



The Post-US Withdrawal Afghanistan: Challenges for the Taliban Regime

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Abstract:

This article elucidates the political and security situation in the post-US withdrawal Afghanistan and challenges for the Taliban administration. The study employed qualitative approach and analytical method in order to evaluate the prevailing security and political situation in Afghanistan. Interpretive approach and thematic analysis method has been used to scrutinized the data collected mainly from the secondary sources. The study finds that the US failed badly to stabilize the country, which had been shattered by frequent invasions and internal conflicts. The Taliban continued their insurgencies, ultimately capturing the capital of Afghanistan and overthrowing the national government. The conservative policies and inhumane activities of the Taliban are deteriorating the humanitarian situation in the country. Essentially, the study concludes, there is an urgent need to stabilize the country and ensure equitable rights for its populace. By adopting a comprehensive approach that includes all communities, Afghanistan can be set on the track to prosperity.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, US withdrawal, terrorism, isolation, women rights, proxy war

INTRODUCTION

Catherine II of Russia had once said, "Power without a nation's confidence is nothing" (BrainyQuote, n. d). Being a crucial part of a state, its nation should constructively play a key role in forming a developmental society. To be progressive, every state should consider its nation an extreme priority and build the confidence of the populace by providing basic facilities and services. All theories of International Relations explain the framework for this progression from certain perspectives. As influential states historically adopt suitable perspectives according to their own interests, weak states become exploited for global power dynamics. In the case of Afghanistan, the country has been witnessing its fifth decade of national crises. Instability, caused by multiple foreign invasions, civil wars and aggressive transition of power, has gripped the country.

Afghanistan experienced socioeconomic turmoil since the Cold War era, witnessing realism during the Soviet invasion, democratic initiatives by the liberal US in support of the Taliban's emirate, the

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US-imposed War on Terror with a realist perspective, the establishment of a weak Afghan government, the US exit due to lack of interest and the Taliban's resurgence (Fisher, 2002). After entering Afghan soil, the US initiated several ventures to rail the country towards democratic development. Despite multiple attempts by the US to ensure political and economic stability in Afghanistan, non-state actors maintained a firm presence in most parts of the country. Among these, the Tehreek-e-Taliban was prominent for keeping its existence through extensive insurgent strategies. Besides this, the absence of the rule of law under the US-Afghan authoritative rule created a power vacuum, allowing non-state actors to deepen their influence. Eventually, these actors, with a fundamentalist Islamic agenda, overthrew the Afghan government in 2021. This violent transition of power in Afghanistan further exacerbated the chaos in the country. Moreover, the majority of the world criticized this attempt by the Taliban and continues to show little interest in maintaining state-level relations with the interim Taliban administration (ITA); this non-recognition has become a significant challenge for the Taliban regime (Trofimov, 2021).

Following a realist approach and exploiting of subordinated class of society, the Taliban government enforces conservative policies and bans female participation in state functions. In its immediate neighborhood, the interim government of the Taliban needs to expand relations to acquire an influential position in regional politics, as the threat of deported Afghans from neighboring countries emerges. However, by revitalizing the focus and shifting towards human development, the Taliban administration can succeed in stabilizing the country both socially and economically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cold War Dynamics and Soviet Invasion in Afghanistan

Like other countries in the region, Afghanistan had remained a venue for US-USSR rivalry during the Cold War. The US expanded its interference in the country through various initiatives to strengthen liberal reform in Afghan society. However, the USSR also tried to extend its role by supporting communist ideologies in Afghan politics. Consequently, this led to a rise in Communism and social Marxism in Afghanistan. In late 1970s, the USSR intervened in Afghan politics by facilitating an illegitimate regime change, without considering the intentions of Afghan stakeholders, to establish the rule of a communist government under Mohammad Taraki. This intervention intensified the rivalry between liberals and communist Afghan stakeholders, each vying to control over socio-political spheres (Cooper, 2012; Naazer 2022). To promote its vested interest, the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and launched a full-scale military operation to maintain its influence in the country.

Civil War in Afghanistan and Rise of Taliban

A shift occurred in the perspective of USSR leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989, leading to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Amid civil unrest due to political and ideological differences, the US and its allies strengthened their foothold in Afghanistan and shaped Afghan society by exploiting ideas of Islamism. In particular, the US provided significant military and financial aid to the Afghan populace to dominate their position against advanced capabilities of the USSR. Subsequently, with the US support, Afghanistan successfully ended the Soviet-backed regime in 1992 and established a power-sharing agreement known as the Peshawar Accord. However, political leaders opposed to the US, such as Hekmatyar, viewed this accord as a supporting

document for rule of his opponents led by Ahmad Shah Masood. This contentious approach between the Rabbani government and the opposition led to a massive civil unrest in Afghanistan, with regional and global powers intervening to support their preferred parties. Resultantly, the entire system of state-functioning in Afghanistan collapsed within months. Ahmad Rashid (2002) conducted an in-depth analysis of the emergence of the Taliban and their ideological roots.

US Invasion, the War against Terrorism and the Aftermath

In their first tenure, the Taliban clearly practiced narrow-minded policies and acted as a close ally against the US and its supportive countries; consequently, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan worsened and the US found a vacuum in the country. For instance, despite several warnings and demands for the rule of law from the US, Afghanistan under the Taliban supported Osama bin Laden after 9/11 attacks. From a perspective of neo-realism, to dismantle Al Qaeda and the Taliban government, the US imposed the War on Terror in Afghanistan with international support. That war spanned two decades, during which the US undertook numerous initiatives to improve the deteriorated security situation in the country. Moreover, the Taliban adopted a specific strategy of “hide, hit and run” against the US and NATO forces. Rather than being contained by US countermeasures, the Taliban and other non-state actors gained dominance and deepened strong footprints in Afghan society (“Who are the Taliban?” 2022).

Hussain (2005) explained the political interventions by the US to promote liberal views in Afghan society. Upon coming to power, the Taliban introduced new social ideas in Afghanistan by exploiting the emotional attachment of the populace. However, conservative policies of Taliban led to a decline in the political, economic and social conditions of Afghan people, as noted by James Gerstenzan and Lisa Getter in 2001. In the post 9/11 period, terrorism became a significant concern for the US and Taliban’s non-cooperation led to the US invasion of Afghanistan. After the removal of Taliban from government, the US focused to uplift the socio-economic and political standings of the country. For instance, governments of Karzai and Ghani were evidence of US assertions to spread its liberal ideas in Afghan society. As these governments lacked firm foundations, a vacuum was created in Afghan society that facilitated the Taliban to deepen their roots.

Emily Stewart (2021), in “The History of US Intervention in Afghanistan, from the Cold War to 9/11,” describes the contentious situation between the US and the USSR in Central Asia. Being adjacent Soviet territory, Afghanistan was the most suitable land for the USSR to spread Communism. On the other hand, the US saw Afghanistan to contain the domino-effect of the Soviet communist agenda. After the exit of the USSR, the US expanded its influence by infusing liberal ideas in the politics of Afghanistan.

Constructivism is relevant here as the Taliban professed their ideology and gradually expanded their hold in different regions. Despite democratic initiatives and international aid keeping the country functioning, neo-imperialism was practiced, with the US supervising decision-making process of Afghanistan during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. In the meantime, the deteriorating civil security and spread of capitalism undermined the trust of the populace towards state; aiding the Taliban to resurge in Afghanistan with increased support. Subsequently, the US started to lose its footprints due to political trust issues. and domestic pressure in the US compelled the decision-makers to define a roadmap to egress from Afghanistan.

For that reason, foreign policy of the US underwent through a shift and the US and Afghan stakeholders started engagements to resolve the Afghan issue on permanent basis. Former President of the US Donald Trump pursued an inclusive approach in Afghanistan, engaging regional powers like India and demanding Pakistan's involvement in addressing regional terrorism. Meanwhile, the Taliban expanded their role in rural parts of Afghanistan and conducted several violent attacks near Kabul. With public support and enhanced capabilities, the Taliban compelled the US towards talks to find a permanent resolution (Shah & Nordland, 2018).

In 2020, with mediation of third parties including Qatar, the US and Taliban met in Doha to define a framework for the US withdrawal and a resolution of the Afghan crisis. Nonetheless, the US intentions of exit infused a new zeal in insurgents like the Taliban who increased their control over various regions. By August 2021, the Taliban entered in the capital and overthrew the Afghan national government. Due to hasty exit of the US from Afghanistan, the Taliban easily took the control of the state and executed contradictory policies. In response, issue of non-recognition of the Afghan government internationally, economic downturn, poor civil security and resurging terrorism pose significant threats to the state-functioning of Afghanistan under the Taliban rule (Maizland, 2023).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative approach and analytical method in order to evaluate the prevailing security and political situation in Afghanistan. Interpretive approach and thematic analysis method has been used to scrutinized the data collected mainly from the secondary sources.

POST-US WITHDRAWAL AFGHANISTAN AND THE CHALLENGES FOR THE TALIBAN REGIME

To analyze the socio-political as well as economic dynamics of Afghanistan over the last five decades, a thorough study of events is crucial for identifying the key factors and their implications. In order to analyze the current situation in Afghanistan, there is a need to provide a detailed view of the continuously changing situation in Afghanistan. Global politics underwent significant changes as hegemonic players determined international relations after the mid twentieth century.

Situational Background of The US Invasion in Afghanistan

Through various means, such as infrastructural developments and military interventions, the US and Soviet Union sought to solidify their footholds in the country (Stewart, 2021). After the USSR's exit from Afghanistan, civil war erupted and the Taliban, once admired by the US, came into power with a certain perspective on Afghan society (Hussain, 2005). From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban, a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist group, ruled most of the country (Skain, 2002). This period was deteriorating for the Afghan nation due to Taliban's conservative approach, which opposed female participation in societal functions and emphasized the enforcement of Islamic values and rules (Gerstenzan & Getter, 2001).

The Taliban's coordination with extremist organizations like Al-Qaeda angered the West, as Europe viewed such extreme views as a threat. Moreover, the US invaded Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks, initiating a twenty-year war in the country. In reaction to US military aggression, the Taliban leadership retreated to the rural areas and adopted a strategy to combat the US and its supported national governments in Afghanistan, including the governments of Hamid Karzai and

Ashraf Ghani. To this end, the Taliban expanded their relations with every US rival in the region (Grad, 2009). This societal and strategic imbalance resulted in poor living standards and politico-economic crises.

The US Exertions to Rehabilitate Afghanistan

The coalition troops led by the US invaded Afghanistan to rebuild the country for better living standards and freedom. Consequently, the US assisted so-called democratic governments by providing basic security and made several attempts to attract foreign investment to the economic structure of Afghanistan (Fossler, 2010). During that time, the Taliban followed constructivism and aimed to construct a broad ideology within Afghan society. The insurgency led by the Taliban shattered the ailing economy of Afghanistan, resulting in acute famine and poor health standards; infant mortality rates became the highest in the world. Meanwhile, several challenges such as a lack of foreign investment, poor economic growth, absence of civil security and non-provision of basic human rights further plagued the country, with global indices highlighting the worsening position of Afghanistan (Crilly, & Spillius, 2010). After Hamid Karzai's presidency, Ghani emerged as a new president following US mediation of the disputed elections of 2014 through negotiations among Ghani and his rival, Abdullah Abdullah (Akhgar, & Gannon, 2019). Moreover, by maximizing power under a realist agenda and employing constructivist perspective to expand their influence, the Taliban strengthened their position and became an inevitable stakeholder of Afghan nation. Subsequently Trump engaged the Taliban in a peace deal in 2017 to secure sustainable security in Afghanistan and initiated the process to end the war on terror in the country (Qazi, 2020). The exclusion of Afghan governing stakeholders from the process weakened relations between the US and its allied government ("US withdrawal prompted," 2022). Eventually, Ghani fled to the United Arab Emirates when his government abruptly ended as the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021, following an expanded insurgency after the US withdrawal.

Return of the Taliban to the Government and Challenges for the Regime

The Taliban movement remained active throughout the years after the US invasion of Afghanistan. In 2018, Donald Trump asserted that America should prioritize its interest and announced plans to withdraw US troops. This shift in US foreign policy led to engagement with regional stakeholders to ensure stability in Afghanistan through a structured framework. By the end of 2018, negotiations between the Taliban and the US began in Doha. After several pauses, both parties agreed on the US withdrawal and non-involvement in terrorist activities culminating in the signing of the Doha Accord in 2020. By exploiting the fading US footprints from Afghanistan, the Taliban became successful in capturing the Kabul on August 15, 2021, through massive mobilization and declared the US-supported national government illegitimate. Consequently, a totalitarian regime emerged under Taliban leadership, leading to several socio-economic issues in Afghan society. Due to the lack of rule of law under the Taliban's narrow-minded government, power rests in the hands of supreme leaders and their assistants; resulting in an autocracy in the political sphere of Afghanistan.

Economic Downturn of Afghanistan Under Taliban's Government

Along with this, the new regime in Afghanistan faced economic challenges, as the freezing of fiscal accounts by the international community deteriorated the economic situation (Human Rights

Watch, 2021). Economic sanctions imposed by global financial institutions undermined investment confidence in the international community and caused an economic disruption, which led to a severe contraction of Afghan GDP. Due to prevailing economic uncertainty in the country and a lack of trust in the banking system, many Afghans closed their bank accounts, which negatively impacted Afghanistan's fiscal performance in the SWIFT payment system. Despite some developmental attempts made by the interim Taliban administration (ITA) against corruption, Afghanistan still lags in the socio-economic progress it attained in 2019. The populace remains uncertain about the future and overall economic performance remains depressed. Although economic progress in Afghanistan reached \$2.2 billion in 2022, it still falls short of the \$5.5 billion mark set in 2019 (World Bank, 2024).

Rising Threat of an Acute Famine in Afghanistan

Additionally, the Afghan population is on the brink of a severe famine, with thirty percent facing acute food insecurity and nearly 1 million children suffering from severe malnutrition ("Over 1 million Afghan," 2023). The proportion of the population with insufficient economic resources has increased from 16 to 36 percent since August 2021 (World Bank, 2024). A fiscal halt has prevented the Taliban from accessing more than 9 billion USD dollars in US accounts, leading to extreme food insecurity in Afghanistan since the resurgence of the Taliban in the political arena ("Taliban blames U.S.," 2021).

Rising Terrorism and Deteriorating Civil Security in Afghanistan

Furthermore, the security situation under the Taliban remains unsatisfactory due to an increase in terrorist attacks on Afghan soil. The Afghan people witnessed the Panjshir conflict and a terrorist attack on Kabul airport immediately after the fall of Kabul in 2021 and they continue to experience the impacts of terrorism. However, the US and the Taliban agreed to cooperate in counterterrorism sponsored by the Islamic State of Khorasan in 2021 following the Kabul airport attack (Shinkman, 2021). According to UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, there are still two million people living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Afghanistan.

Non-Recognition in the International Community

In the international arena, most of the world openly criticized the Taliban's takeover of the country by overthrowing the internationally recognized government. Furthermore, many countries did not show any interest in recognizing the new government, leading to Afghanistan's diplomatic isolation (Lamb, 2021). Although the Taliban, after attaining power, campaigned to expand relations with the global community and seek recognition, no country has yet recognized ITA as a legitimate government in Afghanistan. The UN removed Ghani from the list of heads of state but still does not recognize the Taliban regime as the lawful governing body in Afghanistan. However, some countries have acknowledged only the diplomatic envoys led by the Taliban (Rezahi, 2023).

Strained Relations with Pakistan

Besides this, Pakistan's western borders have become insecure following the rise of the new Afghan regime. Historically, the Taliban had minimal support within Afghan society compared to Pakistan, which had led to the formation of an expanded facilitation network in Pakistan. This exacerbated Pakistan's integration challenges. As a result, Pakistan has been compelled to address national security issues. Despite several military operations, Pakistan has been trying to counter terrorism

effectively for years. In response, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) crossed the Pak-Afghan border and built safe houses for their insurgent activities. Stability in Afghanistan is crucial not only for Pakistan but also for regional security. Despite many attempts to develop a joint strategy against this regional menace, the unresponsive attitude of the Afghan Taliban toward the security concerns of Pakistan has strained relations between these two countries (Mir, 2024).

Denial of Basic Rights to Afghan Women

In addition to this, the Taliban has imposed many policies that violate the fundamental rights of women. Due to the strict as well as conservative policies and decision-making of the Taliban, Afghan girls and women lack freedom of expression, the right to work and access to education and healthcare, resulting in poor humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Initially, the Taliban leadership formed a caretaker government while excluding women entirely. Societal anarchy frequently prevailed due to the use of force by the ITA against peaceful protests addressing the deteriorating humanitarian crisis since the beginning of the Taliban's second era in Afghanistan. In 2023, several civil activists held protests when the ITA refused to allow some girls to travel to the UAE for scholarships, closed beauty salons and banned females from going to parks. The closure of beauty parlors alone forced more than 60,000 women to quit their job (Human Rights Watch, 2023). However, by following the teachings of Islam regarding the essential role of women in society, the Taliban could portray a true image of Islam under the name of Islamic Emirate.

Afghanistan becomes a Region of Proxy Wars

Not only has Afghanistan been facing internal instability due to civil security issues and the lack of basic rights for its populace, but it has also become a bone of contention among regional rivals such as India and Pakistan. As India, a major donor of international aid to Afghanistan, has emerged as an influential player, Pakistan, a competitor of India, is trying to maintain strategic depth in the region (Jonegard, 2019). Conversely, India has established several consulates on Afghan soil near the Pakistan-Afghan border; Pakistan claims these as prominent evidence of an Indian presence threatening its national security. Additionally, Pakistan claims there is strong evidence of expanding relations between India and the exiled leadership of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP). According to Pakistani authorities, India is exploiting Afghan soil as a base for terrorist activities against Pakistan (Naazer, 2019; Rehman & Khan, 2014). If it continues, regional stability may remain elusive. As ASEAN has emerged as a model for promoting regionalism, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India, need to expand cooperation and assistance to address regional crises.

Deportation of Afghan Refugees: Rising Challenge for the Taliban Government

In addition to the deportation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and other regional countries, this is emerging as a significant challenge for the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban. In October 2023, due to ongoing socio-economic turmoil, Pakistan decided to deport unregistered Afghan migrants by November 1, 2023, requiring them to leave voluntarily or face deportation without discrimination ("Pakistan wants undocumented," 2023). Meanwhile, not only has Pakistan adopted a strict policy regarding undocumented Afghan refugees, but Iran has also implemented a similar policy, deporting more than 0.35 million refugees from its 16 provinces (Gul, 2023).

Recommendations

No doubt, the absence of growth and foreign assistance paints a bleak picture of Afghanistan's economic prospects; however, shifting from reliance on foreign aid to a more resilient economic program could enhance the country's potential to improve in this challenging situation. To ensure sustainable economic growth, the Taliban should focus on harnessing the populace, reforming the agriculture sector, promoting free markets without any interference and restructuring the economy to attract foreign investment. Moreover, investing in human development, addressing economic objections of the international community and ensuring equitable provision of rights to the populace will help the Taliban administration uplift the country socially and economically (World Bank, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, it is clear that to address the socio-economic crisis, the ITA needs to revitalize its focus on local resources and harness the potential of the Afghan nation. Afghanistan has been facing a challenging scenario due to strained relations with neighbors, being a feasible region for proxy wars, lack of basic rights, rising terrorism, civil unrest and an economic downturn. The country is on the brink of a dreadful famine, as most of the populace lacks sufficient economic resources for a normal life. The responsibility now lies with the Taliban leadership to uplift the country by addressing poverty, terrorism and rising unemployment. Through inclusion of all communities in the government, the Taliban could effectively pull the nation out of the crises that began five decades ago. Such adaptation would end Afghanistan's role in proxy warfare and guide the country toward sustainable progress.

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Date of Publication

April 30, 2024