

Taliban Strategies and Gains in Post-American Reality in Afghanistan

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the re-establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the frame of the emerging bipolar world order, addressing the post-American realism. We address two significant perspectives: First, the Taliban's re-emergence as a dominant political and military force in Afghanistan, despite two decades of U.S. military intervention, infrastructural devastation, and extensive state-building efforts, reflects a combination of organizational resilience, strategic adaptability, and the mobilization of deeply rooted socio-religious narratives. The Taliban capitalized on widespread disillusionment with the U.S.-backed Afghan government, which was often perceived as corrupt, externally dependent, and disconnected from rural constituencies. Their ability to sustain a decentralized yet cohesive insurgency, embed themselves within local communities, and frame their struggle as both a nationalist resistance and a religious obligation allowed them to gradually undermine the legitimacy of the foreign-supported order and reclaim political relevance. Second, following the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2021, the Taliban successfully positioned themselves as the central political authority in Afghanistan, despite the non-recognition of their regime by the US and its Western allies. Their consolidation of power was facilitated by their military dominance, the collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government, and their ability to negotiate local allegiances. Moreover, the Taliban leveraged Afghanistan's political vacuum to establish a de facto government, asserting internal legitimacy and seeking to navigate the complexities of international isolation through pragmatic diplomatic engagements, particularly with China and regional actors. This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach, utilizing semi-structured, in-depth face-to-face interviews as the primary method of data collection. Interviews were conducted with Afghan graduate and postgraduate students residing in Russia, as well as with four local residents from various cities in Afghanistan, including Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat. For the interviews with local residents, an online platform was utilized to facilitate communication. Both direct and indirect questions were posed to the participants during the interviews to explore and substantiate the research hypotheses. The insights derived from these interviews provided a nuanced understanding of contemporary realities, particularly in relation to the political dynamics of the Taliban and the broader context of Afghanistan. In addition to primary data, secondary sources such as internet-based materials and media reports were analyzed to further examine the post-American reality in Afghanistan. Furthermore, theoretical perspectives from contemporary scholars addressing the post-American world order were incorporated to support and legitimize the study's arguments.

Keywords: Taliban, Post-American Reality, Afghanistan, Political Actor, Western Power

Introduction

Taliban came to power in 1996 and overthrow from the power in the complexity of war on terror and the military expedition of the USA in 2001. Furthermore, they fought for two decades to re-establish their regime and within the subsequent event after the withdrawal of the US troops in August 2021 they seized Kabul and occupied Afghan's government. We aim to explore this phenomenon from the theoretical perspective of the post-American reality in Afghanistan; describing why Taliban became the vital actor in Afghanistan politics and how they emerged as the prevailing powerful group in the country, while they achieved significant military strength and intelligence capabilities. Moreover, their return to the Afghan politics explores the detrimental position of Taliban in Afghanistan's geo-political landscape and their compact steel solidarity who never sell their ideology to any foreign invaders or their antagonist groups.

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Since the late 1970s, Afghanistan has experienced a significant scale of conflicts, characterized by coups, invasions, insurgencies, and civil conflicts. In this traumatic era the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to protect the communist regime of Afghanistan.¹ During the Soviet invasion, several mujahidin groups, the followers of Islamic Sharia law, joined in the war to protect their mother land. The Taliban was one of the groups of Mujahidin who joined the war against the USSR in the 1980s. The withdrawal of the Soviet army and the installment of soviet led-regime promoted new civil wars among the mujahidin's'. Meanwhile, in the early 1990s, Mulla Omar emerged as the leader of the Taliban and quickly garnered popularity among them. Under the guidance of Mullah Omar, the Taliban seized of 95% of Afghanistan and captured Kabul in 1996, and continued their rule until they were overthrown by a military intervention by the United States in response to the 9/11 attacks. Following their removal from power, the Taliban reassembled and has subsequently engaged in a persistent insurgency in Afghanistan. In western academia, Taliban's governance is often characterized by rigorous implementation of their own understanding of Sharia law, which entailed limitations on women's entitlements and severe penalties.²

Although facing severe rules, the Taliban garnered sympathy from certain factions of Afghan society who were fatigued by the disorder and absence of justice in the nation after the Soviet withdrawal and the ensuing of civil war. Their short tenure on the collapse of Soviet communist was characterized by anti-western stance, a regime dominated by the Sharia Law. Since 1996, following their takeover of Kabul, they have emerged as the predominant actor in Afghan politics. Their overthrown in 2001 and their back to power after two decades of civil war in 2021, characterized their unfolding unity and organizational power against US-led regime. Moreover, the Taliban's re-emergence as a dominant force in Afghan politics, despite two decades of U.S.-led military intervention, can be attributed to several interrelated factors. Foremost among these is the group's adeptness at leveraging Afghanistan's complex socio-political landscape, particularly by mobilizing rural Pashtun communities through appeals to religious identity and nationalist sentiment. This grassroots support was bolstered by the Taliban's ability to present themselves as an alternative to the widely perceived corruption and inefficacy of the U.S.-backed Afghan government. Moreover, the Taliban demonstrated significant organizational resilience and strategic adaptability. They capitalized on the shortcomings of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), which suffered from issues such as low morale, inadequate training, and logistical challenges. Following the U.S. military withdrawal in 2021, the Taliban swiftly consolidated power, establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Despite the lack of formal recognition from the United States and its Western allies, the Taliban have entrenched themselves as the de facto governing authority. This consolidation was achieved through a combination of military dominance, the collapse of the previous government, and the Taliban's ability to navigate Afghanistan's tribal and political networks to secure local allegiances. Internationally, while formal recognition remains withheld, pragmatic engagement with the Taliban has occurred, particularly concerning humanitarian assistance and regional security concerns. Organizations and states have found it necessary to interact with the Taliban to address pressing issues, even as they refrain from official recognition. These dynamic underscores the complex interplay between de facto authority and international legitimacy in the context of Afghanistan's evolving political landscape.

Literature review

The existing literature on Taliban³ mostly argued that the Taliban is a threat for Central Asian security. Therefore, the evolving discourse surrounding the Taliban phenomenon in Afghan politics following the withdrawal of U.S. military forces has significantly influenced academic discussions. Recently, scholars have contributed valuable scholarly research on the Taliban regime, providing an in-depth analysis of its governance policies and the challenges it has faced since the departure of U.S. troops. Some argue that the

¹ Md Anisur Rahman "Afghanistane Sour Biplob Soviet Unioner Bhomika". *Itihas*, 48 no.01, (2014-2015): 157-166.

² Andrew Harris and Peter Dombrowski, "Military Collaboration with Humanitarian Organizations in Complex Emergencies", *Global Governance*, 8, no.2 (2002): 155-178.

³ William Maley (ed.) *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and Taliban*. (New York University Press, 1998), Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan A Military History* (Da capo Press, 2002), Amin Saikal, (2004). *Modern Afghanistan* London (I.B Tauris, 2004), Matthew Crosston, *Fostering Fundamentalism Terrorism, Democracy and American Engagement in Central Asia* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), Dauren Aben, "Regional Security in Central Asia: Addressing Existing and Potential Threats and Challenges", *Eurasian Research Journal*, 1, no. 1 (2019): 51-65., P. Stobdan, "Regional Security Issues in Central/South Asia and Potential for cooperation". *Strategic Analysis*, 22, no.10 (1999): 1561-1576.

Taliban's return to power in war-torn Afghanistan has been marked by a severe humanitarian crisis, while the presence of the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK) poses a significant security threat to the regime. Nonetheless, the Taliban government has sought to establish diplomatic and economic relations with China and the Central Asian states. Amir Khan and Aqsa Durrani highlight the economic crisis and challenges in securing international recognition as key obstacles confronting the newly established Taliban regime⁴. Similarly, Filippo Boni examines the economic and humanitarian hardships that pose significant challenges to the Taliban's governance.⁵ Additionally, Boni argues that the collapse of the U.S.-backed regime signifies a broader decline in American hegemony in Afghanistan. Ataullah Jan and Fakhr-ul-Islam focus on the security dynamics between Pakistan and Afghanistan, contending that the resurgence of the Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) has intensified security threats for Pakistan.⁶ Saukani provides an analysis of the Taliban's military strategy, detailing the tactical and operational factors that contributed to their victory over the U.S.-led administration of Afghanistan.⁷ This paper examines the Taliban's emergence as a significant political force in Afghanistan. The Taliban's resurgence is analyzed within the broader context of the post-American international order, following the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan. In this new geopolitical landscape, characterized by an evolving multipolarity, emerging powers such as China, Iran, and Turkey have assumed increasingly influential roles in shaping regional dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

The term 'post-American reality' denotes the idea that, the global political landscape and international order are undergoing a transformation, moving away from the historical dominance or influence exerted by the United States. This concept envisions a future in which the United States may relinquish its longstanding position as the primary influencer in global politics, economy, and culture in the emergence of multipolar world order. The term is significantly disseminated by Fareed Zakaria's book *The Post-American World*, published in 2008. He claimed the United States remains an influential power in terms of creating influence over the global administration, but the country's absolute power is becoming less influential in the section of economic and geopolitical stature. He argues that the economic and political climb of China and India challenges the traditional hegemony of the U.S., not by lessening its power, but by elevating others to comparable levels of influence. This approach he defined as the "the rise of the rest".⁸ Basically, his argument centers that the controlling power of global governance particularly in politics and economics from the US based unipolar world to a complex multi-polar one. This distribution of power as he mentioned the world is moving from anti-Americanism to post Americanisms.⁹

Before Zakaria, a group of scholars had already pointed out the decline of American hegemony and the emergence of a multipolar world, the post-American world. Paul Kennedy is among of them. In 1987, in his seminal work he argued the extensive military expansion and economic pressure would decline American hegemony in the world which he defined as the "imperial overstretch".¹⁰ His theory of "imperial overstretch" is widely regarded as a foundational reference for understanding the decline of U.S. hegemony within the edifice of global governance. Later Kenneth Waltz extended this debate through the lens of neo-realism. He argues the world system is anarchic in character where there is no central authority to administer rules upon the states. In the system states prioritize their own security and self-interest by engaging self-help. This approach promotes multipolar world system against unipolar structure.¹¹ He did not mention post-American word but stated the unipolar world led by the US is not workable in the anarchic system and

⁴ Amir Khan, & Aqsa Durrani, "The future of Afghanistan under Taliban-led regime: challenges and likely scenarios", *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal* 8, no. 1 (2024): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/8.1.1>

⁵ Filippo Boni, "Afghanistan 2021: US withdrawal, the Taliban return and regional geopolitics" *Asia Maior*, XXXII (2022): 375-391, DOI: 10.52056/9791254690994/17

⁶ Ataullah Jan and Fakhr-ul-Islam "The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021 and Its Security Implications for Pakistan" *Journal of Social Research* 4, no. 4 (2022): 2710-3137.

⁷ Muhammad Izzu Saukani, "Successful Insurgency: A Case Study of the Taliban Insurgency and Its Success in the Afghan War in 2021" *Dauliyah: Journal of Islamic and International Affairs*, 9, no.2 (2024): 1-26

⁸ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (W. W. Norton, 2008), 1-5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ Paul, Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Random House, 1987), 515

¹¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War." *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 27-28.

the multipolar system is more expected.¹² Charles Kupchan defined 21st century through the lens of multipolar approach. He argues this century is not for the American or the anyone else rather it will be for the countries which leads the multipolarity.¹³ Predominantly, he emphasizes that the unipolar system has ended, and that the “rest” particularly China, India, and Brazil are playing a dominant role in formulating a multipolar order.¹⁴ As he argued the world is no one’s but for the multi-actors.¹⁵

John Mearsheimer proposes offensive realism. He argues the international system is anarchic where great power competition is inevitable and they maximize their power for their self-interest¹⁶. He did not mention “post-American” term but he argued for bipolar world system against unipolar. Therefore, bipolar is more conducive than unipolar, multipolar or balanced multipolar system to evade a deadly war.¹⁷ Acharya argues that the American led world order is not ending due to the replacement of China but it returns through the transformation into a multiplex world system. This system can be considered as post-US hegemon centered system where many actors shape global governance against old US based liberal order.¹⁸ Moreover, the post American reality in Afghanistan can be evaluated by the withdrawn of the US troops after two decades of bloody war. Biden’s administration’s mantra the USA should abandon its “unwinnable” war with Taliban.¹⁹ This mantra led Biden’s administrations to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. The withdrawal of the US troops provided Afghanistan into a post American reality which has transformed Afghanistan into a new geopolitical battleground for multiple international entities. This withdrawal explores the declining hegemony of the US in the region and China along with the regional actors has become the dominant external actors in Afghanistan. This is the true face of the multipolar world system while the theories claim against the US led unipolar world and boldly utter for the “rest” of the world, the nonwestern actors China-Russia and some regional actors mainly the Pakistan and Iran, are doing this role in the context of Afghanistan. These multifaceted actors create a reality of defining and understanding the post-American reality in the world order system that posits the end of the American hegemon in Afghanistan.

Taliban’s March towards Afghanistan Politics

‘Taliban’ is the plural form of the Pashto word ‘Talib’. The Arabic term ‘Talib’ is derived from the word ‘Talib-i-ilm’, which signifies a learner or student.²⁰ Afghanistan ‘Taliban’ is known as ‘religiously-oriented’ student’.²¹ This group is ideologically influenced by Deobandi Islam, associated with the orthodox school at Darul Uloom Deoband, a prominent Indian Madrasa established in 1876 in Deoband, India.²² The majority of the Taliban members were Pashtun, and their culture emphasizes principles such as morality, hospitality, self-reliance, and retribution.²³ They possess a diligent and robust physical structure, enabling them to sustain and enhance in a rough condition over an extended period of time with remarkable endurance. According to an Afghani graduate student, the physical characteristics of the Rock Mountains of their country contribute to the Afghan people for to be hard and patient nature.²⁴ This nature made them to cope with the adversity. From an ethnic perspective, the Pashtuns exhibit a strong sense of cohesion under the leadership of their tribal chiefs.

This unity can be likened to being under a single umbrella, providing a collective strength that enhances their capacity to exert control over Afghanistan. The cohesive tribal structure offers a significant impetus for the Taliban’s control over the region. Historically, jihad in Afghanistan has been deeply intertwined with the nation’s political, social, and religious issues, shaping the country as a prominent battleground in

¹² Ibid., 27.

¹³ Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn*. (Oxford University Press, 2012), 7-10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (W. W. Norton, 2014), 360-362.

¹⁷ Ibid., 380.

¹⁸ Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, (Polity Press, 2018), 117-123.

¹⁹ Vali Nasr. “All Against All The Sectarian Resurgence in the Post-American Middle” *Foreign Affairs*, 101 (2022): 128.

²⁰ Abdul Hai Mutma, *Taliban a Critical History From Within* (First Draft Publishing GmbH, 2019),1-3

²¹ Ibid.,

²² William Maley, ‘Interpreting the Taliban’ in *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and Taliban* (ed.) William Maley (New York University Press, 1998), 14.

²³ Harris, A., & Dombrowski, “Military Collaboration”, 155-178.

²⁴ Informant 1 (Afghan Graduate Student), Interview by Md Shafiqur Rahaman, February 20, 2022, Russia.

the Global South. To fully comprehend the scope of jihad in Afghanistan, it is essential to consider the diverse perspectives and interactions of the Afghan people, as well as the historical, geopolitical, and ideological factors that have fueled and sustained it. British colonialism significantly influenced the local understanding and perception of jihad, gradually leading Afghans to wage a holy war against foreign invaders. During British rule, Afghan insurgent fighters frequently invoked the concept of jihad to unite against the occupiers. These Afghan warriors viewed their resistance against British colonial authority as a spiritual commitment, considering it their religious duty to liberate their homeland and people from foreign domination.

Therefore, in 1979, Afghanistan had to face another western power while the USSR started their invasion to protect their communist revolutionaries. In the course of the Soviet occupation the Mullah, a locally knowledgeable person in Islamic jurisprudence and the Mujahidin began their fights against the communist regime. The Mujahidin organization consisted of a significant proportion of Taliban fighters. During the Soviet occupation, the Taliban Mujahidin received large scale of arms and significant finance from the CIA to fight against the Soviet soldiers.²⁵ During this time, the Taliban, formed as a guerrilla group and set up a robust intelligence network against the Soviet occupation. At the end of 1996 Taliban fighters occupied around 95% area of Afghanistan under the leadership of Mullah Omar, a sole leader of Taliban fighters who fought against Soviet invasion during 1978-1992.²⁶ In 1996 Taliban form an Islamic government and Mullah Omar became the Head of the Supreme Council of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in the United States, the U.S. administration declared a 'war on terror', marking a significant and profound shift in global politics. The United States accused Al-Qaeda of orchestrating the attacks, with its leader, Osama bin Laden, maintaining close ties with Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban. It has been alleged that the United States provided assistance to bin Laden and Al-Qaeda during the Soviet-Afghan conflict. However, the situation changed radically after post-9/11, with the U.S. government demanding that Mullah Omar extradite bin Laden for his role in the attacks. Mullah Omar refused this demand, prompting the United States and its allies to launch the 'Operation Enduring Freedom' against Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. By December 2001, U.S.-allied forces, along with the Northern Alliance, had successfully ousted the Taliban. On December 22, Hamid Karzai, a pro-U.S. figure from the Pashtun community, was sworn in as the president of the interim government of Afghanistan. This U.S.-backed regime endured for two decades. However, after twenty years of conflict, the United States withdrew all its forces from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021, and the Taliban regained control over the country. The interim administration was subsequently led by Mullah Muhammad Hasan Akhund as prime minister and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar as deputy prime minister.

A resident of Kabul, provided a detailed explanation of how an individual can be a member of the Taliban. According to him, a member of the Taliban must possess the following attributes: They should engage in conflict with the republican administration. It is important that their views and attitude should be align with the Taliban. They should possess a comprehensive understanding of Taliban ideology and they should establish strong connections with Taliban commanders. The requirement is that they must have a beard and attire must be traditional Afghan dress.²⁷ Additionally, they should have maintained a good connection with the Mullah, a local religious leader of Afghanistan. According to a graduate student from Afghanistan residing in Russia, said, Taliban member's mindset is Islamic and they seek to apply Islamic Sharia law which contradicts against the western principles of democracy and western freedom of expression.²⁸ It is worthy that, their unwavering devotion to their Mullah (religious leader and commander) can be considered as compact steel. If a Mullah commands the Taliban warriors to initiate a military campaign against their adversaries, the fighters will go promptly to execute the operation without any hesitation or refusal. An Afghan graduate student while interviewing in Russia, claimed this devotion and compact steel commitment of the Taliban fighters to their commanders made them a robotic machine. They possess

²⁵ Sandra Gathmann, "Who are the Taliban" *Aljazeera*, May 30, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o95Mt48xVgM>

²⁶ Adam Augustyn, "Muhammad Omar Amir of Afghanistan" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohammad-Omar>

²⁷ Informant 6, (a Local Inhabitant of Kabul) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, May 22, 2023.

²⁸ Informant 8, (an Afghan Graduate Student) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, Russia, April 22, 2022.

human characteristics, like as blood and flesh human body, but they act like robotic machines in order to carry out their mullah's commands. This chain of command provides Taliban the foremost powerful group in Afghanistan.²⁹ It is worth mentioning that initially, Taliban members were primarily came from Madrasa students. After gaining governmental power in 1996, they expanded their memberships by recruiting from the broader population. Essentially, individuals who uphold religious practices and love Taliban culture are now considered part of the Taliban.

China and Russia in the Post-American Afghanistan

In the entities, China emerges as the dominant actor in collaborating with the Taliban administration against western hegemony in Afghanistan. In the absence of American hegemony, China plays focal role in Afghanistan politics. This reality has transformed Afghanistan into a new geopolitical battleground for multiple international entities. In the entities, China emerges as the dominant actor in collaborating with the Taliban administration against western hegemony in Afghanistan. China's primary focus in Afghanistan can be understood from two significant viewpoints: economic and security concern. For the economic, China intends to promote its Belt and Road Initiative Project through Afghanistan to Central Asia for the greater partnership in trade and energy.³⁰ Chinese security concern is for Xinxiang province, the largest province which borders are connected with eight countries (Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia) is the pivotal security issue for Uyghur militants. On 28 July, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the co-founders of the Taliban and currently serving as the Deputy Prime Minister of the Taliban government, held a meeting with the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi. During the meeting, Baradar promised that, Afghanistan would not be utilized as a base for terrorists.³¹ Baradar's commitment denotes they need Chinese cooperation and for the security China needs Afghanistan. Taliban officials said China is their foremost partner to rebuild war torn Afghanistan. In September 2021, China declared \$31 million emergency aid including 3 million Chinese covid-19 vaccines for Afghanistan.³² Chinese foreign minister stressed that; Taliban should sever all links with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement in order to ensure regional stability.³³ Chinese current economic involvement with the Taliban government has surpassed from previous years. In January 2023, Chinese company signed \$450 million deal with Afghan government to investigate and exploit oil deposits in the northern region of Afghanistan.³⁴ The Chinese government's strong collaboration with the Taliban indicates their support for the Taliban-led administration, whereas Western nations are largely isolated in terms of economic business with Taliban. Concurrently Chinese embassy in Afghanistan promotes *de facto* recognitions of Taliban. In January 2024 China officially recognized Bilal Karim as a Taliban envoy in Beijing which represents notable diplomatic engagement between the two countries.³⁵

The current Chinese-Taliban relationship reflects the mutual recognition of strategic utility. In the strategic relationship, China unswervingly respects the Taliban as a legitimate and valuable political partner, while the Taliban view China as a decisive source of economic investment and political legitimacy amid ongoing international isolation.³⁶ In the post-American reality, Russia's reaction to the Taliban's takeover is more vigilantly pragmatic and restrained one. Moscow is not yet ready to recognize the Taliban govt. formally but interested in continuing to work with the current *de facto* Taliban administration.³⁷ Its policy mostly

²⁹ Informant 2, (an Afghan Post-Graduate Student) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, Russia, February 25, 2022

³⁰ Sohrab Azad, "China's Stake in the Afghan Peace Process" *The Diplomat*, September 22, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/chinas-stake-in-the-afghan-peace-process/>

³¹ "China offers \$31m in emergency aid to Afghanistan" BBC, September 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-58496867>

³² Helen Regan and Hande Atay Alam, "China to provide Afghanistan with \$31 million worth of food and Covid vaccines" *CNN*, September 9, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/09/asia/china-vaccines-aid-afghanistan-intl-hnk/index.html>

³³ Eric Cheung and Ben Westcott, "Chinese officials and Taliban meet in Tianjin as US exits Afghanistan" *CNN*, July 29, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/29/china/china-taliban-tianjin-afghanistan-intl-hnk/index.html>

³⁴ Ahmed S. Cheema, "China's Gamble in Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, May 19, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/chinas-gamble-in-afghanistan/>

³⁵ "Why has China recognised Taliban's envoy to Beijing?" *Al Jazeera*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/14/is-chinas-recognition-of-afghanistan-envoy-a-diplomatic-win-for-taliban>

³⁶ Luke Encarnation & C. Christine Fair. "China and the Taliban: Past as Prologue?" *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 47, no. 5 (2024): 588–611. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.2177988>

³⁷ Stepanova, Ekaterina. "Russia, Central Asia and Non-traditional Security Threats from Afghanistan following the US Withdrawal." *Global Policy*, 13, no. 1 (2022): 143–144. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13058>.

bound in security and political only than the Chinese robust economic interest. Moscow provides its relation by sending a Chargé d'affaires but did not start a full fledged embassy in Afghanistan. However, Russia's primary objective is to make sure its southern border's security. To ensure this security Russia demands on safeguarding of Afghanistan's northern borders which are located with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan zone from Islamic State activities and drug trafficking and any type of extremism.³⁸ In recent days Russia intends to grow its prospective relation with the Taliban.

Regional Actors: Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Qatar

Regionally Pakistan, Iran and Turkey play crucial role in Afghanistan politics. Among the actors Pakistan is the foremost pivotal neighbor of Afghanistan which shares around 3000 km borders with Afghanistan. Pakistan advocates for the formation of an inclusive government by the Taliban, allowing all parties to participate in governance and ensuring a secure and stable Afghanistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan warns that if a civil war is start in Afghanistan, Pakistan will be affected.³⁹ Imran Khan urged Taliban government to establish an inclusive government that promotes political and ethnic harmony. Failure this ethnic harmony will hinder the stability of Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Pakistan's major concerns are terrorism and the refugee crisis. Islamabad contains if Afghanistan descends into a turmoil political condition, Pakistan will face augmented security challenges and an outpouring of refugees from Afghanistan will create wobbly condition inside Pakistan.⁴¹ In the post American landscape of Afghanistan, Pakistan is the strategic partner of Taliban's victory. Particularly the return of the Taliban to the power of Afghanistan is the strategic victory of Pakistan against its longstanding regional rival, India.⁴² In July 2024, Pakistan sent an ambassador to Kandahar to maintain robust profile diplomatic relation with Afghanistan in recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government.⁴³ Currently both countries maintain high profile diplomatic engagement to resolve their security and refugee problems.

The interest of Iran and Turkey in Afghanistan revolve around their competition for regional dominance. Iran's engagement with Afghanistan is driven by a desire for both security and economic collaboration. Iran perceives the withdrawal of US soldiers from Afghanistan as a manifestation of the failure of US strategy in the region. Consequently, Iran sees the current situation is a chance to exert its influence and should take this lead in rebuilding Afghanistan. However, Iran is willing to cooperate with new Taliban government on the basis of secure and stable situation which leads Taliban should not engage with Al-Qaeda and ISIS or any militants' groups in the region. In an effort to safeguard Iran's border security and its Shia population of Afghanistan, the Hazara Community, from the assaults of ISIS-K Iran has pursued a conciliatory foreign policy against the Taliban regime.⁴⁴ Being a counterpart of Iran, Turkey provides pragmatic approach to the Taliban government. They increase their security and humanitarian engagement with the Taliban but for the time being they are not ready to recognize Taliban.⁴⁵

Qatar is considered as a gateway of western countries for Afghanistan and the chief mediator of US-Taliban peace process. Qatar also promoting positive image of Taliban government in the international arena. The Doha Agreement was signed under the conciliation of Qatar on 29 February 2020. The key message of the agreement is withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban promised they would not cooperate to any terrorist groups and the soil of Afghanistan would not be used for any security threat to the USA and

³⁸ Brian G. Carlson, "The Taliban Takeover and China-Russia Relations" *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 294, November 2021, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/ess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse294-EN.pdf>

³⁹ "Pakistan's Imran Khan warns of 'civil war' in Afghanistan" *Aljazeera*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/22/pakistan-imran-khan-civil-war-afghanistan-taliban>

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*,

⁴¹ Sitara Noor, "The Taliban's Ascendance in Afghanistan: Implications for Pakistan" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2021): 14-18

⁴² Abdul Basit, "Af-Pak: One Year Since the Taliban's Return to Power" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 14, No. 4, (2022): 7-10

⁴³ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury "Towards the Reintegration of Afghanistan into the International Community" in *The Armed Conflict Survey of 2024* (ed.) Dr Irene Mia (Routledge: 2024), 288

⁴⁴ Fred H. Lawson & Matteo Legrenzi, "How conciliating Taliban-led Afghanistan ended up endangering Iran" *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 35:1, (2023) 79-82, DOI: 10.1080/14781158.2024.2413382

⁴⁵ Ezel Sahinkaya, "Turkey's Engagement With Afghanistan Has Grown Since Taliban Takeover" *VOA*, August 12, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-s-engagement-with-afghanistan-has-grown-since-taliban-takeover-/6699437.html>

its allies.⁴⁶ However, Qatar urges to international community that, they should engage to Taliban government than boycotts. At the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly Qatar Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani addressed “boycotting them would only lead to polarization and reactions, whereas dialogue could be fruitful”.⁴⁷

For the western block, The US policy appears with inconsistency. They provide some humanitarian aid for the Afghan people, concurrently they issued sanction against Taliban government and frigid Afghanistan’s reserves which is around \$7.5 billion. In the post American reality, the EU takes pragmatic approach against the US government. They appeared as a dominant normative actor in Afghanistan. On 12 October EU-Taliban talk was held in Doha under the conciliation of Qatar. The EU announced \$1.5 billion humanitarian aid for the Afghan people and Taliban foreign minister reaffirms that there is no discrimination to the minority and Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) is under control.⁴⁸ But the EU is not ready to recognize Taliban government rather; they emphasize humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.

Since the takeover of Kabul, Taliban has a very clear message to the international community that, Afghanistan will be an Islamic Emirate. They will not consider this issue because they had to fight more than two decades to establish this regime. In the post American reality, Taliban understood that supporting Al Qaeda would be a major trouble to get their recognition from the international community. To get international recognition Taliban takes pragmatic approach against Al Qaeda. On 21 September 2021 Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid claimed we are against any sort of terrorism. He said, “we do not see anyone in Afghanistan who has anything to do with al Qaeda. We are committed to the fact that, from Afghanistan, there will not be any danger to any country.”⁴⁹ In the inception of their interim government, Taliban did not get any recognition even from Pakistan and Qatar but now the international community’s engagement with Taliban are developing in reconstructing Afghanistan. Now four countries are officially *de facto* recognized Taliban government by sending diplomate which we mentioned earlier. This progress notices Taliban is connecting with greater international community. Still the western world raises question for rule of law and human rights violating against Taliban regime. A post-graduate student said whatever western recognition for the Taliban, the reality of Afghanistan is that, currently the Taliban is the only one option to run Afghanistan. Because now the Taliban has an organized government system and some international recognitions already, they have achieved. At present, the opponents of Taliban are in very weak position in comparing of Taliban’s organizational capacity or military strength.⁵⁰

Strength of Taliban

Since August 2021 Taliban members have completely occupied the government of Afghanistan. The cabinets have been adorned by the Taliban veterans who either fought in combat against the Soviet invasion or held pivotal positions in the previous Mulla Omar government. Informant 2, said, these veterans are the most tested personalities of the Taliban who have fully adopted Talibani ideology as their way of life and they are ready to sacrifice their life for the Taliban regime without any hesitation. They seem to be identical, resembling an impenetrable barrier constructed from cast-iron.⁵¹ This unity is the major source of Taliban’s strength. A local inhabitant of Herat Province, claimed, the strength of the Taliban lies in their unity and being under one umbrella and one movement which is to found an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.⁵² Since the withdrawal of the US troops, Taliban’s compact steel unity has been amalgamated with modern military arms. However, Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan has provided a substantial chance to strengthen their military capabilities.

⁴⁶ “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Signed-Agreement-02292020.pdf>

⁴⁷ “UNGA: Qatar’s emir urges world to engage with the Taliban” *Al Jazeera*,

September 21, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/21/unga-qatar-emir-urges-world-engage-with-taliban>

⁴⁸ “Afghanistan: Taliban meet with EU, US representatives as G20 holds special summit” *DW*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-taliban-meet-with-eu-us-representatives-as-g20-holds-special-summit/a-59473960>

⁴⁹ “Taliban say no al Qaeda or ISIS in Afghanistan” *Reuters*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-say-no-al-qaeda-or-isis-afghanistan-2021-09-21/>

⁵⁰ Informant 2, (an Afghani postgraduate Student) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, Russia, February 25, 2022.

⁵¹ Ibid.,

⁵² Informant 4, (a Local inhabitant of Herat) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, March 8, 2023.

Under the US-led regime, they were categorized as insurgents, with their military units being perceived as terrorists, militants, and belligerents recognized by the Afghan government. Currently, they are the primary catalyst of the Afghan government and the main entity responsible for making military policies. This is mainly because it may say that the military power of the Afghan government is the military power of the Taliban. Prior to 15 August 2021, Taliban fighters used light arms in comparing to since their take over Kabul. Aftermath of August 2021, substantial quantities of armaments procured from US made weapons were left behind. Latifullah Hakimi, the head of the Taliban's Ranks Commission openly asserted that they control over of more than 30,000 small arms, 26000 heavy arms weapons and approximately 61000 military vehicles in the course of their take over.⁵³ He added, we have successfully restored 50% of the 81 helicopters and planes that were purportedly unserviceable during the US troops last year's riotous withdrawal. It is worthy that, strategically Taliban included pivotal professionals: engineers, military personnel, experienced administrative stuffs from the previous US-led regime in their nouveau Islamic Emirate.⁵⁴ Latifullah Hakimi claimed we will build a grand army based on our country's needs and our national interests.

According to the ministry of defense, the Islamic Emirate has 1,70,000 personnel in total.⁵⁵ These forces mainly come from the previous trained and devoted Taliban fighters who fought against the US-led regime in the last two decades. The unofficial number of Taliban military forces could exceed 170000. Because all Taliban fighters are able to fight against their opponents. As Latifullah Hakimi said, earlier the suicide bombers were pursuing to target him, but now the same suicide bombers are protecting him.⁵⁶ His discourse promotes the Afghan military force is comprised by the highly devoted Taliban fighters. At the same time, Taliban government has founded their especial military force named "Badri 313" which shown off their capability with bullet proof jackets and modern military arms at Kabul airport area.⁵⁷ A student asserted that earlier Taliban fighters were used to fight by only light arms like AK-47 rifle, hand grenade, and conventional rocket lancer. But after withdrawal of the US and their allies' forces on August 2021, Taliban occupied Kabul and control over government power. They formed Afghan military forces as their planned design for which they fought in the last twenty decades. Now they are weaponized with the US left behind heavy and light arms including fighter jet, attack helicopter and tanks.⁵⁸ Currently they are the foremost powerful group in Afghanistan. This foremost powerful position provided Taliban fighters more confident than previous years. A student said that the military strength of Taliban signifies their stance against their adversary groups such as the faction led by Ahmad Massoud and the ISK (Islamic State of Khorasan).⁵⁹ He added, Taliban is the driving force of Afghan government and their opponent groups are now in state of terrified. The current condition of Taliban denotes they can survive in Afghanistan for a long time, whatever the recognition of the western countries.

The Detective System and the Taliban Network

No information is available regarding to the Taliban's detective system and their network to all over the Afghanistan. However, through interviews with local residents, we can gather little information on the issue. A resident of Kabul mentioned that the Taliban are the ever-strongest fighter group in Afghanistan because of their robust military detective system.⁶⁰ Their military detective system is based on devotion to their unique ideology. All of the members of Taliban are look like in a compact family. They are all against their opponent groups. Once any of them member got information against their opponent, they can easily track the person because their network is extended to all over Afghanistan. Furthermore, an inhabitant of Heart noticed that since 15 August 2021, Taliban regime has taken control over the Afghanistan and they

⁵³ "Taliban to create Afghanistan 'grand army' with old regime troops", *Al Jazeera*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/22/taliban-create-grand-army-afghanistan-old-regime-troops>

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁵ "IEA's army now totals 170,000: MoD's Inspector General" *Ariana News*, September 24, 2023, <https://www.ariananews.af/ieas-army-now-totals-170000-mods-inspector-general/>

⁵⁶ 'Taliban To Create', *Al Jazeera*, February 2, 2022,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/22/taliban-create-grand-army-afghanistan-old-regime-troops>

⁵⁷ Alba Sanz "Badri 313: The Taliban's elite unit in Kabul" *Atalayar*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/badri-313-talibans-elite-unit-kabul/20210826141143152678.html>

⁵⁸ Informant 1, (an Afghani Graduate student) February 20, 2022.

⁵⁹ Informant 2, (an Afghani Postgraduate student) Interview by Md Shafiqur Rahaman, Russia, February 25, 2022.

⁶⁰ Informant 3, (an Afghani Graduate student) Interview by Md Shafiqur Rahaman, Russia, March 30 2022.

have established a visible and invisible network to all over Afghanistan.⁶¹ No one can get away from their network. The Taliban's detective network to all over the Afghanistan is a symbol of their existence that they are the driving force of Afghanistan. All Taliban members are ardently united and they know without wholehearted unity they will lose their regime. As mentioned, informant 5, an inhabitant of Kandahar,⁶² said, the Taliban have no ultra western made technology but they have the devotion and iron unity. They know without the devotion and ardent unity their power will be occupied by anti-Taliban group which they do not want to see forever. A local inhabitant Mazar -e-Sharif, claimed, prior to the US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban had no ultra-modern technology like fingerprint system to detect their opponents. But now due to government miniating they have fingerprint, mobile technology and person profile picture to detect their opponents.⁶³

Security

Security is the omphalos part of a society or state or a person's daily life. The historical testament denotes civil war became a part of Afghan life. Afghanistan has a long experience of turmoil political condition and bloody civil war resulted insecure life since British colonialism. Later more than three decades of civil war requires the Afghan people need a secure life. Informant 4, said, ever since the Soviet invasion, the security issue has become the most pivotal issue in daily Afghan life. Under the US-led regime, the Taliban posed a significant threat to the Afghan government. At present, the Taliban is ensuring the security of the Afghan and they have taken a strong stand against the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) and actively fighting against them. Let's hope for a peaceful and prosperous future for Afghanistan.⁶⁴

The Taliban's security policy is quite strategic in terms of getting international image. As mentioned, informant 3, once Taliban were directly connected with Al Qaeda. But since their seizure of Kabul in August 2021, they take strategic position in defining their connection with the any terrorist group, because of their international recognition. Currently, Taliban has direct conflict with ISK. They are showing to international community that, ISK is their major opponent. Still the Taliban did not get any recognition but they are committed against terrorism to use their land and that's why since their taking power, they have some conflicts with ISK.⁶⁵

Future of Afghanistan: Taliban or Anti-Taliban Regime

The origin of the Taliban can be traced back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. From 1979 till the present day, their power structure has been fluctuating over the time. At present, they have established their dominance over Afghanistan and are the most prominent powerful community in terms of military might, personnel and financial resources. They are unparalleled in comparing with any of their opponent's group inside Afghanistan. Informant 2, an Afghani graduate living in Russia, claimed, currently there is no option without Taliban. If the Taliban falls by any other opponents' group, then, again Afghanistan will face a bloody civil war.⁶⁶ Informant 8 mentioned, if Taliban government again falls by any anti-Taliban group, then the current political condition will be in a state of turmoil suddenly and a bloody civil war will start for a long time. This situation will be worse than current Taliban regime.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the numbers of Talib members are increasing day by day.

Never ever they are not ready to sell their ideology and power to any group because they occupied Afghan power by two decades of bloody wars and they achieved it by their thousands of members sacrifices. Informant 1 said, Taliban got Afghanistan's power by force and no one did not bestow them as a gift rather, thousands of their members had been killed in the last two decades of war and they fought to establish their

⁶¹ Informant 4, (a Local Inhabitant of Herat) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, March 8, 2023.

⁶² Informant 5, (a Local Inhabitant of Kandahar) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, March 5, 2022.

⁶³ Informant 7, (a Local Inhabitant of Mazar e-Sharif) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, April 10, 2022.

⁶⁴ Informant 4, (a Local inhabitant of Herat) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, March, 8, 2023.

⁶⁵ Informant 3, (an Afghani graduate student) March 30, 2022.

⁶⁶ Informant 2, (an Afghani graduate student) February 25, 2022.

⁶⁷ Informant 8, (a Local Inhabitant of Kabul) Interview by Md. Shafiqur Rahaman, February 25, 2022.

ideology, in a sense, now they are enjoying government power along with their ideological approach.⁶⁸ So there is no possibility to found a coalition government meaning a government with the Taliban opponents and no opportunity for major changing of their ideological approaches.

Conclusion

In exploring the post-American reality in Afghanistan, we sought to understand the legacy of the Taliban in Afghan politics and their strategies for legitimizing their position both domestically and internationally. The conclusion of the American occupation has placed the Taliban in power, necessitating their efforts to consolidate and legitimize their rule within Afghanistan and on the global stage. In this new phase of governance, the Taliban have exhibited a greater sophistication compared to their previous tenure. They are now more adept in navigating political, social, and economic challenges, and in leveraging these skills to stabilize their rule. A critical aspect of this sophistication is their engagement with international actors, among which China has emerged as a significant player in Afghanistan's geopolitics. The relationship with China represents a pivotal shift in the regional dynamics and underscores the Taliban's strategic adaptation to the post-American reality. China's involvement is driven by multiple factors, including its economic interests, security concerns, and the broader geopolitical competition with the United States. The Taliban, in turn, view China's investment and diplomatic support as crucial for gaining international recognition and economic stability. Our analysis frames this development within the context of the 'Post-American Reality', emphasizing the transformation in Afghanistan's political landscape following the withdrawal of American forces. The end of American occupation has not only altered the internal power dynamics but also reshaped Afghanistan's external relations. The Taliban's efforts to legitimize their rule are thus seen through a dual lens: domestically, they are working to consolidate power and gain acceptance among diverse Afghan factions; internationally, they seek to build alliances and secure recognition from key global powers. By navigating these new realities, the Taliban aim to establish a sustainable and recognized authority in the post-American era, with China's role being particularly instrumental in this geopolitical recalibration.

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