

Taliban in Afghanistan and Its Implications on Pakistan

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Abstract

After 20 years of war, the Taliban has swept to victory in Afghanistan and have outlasted one more superpower. The Taliban's return to rule brings an end to almost 20 years of the presence of a US-led coalition's presence in the country. Taliban's rule certainly will have consequences that will go well beyond the country's immediate borders. Pakistan, undoubtedly, would be the most affected country with the passage of power into the hands of the Taliban. This paper is an attempt to analyze the impact of the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan and its implications on Pakistan.

Key Words: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Taliban, security, refugees

Introduction

Afghanistan has a tumultuous history of uprisings against the government, guerilla warfare, and foreign occupation dating back to the 19th century. The US's withdrawal, from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban's rolling into Kabul, much earlier than estimated by most intelligence agencies was a frightening shift. Afghan government figures, the media, and security experts blamed the United States for running away from its responsibility and betraying the Afghan people, leaving them exposed to Taliban atrocities. Taliban's rule in Afghanistan no doubt accompanied itself with uncertainty and fear causing tens of thousands of Afghans to flee, often by taking desperate measures. The disturbing images of people clinging to the hulking aircraft even as it left the ground and running alongside the U.S. military planes on the runway and falling off the aircraft in mid-air to their deaths reflect the horrendous state of affair. Afghanistan is today engulfed with sadness, panic and uncertainty. Although

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the Taliban promised peace at home, a softer, smoother and inclusive government but their history of violence and repression and the present surreal state of affairs have some other stories to tell.

Taliban's rule poses immediate threats to Afghans' civil and political rights enshrined in the constitution created by the U.S.-backed government (Maizland, 2021). As per a report by Human Rights Watch 2021, the Taliban have instilled fear among women and girls by searching out high-profile women, denying women freedom of movement outside their homes, imposing compulsory dress codes, severely curtailing access to employment and education, and restricting the right to peaceful assembly. This state of affair was not a surprise because when last time the group was in power from 1996 to 2001, they first appeared as the *messiah* who vowed to fight corruption and improve security and promised to take Afghanistan out of all the trouble and they became popular too but eventually, they turned Afghanistan practically into a pariah state.

Taliban's Six-Year Rule

The Taliban, or "students" in the Pashto language, emerged in the early 1990s in northern Pakistan following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. It is believed that the predominantly Pashtun movement first appeared in religious seminaries - mostly paid for by money from Saudi Arabia - which preached a hardline form of Sunni Islam (Rivlin, 2021). The promise made by the Taliban - in Pashtun areas straddling Pakistan and Afghanistan - was to restore peace and security and enforce their own austere version of Sharia, or Islamic law, once in power. Afghans, weary of the Mujahideen's excesses and infighting after the Soviets were driven out, generally welcomed the Taliban when they first appeared on the scene. Their early popularity was largely due to their success in stamping out corruption, curbing lawlessness and making the roads and the areas under their control safe for commerce to flourish (*The Week*, 25 August 2021). Eventually, Taliban took over Kabul on September 27, 1996, and followed that up with the murder of former president Najibullah in a gruesome public hanging (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

By 1998, they had taken control of almost all of the country (*BBC News* 18 August 2021).

From 1996 to September 2001, the Taliban ruled, largely isolated from the international community due to their brutal treatment of Afghans. They imposed a harsh interpretation of Sharia law - such as public executions of convicted murderers and adulterers, and amputations for those found guilty of theft. They were accused of various human rights and cultural abuses. Men were required to grow beards and women had to wear the all-covering burka. They banned television, music and cinema, and disapproved of girls aged 10 and over going to school. In fact women were banned from almost all public spaces. They brutally executed political opponents, massacred religious and ethnic minorities such as the Hazaras and provided grant safe haven to al-Qaida (Agrawal, 2021). Their cultural abuses were also obnoxious. One notorious example was in 2001, when the Taliban went ahead with the destruction of the famous Bamiyan Buddha statues in central Afghanistan, despite international outrage.

The attention of the world was drawn to the Taliban in Afghanistan in the wake of the 11 September 2001 World Trade Center attacks in New York. The Taliban were accused of providing a sanctuary for the prime suspects - Osama Bin Laden and his al-Qaeda movement. The 9/11 attacks brought the global war against terror right into the heart of Afghanistan. On October 7, 2001, a US-led military coalition launched attacks in Afghanistan, and by the first week of December, the Taliban regime had collapsed. However, the group's then-leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, and other senior figures, including Bin Laden, evaded capture despite one of the largest manhunts in the world (*BBC News*, 18 August 2021).

Twenty Years of War in Afghanistan

In December 2001 an interim government under Hamid Karzai was set up in Kabul which was later ratified by a Loya Jirga (a traditional assembly of Afghan leaders). But the Taliban's deadly attacks continued to take place. In 2003, amid increased violence,

NATO takes over security in Kabul (*PBS News hour* 30 August 2021). In 2009, President Barack Obama's "troop surge" helped push back the Taliban but it was not long term. In 2014, at the end of what was the bloodiest year since 2001, NATO's international forces ended their combat mission, leaving responsibility for security to the Afghan army. That gave the Taliban momentum and they seized more territory (*BBC News* 30 August 2021). The Taliban have operated as an insurgent force, attempting to expel NATO forces from Afghanistan and defeat the democratically elected Afghan government. Peace talks between the US and the Taliban started tentatively, with the Afghan government pretty much uninvolved, and the agreement on a withdrawal came in February 2020 in Qatar. The US-Taliban deal did not stop the Taliban attacks - they switched their focus instead to Afghan security forces and civilians, and targeted assassinations. Their areas of control grew (*BBC News*, 30 August 2021) and on August 15, 2021 Taliban took over Kabul.

The world was numb with the reality that the Taliban have returned to Afghanistan after 20 years of war. The Taliban and its supporters started celebrations at the moment. Many feared persecution and punishment for siding with foreign forces. While the Taliban spoke of "general amnesty" and said all are "forgiven", and assured the safety of all Afghans and that they should not leave the country, the videos that circulated on social media told a different story. Taliban's takeover of course is going to have a catastrophic effect not only on the Afghan citizens but also the neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan. With the Taliban coming into power in Afghanistan, Pakistan bears a big responsibility for Afghanistan's fate.

Pakistan and Afghanistan Relations

Afghanistan and Pakistan have a unique kind of relationship. They share geostrategic, ethnic, cultural and religious bonds. They are significant trading partners. In fact, in a televised speech on October 3, 2011 the former Afghan leader Hamid Karzai once described the two countries as "inseparable brothers" primarily due to the shared religious and ethnic connections. Although their direct relations are apparent from 1947 when Pakistan came into being, the border that they share known as Durand Line, which

is 2,400-kilometer (1,500-mile) long border was drawn in the 19th century when the British dominated South Asia. Thus, the cultural and ethnic mix between the two dates back to the British period. Both the countries have faced many highs and lows in their relations.

Being close neighbours Pakistan always had a high stake in each and every happening in Afghanistan. Pakistan has a history of military support for different factions within Afghanistan, extending at least as far back as the early 1970s. During the 1980s, Pakistan, which was host to more than two million Afghan refugees, was the most significant front-line state serving as a secure base for the mujahidin fighting against the Soviet intervention. Pakistan also served, in the 1980s, as a U.S. stalking horse. The United States through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), granted Pakistan wide discretion in channelling some U.S.\$2-3 billion worth of covert assistance to the mujahidin, training over 80,000 of them (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Even after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, serving and former Pakistani military officers continued to provide training and advisory services in training camps within Afghanistan and eventually to Taliban forces in combat. Throughout the war against the communist government and Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan asserted a mix of internal and external concerns (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

Pakistan views its security interests in Afghanistan predominantly through the prism of its regional rival and neighbour India. To avoid an encirclement scenario in which India's influence extends from Pakistan's eastern to western borders, Islamabad has sought to develop "strategic depth" in Afghanistan by backing friendly governments in Kabul. Pakistan always sought a secure Afghan frontier permitting the concentration of Pakistani forces on the Indian frontier and economic advantages through stronger political and economic links to Central Asia (Threlkeld and Easterly, 2021). Pakistani support for Pashtun parties in Afghanistan helped solidify the position of Pashtuns in Pakistan's military and civilian elites. In addition, Pakistan promoted the emergence of a government in Afghanistan that would reduce Pakistan's own vulnerability to internal unrest by helping to contain the nationalist aspirations of tribes whose territories straddle the Pakistani-Afghan border (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

The strategic interest of Pakistan has many times suffered blow also because of the boundary dispute between them. Durand line has always been the bone of contention between them. Pakistan has sought to quell local support for Afghanistan's ambitions of redrawing the Durand line but it has not been successful in that and the problem continued to persist. When the Taliban came into power in 1996, they maintained close ties with the Pakistan government but they refused to recognize Durand Line as an international border, arguing that there should be no borders between Muslim countries (Roashan, 2001). This approach deteriorated the relations between them.

The 9/11 attacks changed the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban as Islamabad decided to side with the West in its war on terror. When Hamid Karzai became the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2004, he also refused to recognize the Durand Line. He described it as "a line of hatred that raised a wall between two brothers" (Harrison, 2009). Because of the failure to recognize the border, there has been unchecked and frequent transshipment of men and materiel.

Pakistan has many a times asserted that there had been cases of cross-border attacks by Afghanistan-based Pakistani Taliban militants on Pakistani security forces' posts. These militants were part of the Taliban factions that fled to Afghanistan's border provinces, in the face of military operations and their attacks contributed to the deterioration in bilateral relations (Javaid and Meer, 2018). Before the Taliban took power in Afghanistan on August 15, the two neighbouring countries regularly traded accusations, blaming the other for turning a blind eye to militants operating along the porous frontier. There have been reports that the upsurge in the TTP's terrorist violence in Pakistan has coincided with the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August.

Taliban in Power: Opportunities and Challenges for Pakistan

For very long it has nurtured the Taliban as a proxy to exert its influence over Afghanistan but since the ignominious collapse of Afghanistan's Western-backed regime and Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, Pakistan has oscillated uncomfortably between relief and anxiety. At present, Pakistan views the Taliban victory in Afghanistan as a

strategic win, even at the risk of emboldening other extremist groups in the region (Findlay and Bokhari, 2021). It is an open secret that Pakistan's powerful deep state has for decades quietly backed the Taliban. There is little doubt that many Afghans who initially joined the movement were educated in madrassas (religious schools) in Pakistan.

After the 9/11 attacks that were planned in Afghanistan, Pakistan positioned itself as an ally of the US in the so-called "war on terror". But at the same time, parts of the country's military and intelligence establishment, maintained links with Islamist groups in Afghanistan like the Taliban. Many senior Taliban leaders reportedly took refuge in the Pakistani city of Quetta, from where they guided the Taliban and provided significant material and logistical support (Landale, 2021). The extent and duration of Pakistan's support for the Taliban are disputed. Pakistan was also one of only three countries, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which recognized the Taliban when they were in power in Afghanistan. It was also the last country to break diplomatic ties with the group.

In more than 40 years of civil strife, war and instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan has often pursued their own strategic interests by manipulating the Afghan political field, even at the expense of peace in the country. A day after the Taliban took over Kabul the Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan said that the Taliban are "breaking the chains of slavery," (*Dawn* 16 August 2021). Pakistan's military and civilian leaders have been desperately trying to convince the world that the Taliban are a newer, more moderate version of the Islamist militant group that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

Downplaying international fears about the egregiousness of Taliban rule, Pakistani leaders have claimed that the Taliban are, this time, open to sharing power and protecting basic human rights—if only the international community would give them time and money before judging their record on human rights and governance (Shah, 2021). Since Pakistan's government continues its feverish diplomatic efforts to convince the international community of the group's newly found moderation. Even so, its bid to legitimize the Taliban's usurpation of state power in Afghanistan may be undermined by

the Taliban's intransigence. Pakistan's historic support for the Taliban does not, however, mean that it should become complacent about Taliban's rule. Pakistan should not forget that it has suffered hugely over the years at the hands of Islamist terror groups launching attacks over the border from Afghanistan. Taliban's being in power gives Pakistan the feeling of victory, but along with that it should be concerned about the fact that this regime would embolden the Pakistani Taliban to stage more attacks in Pakistan along with Afghanistan (Ahmed, 2021).

Pakistan has a huge interest if it ensures that the new government in Kabul cracks down on groups like Al Qaeda and the local Islamic State offshoot - ISIS-K because, at one point, the Taliban threatened to destabilize Pakistan from areas they controlled in the north-west. One of the most high-profile and internationally condemned of all Pakistani Taliban attacks took place in October 2012, when schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai was shot on her way home in the town of Mingora. A major military offensive two years later following the Peshawar school massacre greatly reduced the group's influence in Pakistan but there are reports that TTP has never been out of the north-west region despite many counter-terror operations by the Pakistani military.

While there are fears of a further escalation in terrorist violence and a rising concern in Pakistan as the Taliban offensive across Afghanistan has resulted in a mass release of prisoners, including senior leaders of the TTP, the real challenge lies in the persisting shades of religious extremism which have the potential to complicate Pakistan's security and political landscape. There is no doubt over the fact that the Afghan situation will have multiple implications for Pakistan in terms of insecurity and militancy, cross-border terrorism, refugees' influx, and economic instability, sovereignty geopolitical dynamics, connectivity and trade.

Pakistan has fenced off most of its border with Afghanistan, but these TTP elements could still pose a significant challenge to the Pakistani state, particularly in the districts of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The Afghan Taliban have more than once affirmed that Afghan soil will not be used for activities against any other country by foreign militants, but they have shown a reluctance to take a clear position on the TTP

issue, while also airing concerns on the fencing of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. As the new Taliban regime faces political and economic isolation from much of the world, its dependence upon Pakistan will increase even further, giving Pakistan even greater leverage on the TTP issue (Karim, 2021). Certainly, the Taliban’s dominance in Afghanistan has given Pakistan a geopolitical edge over India in the broader Central Asian region. A stable Afghanistan could become a strategic conduit between Pakistan and the Central Asian republics and help Pakistan realize its geo-economic ambitions in the region. Yet, for this to happen, the Taliban must reach a political consensus with other Afghan stakeholders. Barring a political agreement, peace and stability will remain elusive, and the country’s potential to develop into an economic and energy corridor linking South Asia with Central Asia will never be realized.

Although Pakistan has repeatedly denied that it was the architect of the Taliban enterprise, their bonhomie has been a secret affair. It is because of their friendly ties that the security situation in Pakistan is still fragile. Despite the military’s claim that the region had been cleared of militants, South Waziristan still sees sporadic attacks, mainly targeting Pakistani security forces. Pakistan has blamed TTP for most of the attacks (Ahmed 2021). TTP has carried out a number of major terror attacks across Pakistan and has reportedly been using Afghan soil to plot terrorist attacks in this country (*The Hindu*, August 23 2021). According to a report prepared for the United Nations Security Council in July, the TTP has about 6,000 trained fighters on the Afghan side of the border and the Afghan Taliban despite their distrust carry on with relations mainly as before (Iqbal 2021). Pakistan’s national security adviser Moeed Yusuf in a Press conference remarked that “militants along the border were exploiting the fluid situation in Afghanistan to target Pakistani troops” (Ahmed 2021). That means Pakistan has an interest in the Taliban acting firmly and not allowing Afghanistan to descend into an ungoverned space.

Refugee Crisis

The other great concern of Pakistan is the refugee crisis. Being the closest neighbouring country, Pakistan remains the main hub for people fleeing Afghanistan. The country

already has about three million Afghan refugees from previous wars and, with its ravaged economy, it cannot afford to support any more (*Aljazeera*, 2 September 2021). There had been many reported instances when the Pakistani government campaign to systematically expel Afghan refugees. There have been reports of increasing abuse of refugees by the police of Pakistan (Human Rights Watch 2015). The major issue of concern for the international community is that these helpless refugees cannot seek any legal help to avert these abuses. Pakistan is not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees/1967 Protocol and has also not enacted any national legislation for the protection of refugees nor established procedures to determine the refugee status of persons who are seeking international protection within its territory.

In the absence of any national refugee legal framework, refugees are treated in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946. UNHCR conducts refugee status determination under its mandate (Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees adopted by the General Assembly Resolution 428 (V) of 14 December 1950) and on behalf of the Government of Pakistan in accordance with the 1993 Cooperation Agreement between the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR. Pakistan generally accepts UNHCR decisions to grant refugee status and allows asylum-seekers (who are still undergoing the procedure) as well as recognized refugees to remain in Pakistan. Pakistani authorities have time and again stated that the country already houses one of the world's largest populations of refugees and now it cannot accommodate more refugees resulting into violation of the rights of refugees.

Pakistan's High Commissioner to the UK, Moazzam Ahmad Khan, told the BBC Today programme: "We don't really have the capacity to take more refugees in and that's why we're suggesting - and requesting - that let's sit down together and work on the possibility of avoiding that eventuality" (*BBC News* September 3 2021). Afghan refugees are not seen in a good light in Pakistan not only because they pose a burden on the government but also because of security issues. The link of the 2014 terrorist attack in the school in Peshawar in which more than 100 schoolchildren were dead was traced to Afghanistan. Since then, refugees are viewed as terrorists. They are subjected to routine

harassment, including the solicitation of bribes (Amnesty International, 2016). The severity of the situation can be traced from the statement made by Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed, Pakistan's powerful intelligence chief. He listed terrorism and refugees among Pakistan's top concerns (Rehman 2021).

Pakistan not being the signatory of the Refugee Convention has also resulted in the lack of basic amenities for the Afghan refugees who are living in Pakistan for several decades. They often face discrimination, they have not been able to access formal education opportunities, open a bank account, work, buy a property and have even been denied access to healthcare. They are often portrayed in Pakistan's news media as drug peddlers and criminals and increasingly terrorists. Harassment and exploitation on the part of law enforcement agencies is a product of underlying perceptions of Afghans as violent, dangerous and suspicious. Refugees are therefore viewed as an alleged threat to the security of the nation-state. This makes an entire community, including refugee children, at risk of state harassment.

This skepticism had left Afghan refugees in a state of uncertainty. Though Pakistan's law allows those born there to get citizenship, the claims of Afghan children are generally not recognized. Imran Khan pledged to recognize their citizenship after he became prime minister in 2018, but he backed off following a backlash from politicians and the country's powerful military (Rehman 2021). This sorry state of affairs is adding on the sorrows of Afghan refugees. They have no place to live. They are not safe in their own country and they are viewed as threat in the neighbouring countries. The Taliban's vengeful ways add to the risks. This is an issue of great concern. Pakistan with its limited resources cannot accommodate such a large chunk of population as refugees in its territory. This issue to need to get resolved taking into consideration the humanitarian grounds and protecting the lives of people and for that the international community must support Pakistan in their hosting of this population, pushing to ensure rights are both upheld and extended.

Conclusion

The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan is viewed by Pakistan as its victory. But Pakistan's have to understand the fact that any humanitarian crisis and a socio-economic collapse in Afghanistan will not only be an existential threat for Afghans but also for the region and international security at large. An unstable and violence-prone Afghanistan will certainly encourage violent radical and extremist narratives and movements in Pakistan which will not be easy to deal with. Taliban's rule has increased the confidence of religious groups and encouraged the madrassah generations and Pakistan's religious landscape is fertile for radical ideologies. The Taliban will surely want to consolidate their rule and they will exploit it to the maximum extent. Thus, Pakistan should avoid giving the impression that the "triumph of Taliban was its own victory" as it has few options at this front including dealing with the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. At this juncture, there are no easy options for Pakistan, but its decisions will have consequences on regional peace and global geopolitics and any misstep by Pakistan will end up in real tragedy not only for itself but also for the world at large.

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