a strategic manoeuvre of India to develop a soft influence among the masses of Afghanistan. In contrast, Pakistan manipulated the Afghan militant groups as strategic proxies. This move became successful and India couldn't read the Pakistani activities in Afghanistan with an adversarial lens.¹⁷ Indian think-tank adopted the reprobated way to support the Afghan government. This policy has lacked of plausible alternatives and this drawback became the prime factor of its failure. Because India alone had taken a fancy to punish Pakistan on Afghan soil and was eager to gain the necessary power to tackle Pakistan in Afghanistan. The Indo-Afghan alliance was mainly constituted to encircle and weaken Pakistan. This alliance has badly collapsed with the Taliban's swift occupancy of Kabul on 15 August 2021, right on the Indian Independence day.

Indo-Pak rivalry and the other actors in Afghanistan

The transforming situation in Afghanistan has lasting impacts on its neighbouring countries. The ambiguous situation of peace and security turns out the chaos among the Afghans which results in flee from Afghanistan. Pakistan and Iran have 2.5 million displaced Afghans. This situation is a major hurdle in regional growth and the enhancement of economic connectivity. The peaceful Afghanistan is the only hope to connect South Asia with Central Asia.¹⁸ Iran has a 572-mile long border with Afghanistan and the Iranian government has long term interests in Afghanistan. Apart from this Iran have some major concerns regarding the Afghan refugees, narcotics trafficking, border and trade issues, Islamic State, water resources and the Shia community in Afghanistan. Iran has three refugees' camps for Afghan, Sistan, Razavi Khorasan and South Khorasan, which have almost 950,000 registered Afghan refugees and at least more than 2 million unregistered. In the curry scenario, Iran has reduced its diplomatic staff in Kabul, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar embassies.¹⁹ In the past Iran has arranged peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. After the fall of Ghani's government and Panjshir valley, Iranian authorities have concerns with the Pakistani diplomacy in Afghanistan. After the newly established Taliban's government, Iran is hopeful for the peace and security in the region.

The Russian reaction over the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan was quite surprising for the world. The Russian authorities showed a positive response to the end of the long military camping of its great rival. Russian authorities have remained frequent critics of this military solution in Afghanistan and they called the American withdrawal as "the revenge of history". Many observers asserted that both superpowers, Soviet Union and America, failed to impose their will on Afghanistan.²⁰ Russian authorities declared that the sudden withdrawal of America could stipulate a basic change in its foreign policy. Now the U.S. can conduct targeted operations against terrorists, but would no longer indulge in regime change and nation-building to promote democracy. Afghanistan still has a strategic depth for America against China. This withdrawal is not a complete evacuation, definitely, U.S. has great interests in this region. Afghanistan can play a better role for the check and balance in South Asia. Russian authorities, who have been in touch with the Taliban, indicated a readiness to work with them.²¹ Russian Ambassador Zhirov exalted the Taliban forces and their good impression for the safety of the Russian Embassy in Afghanistan.

Central Asian states have a good connection with the Taliban and their bilateral relation became strengthen in the 1990s. Central Asian states had no interest in a weak, corrupt and fragmented Ghani's government in Kabul. Because a state "engulfed in the civil war would pose serious security and economic challenges to Central Asia". The great threat which prevails among the minds of Central Asian leadership is the jihadist phenomenon. After recent descent into chaos, Afghanistan has turned into a hub for jihadist and criminal organizations.²² Without a strong government in Afghanistan, trade, connectivity and economic transit are not possible. It is a positive sign that the Taliban have shown a great interest in the strong centralized government. Now it is a great challenge for the newly established Taliban's government to eradicate the threats and organization of terrorists in Afghanistan.

China is one of the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan had abandoned diplomatic relations after the eruption of civil war in 1993. After that Chinese authorities never established diplomatic relations with the Taliban. After the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed a "safe landing" for the country and above all the stability for Afghanistan. China believes that the protracted chaos and humanitarian catastrophe is not in the favour of Afghanistan.²³ Beijing, along with the world community, is making endeavours to stop Afghanistan from being an epicentre of terrorism and extremism. The Chinese government believes that the American withdrawal from Afghanistan would bring peace and stability to the troubled country. The communist minds in China are deeply pragmatic and agnostic about the new government. They believe that this newly established government would be able to safeguard their interests in Afghanistan and they will play an exceptional role in the development of the country. On the American withdrawal, Beijing expressed mix emotions and kept Chinese diplomacy unclear. It is constantly reported in world media that over the years Beijing has engaged diplomatically with the Taliban and their high-level delegation to China welcomed in July, 2021. In this meeting, two prominent points were discussed, first, the Chinese assurance for

the accommodation with the Taliban and second, the Taliban's government will not disturb China's economic interests in Afghanistan. Taliban reassured Beijing their territory will never use against China or any other country.²⁴ This gesture of goodwill was welcomed by Beijing and this manifested all doubt in the way of Chinese economic commitment in the near future.

In India, this ascendancy of Taliban in Afghanistan is seen in the prospect of Indo-Pak rivalry and the fall of the pro-Indian Ghani's government as a major setback to Indian interests in the region. Many observers in India are delineating the Taliban takeover as the victory of Pakistan's Afghan policy.²⁵ India chaired the special session of the UN Security Council and pushed for instantaneous cessation of all kinds of violence in Afghanistan. Before the American withdrawal, there was considered among the Indian authorities about a suitable agreement with the Taliban. But the Indian government is willing to perform this handiwork while nurturing support for the Ghani's anti-Taliban government.²⁶ The fall of Ghani's government has become the Indian fall out from Afghanistan and now its relations depend upon the "future of Taliban's relations with Pakistan." India has great concerns over the Taliban's relations with the Pakistani jihadist organizations. India has evacuated, especially, Afghan Hindus and Sikhs on emergency visas along with its all diplomatic staff through special flight operations. Moreover, India has offered to the Afghans to stay in India while processed for any other settlement.

On 16 August, Prime Minister Imran Khan chaired the meeting of the National Security Committee and reiterated the inclusive political solution of the Afghan question with the support of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan. This statement lauded the fact that all groups averted the violence in Afghanistan.²⁷ After the fall of Kabul, the Taliban announced the coalition of all parties in their government which would be ensured human rights and not allow the Afghan soil to be used against any country. Pakistan has evacuated its diplomatic staff from Afghanistan and has not yet recognized the Taliban's government. The Pakistani authorities carefully observing the situation and look that they are not in hurry. In Pakistan, there is a sense of victory that "its policy of hedging and supporting the Taliban has paid off". In Pakistan the right-wing is painting the Taliban's takeover as a Pan-Islamist achievement over the U.S. Prime Minister Khan remarked that the Afghan denied accepting the Western imposition on Afghanistan.

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