

Afghanistan Today: An Analysis of Issues and Challenges

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Abstract: *The Taliban take over in Afghanistan in August 2021 has been viewed as a very critical moment in the history of the world. This created great unrest in the regional politics since the US has already announced their total withdrawal from the country as a result of the US-Taliban Peace Process signed on 28th February 2020. Objective of the study is to analyze the current scenario in Afghanistan coupled with the issues and challenges. Research questions include the issues faced by the current government, hurdles faced by the women and girls in public life, economic and humanitarian crises, to find and the role of regional dynamics in bringing peace and stability to the region. The study is very significant on account of its focus on the burning issue that Afghanistan has been confronted with. Only a viable government representative all the stakeholders in the country can be a panacea to resolve all the issues of the country and bring in peace and harmony to the people.*

Key words: Taliban, Issues, Challenges, Women, Crises, Regional Dynamics

Introduction

The fallout from the Taliban regaining control in August 2021 is one of the most important events in the history of the modern world. This showed the resurgence of Afghan Taliban after a period of twenty years. Afghanistan also went through this sort of government by Taliban during 1996-2001 that was followed by the US intervention and allied partners (Clayton, 2022). This study provides background information and analysis on developments in Afghanistan and their potential policy ramifications, including (Clayton, 2022):

- The Taliban government and its influence on terrorist organizations, human rights, and the ability of American Afghan partners to leave the country;
- Regional dynamics; and
- The nation's intertwined economic and humanitarian issues.

The study also includes details on Afghan-related legislation and other legislative activity. The issue at the centre of many U.S. policy discussions that Congress can affect (such as those surrounding humanitarian aid, U.S. sanctions, and the status of assets held by U.S.-based central banks) is how to prioritize and, if feasible, balance two competing interests.

The takeover by Taliban was not something unexpected and strange as the US government has already expressed her concern over the possible Taliban attack. The US government, while apprehending the threat of Taliban ghost, signed a Peace Deal with the Taliban in Doha (Qatar) on 28th February 2020 to reach out an agreed upon formula of peace settlement in Afghanistan and to be followed by the intra-Afghan talks where the Afghan government would enter into peace deal with the Afghan Taliban for bringing peace and political stability in the country (Tariq, 2020). The intra-Afghan talks hovered over some round of talks and enabled the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government to come closer for discussing critical and sensitive issues faced by them. In August 2021, the Taliban made a very dramatic success by ousting the Afghan government and came to power within a few days and provided a safe passage to the foreign troops. The Taliban take over was not something of a unique incident, the country has been passing through this turmoil since 1979 when the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan and the country served as a battleground for the United States and the Russian forces. The post-9/11 era was one of the greatest eras of insurgency in Afghanistan when a huge number of insurgents took their sway wherever they desired (Tariq, 2018).

Background: Taliban Takeover

The United States, in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, led a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban regime that supported it, which is considered to be the beginning of the chapter of Afghan history that ended in 2021. Over the next 20 years, the Taliban insurgency caused the United States hundreds of combat casualties in Afghanistan, and Congress appropriated over \$146 billion for security forces and reconstruction. While Afghanistan remained one of the world's poorest and most corrupt nations throughout this time, the Taliban were ousted by an elected Afghan government, which, with major U.S. and international help, made modest but unequal advances in most indices of human development (Clayton, 2022).

As a result of nearly 20 years of significant U.S. and international support, including the deployment of hundreds of thousands of troops and the commitment of tens of billions of dollars in assistance, the Afghan government was a close U.S. counterterrorism partner at the beginning of 2021. Prior to the full military pullout that the US agreed to in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, President Donald Trump had already withdrawn all but 2,500 US troops, the lowest US force level since 2001 (Clayton, 2022). While acknowledging that the Afghan forces continued to depend on U.S. help, U.S. officials vowed to support them financially and voiced confidence in their ability to defeat the Taliban (Clayton, 2022).

The US and allied partners had already pondered over the drawdown of NATO forces from Afghanistan in different phases that had to commence from December 2014 (Tariq

M. , Dynamics of NATO Drawdown from Afghaistan and Future Dyanmics , 2015). As per the drawdown scenario, the NATO had to leave Afghanistan in five different phases whereby security of the country had to be handed over to the Afghan Security Forces and the foreign troops would leave the country while handing over the security of the key installations to the US forces. In the aftermath of this backdrop, the US administration signed Peace Treaty with Afghan Taliban in February 2022 whereby the US agreed to leave five airbases and withdraw her complete forces from Afghanistan in 135 days (Tariq, 2020). But the whole process was not concluded during the stated time and it was in August 2021 when the Talban had to take over the control of the country and form their care taker government.

The Taliban Government in Afghanistan

The Taliban declared a "caretaker government" to administer Afghanistan on September 7, 2021. The Taliban refer to their government as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, much as they have done for decades when referring to themselves (Group, 2022). The Taliban, who ruled from 1996 to 2001 without passing a formal constitution, have stated their intention to rule in accordance with Islamic law (sharia), but they have not done so far. Changing the very nomenclature of the government from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will have great repercussions on the subsequent politics of the country (Hassan, 2022). There is "a clear and unified legal framework, judicial system, or enforcement mechanisms," according to a U.S. State Department report from June 2022 (State, 2022). It is clear that the Afghan Taliban did not frame or enforce any constitution during their previous regime though they had committed that they would frame a constitution for running the country. It would be in the best interest of the country if a constitution is framed and all the stakeholders are included in the set up so as to be an inclusive government representing all the major sections of the people.

As the group's emir, Haibatullah Akhundzada has held supreme authority since the 2016 U.S. drone attack that killed his predecessor, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor. Only one picture of him is known to be available to the general public, and he has reportedly made few reported public appearances (Jazeera, 2022). Almost all of the government's members were either lifelong Taliban supporters or previous Taliban officials. They are all men, overwhelmingly ethnic Pashtuns (the bulk of the population in Afghanistan), and the majority are from the southern part of the country. Even today, more than half of them are subject to U.S. and or U.N. sanctions related to terrorism, including Sirajuddin

Haqqani, the acting interior minister. For years, the U.S. Department of State has offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information that results in the capture of Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani Network, a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) that the United States has designated as being responsible for numerous attacks in Afghanistan against American and other foreign targets.

The announcement of awarding of up to \$10 million for those who provide any sort of information regarding the whereabouts of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Interior Minister of Afghanistan, prognosticates security threat for the US and the allied partners. The US drawdown from Afghanistan is a strategic retreat after the US has achieved her objectives by staying for about 20 years. It is also noteworthy that the despite staying for such a long time in Afghanistan, the US and allied partners have not been able to dismantle the terrorist networks and still sacred by the Haqqani network. Even the Taliban are not in secure position to safeguard their interest in the country and are threatened by different networks. Some of the threats emanating from the networks are the threat of Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) coupled with threats from some non-state actors who served the country prior to the US intervention in the country. Even the issue of gaining political stability and forming an inclusive government representative of all the political stakeholders in the country would be a challenging area for the Taliban to harbor support from the people. Besides, challenges from the regional actors the Taliban are also facing internal challenges from the various actors.

Status of Women and Girls

Since gaining control, the Taliban have enacted a profusion of laws and regulations that completely restrict the ability of women and girls to exercise their fundamental rights, including the freedoms of expression, movement, employment, and education (Hassan, 2022). This has an impact on almost all of their rights, including the right to life, livelihood, and shelter, access to health care, food, and water. In March 2022, the Taliban declared that women and girls will be prohibited from secondary education. This decision received considerable criticism and expressions of concern from all around the world, including the majority of the G7 and G20 members and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (Hassan, 2022). But the Taliban gave a practical manifestation to the banning of women education in the country which was highly criticized by the international community (HADID, 2022).

The Taliban's leadership, which is made up solely of men, has never allowed women to take part in decision-making. Women have not been allowed to participate in government at any level or hold any high positions in the civil service, even as judges,

according to the Taliban leadership, which is made up solely of men. Authorities announced and frequently enforced regulations that forbade women from travelling or leaving their homes, including to go to work without a male family member accompanying them—a requirement that was impractical for almost all families—and prohibited women from holding the majority of jobs. In addition, authorities established rules mandating that women's faces be covered in public, including by female TV newsreaders, and they stated that male family members will be held accountable for a woman's violations of the laws governing her mobility and attire (Hassan, 2022).

Women have enjoyed great rights and political participation in the affairs of the state during the period from 2001 to 2020 when Afghanistan was run by a democratic government (Tariq M. , Political Participation of Women in Afghanistan in the present set-up , 2022). There was much participation of women in the Afghan Parliament and political affairs of the country.

Economic and Humanitarian Crises

Afghanistan's ongoing economic collapse following the Taliban takeover contributed significantly to the humanitarian crisis there worsening in 2022. Over 90% of people continued to experience food insecurity throughout the year, with tens of millions being forced to skip meals or go for entire days without food. Increased hunger mortality and longer-term health issues in children are results of persistent malnutrition (Hassan, 2022). The economic crisis has a number of underlying reasons. The majority of donor nations continued to impose cutoffs on income support and wages for workers who are important to providing healthcare, education, and other key services in 2022. Widespread pay losses as a result of this occurred at the same time when the cost of food, fuel, and other necessities was rising. During 2022, agricultural productivity also declined as a result of a severe drought and a lack of inexpensive access to fuel, fertilizer, and other resources.

The crisis has a disproportionately negative impact on women and girls, who also have more difficulty getting access to food, medical care, and financial resources. The issue worsened under Taliban rules that prohibited women from working in the majority of paid positions, especially in households where women were the sole or primary wage earners. When the Taliban did permit women to work, it was often under repressive conditions that made it nearly impossible for them to do so, such as having a male family member accompany them to work and even stay with them during the entire workday.

Most female-headed households didn't have enough food for most of 2022, according to surveys by the World Food Program, and nearly all of them are now resorting to

"draconian measures" to get food, like selling essential household items, putting kids to work, or marrying off young girls for marriage. Since women and girls are disproportionately impacted by the crisis, the US government announced the establishment of "The Afghan Fund" on February 14, 2022. This Swiss-based financial mechanism will act as a trustee for Afghanistan's foreign exchange reserves and replace DAB in certain limited transactions and other activities. However, until the US and Taliban authorities come to an agreement over DAB's status, a number of crucial central banking functions can only still be performed by DAB. As a result, economic effects will persist. The Afghan Fund's long-term viability as a solution to Afghanistan's economic issues is still seriously questioned, and delaying action to stabilize the crumbling economy has a high human cost.

Extra-Judicial Killings

Revenge killings and forced disappearances of former government officials and security force members have been carried out by Taliban militants. Additionally, they have executed individuals they claim to be Islamic State of Khorasan Province members summarily (ISKP). In a report published in August 2022, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) described several instances of murders and disappearances carried out by Taliban troops since August 2021. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether those who were killed were former government employees or alleged ISKP.

Over the course of the year, Taliban forces carried out military operations and night raids against civilians whom they believe to be hiding or supporting ISKP members. Soldiers frequently abused citizens and imprisoned people without following the law. Detainees were slain or made to disappear by force in Residents of Nangarhar excavated a mass grave in a canal in the latter half of 2021 and early 2022. It comprised at least 45 victims in varying states of decomposition, many of which bore evidence of torture or cruel executions, such as missing limbs, ropes around their necks, or beheadings (HADID, 2022).

The Taliban detained and tortured locals during search operations in the province of Panjshir that they claimed were targeting communities that supported the National Resistance Front (NRF), an armed opposition organization. Authorities also subjected prisoners to collective punishment and ignored their rights to protection. At least 700 people were killed and injured in various bombs and violent attacks against Hazaras in 2022, which the ISKP claimed credit for. ISKP claimed responsibility for the April 19 suicide explosion at a high school in the primarily Hazara and Shia district of Dasht-e

Barchi, Kabul, which resulted in the death or injury of 20 pupils, teachers, and staff members (HADID, 2022).

Attacks by the Islamic State of Khoirasan Province

Two days later, an incident at the Seh Dokan Mosque in Mazar e Sharif claimed the lives of 31 people and injured 87 others. ISKP also claimed responsibility for the attack. Five Hazara men were slain on April 27 by unidentified shooters as they travelled to the Dare-Suf coal mine in Samangan. On September 30, a Hazara-dominated attack on a school in west Kabul left 100 people, mostly children, injured. The damage brought on by the bombings was made worse by the Taliban's refusal to protect vulnerable people and offer survivors and afflicted families medical care and other aid (HADID, 2022).

Beyond the immediate destruction, the assaults had a devastating long-term impact, robbing survivors and families of victims of breadwinners, frequently placing a heavy weight on their health, and limiting their ability to go about their everyday lives. In the early days of the transition, several observers conjectured that the Taliban may make contact with former members of the Afghan government or with individuals outside the organization as part of their pledge to create a "inclusive administration." However, the Taliban have not looked outside of their own ranks to fill positions in government, and it has been stated that they are filling ministries with military and/or religious officials who lack necessary experience, which exacerbates the group's administrative difficulties.

Since the Taliban took control, some sources have suggested that there is division within the group on a number of different fronts. Even though the Taliban have a track record of successfully resolving internal conflicts, running Afghanistan provides fresh and particular difficulties for the group's consensus-based decision-making. 13 Points of contention are said to exist between the group's political wing's members (like Baradar) and its military leaders (like the Haqqanis) over who should receive the most credit for the group's victory;¹⁴ between the leadership, which seeks stability, and the rank-and-file fighters, who are finding it difficult to adjust to life after the conflict;¹⁵ and between those with various ideological perspectives and ethnic identities

Potential Opposition to Taliban

Organized armed opposition to the Taliban comes from two very different sources. The National Resistance Front (NRF), which consists of supporters of the old Afghan state, is the first. The NRF leadership has maintained representation in Washington, DC and has made appeals for American and international help. Due to the Taliban's comparatively stronger military position and closer ties with regional powers, even some that had

supported Taliban opponents in the 1990s, like as Russia and Iran, they have not received any public assistance from any foreign nations (Clayton, 2022). Numerous strikes against Taliban members have been allegedly carried out by the NRF, primarily in and around the central province of Panjshir, however it is difficult to verify these claims, which the Taliban dismiss as "propaganda."

The local Islamic State affiliate (Islamic State-Khorasan Province, ISKP, also known as ISIS-K), a longtime Taliban foe, poses a potentially more serious armed danger to the Taliban. ISKP has opposed the Taliban since its founding in 2015 because it sees the Taliban's nationalist political agenda, which is centered on Afghanistan, as incompatible with the Islamic State's Universalist idea of a world caliphate. ISKP has claimed responsibility for a number of significant incidents in 2022 (several of which targeted Afghanistan's Shia minority, the Hazaras). Since the Taliban took control, ISKP's ranks have increased to as many as 4,000 members despite a determined Taliban offensive. Experts disagree on the strength of the ISKP danger and the Taliban's self-declared capacity to defeat the organization without outside support.

Regional Dynamics

Afghanistan, a landlocked country that has historically been the target of intervention by its neighbors and other international powers, is directly impacted by regional dynamics. These neighbors are likewise affected by what happens in Afghanistan.

Pakistan

Pakistan is widely regarded as the neighboring country that is most significant in this regard. Pakistan has long played an active, and by many accounts stabilizing, role in Afghan affairs, including by actively supporting the Taliban during their rule in the 1990s, bringing peace and stability in the country and facilitating the US-Taliban Peace Deal in February 2020 in Qatar. Many commentators initially saw the Taliban takeover as a success; citing declarations of clear support for the takeover from Pakistani leaders, for Pakistan's foreign policy in the region (Haqqani, 2021). Since August 2021, senior Pakistani officials have met with the new Taliban administration multiple times in both Islamabad and Kabul to ponder over the issues faced by the Kabul regime.

There are certain signs, though, that Pakistan may face difficulties as a result of the Taliban regaining power. The victory of the Taliban could give Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist organizations, such as the so-called Pakistani Taliban, morale and possibly financial boost (Tehreek-i Taliban-i Pakistan, or TTP, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization) (Clayton, 2022). After TTP attacks on Pakistani security forces rose in

August 2021, the Pakistani government is said to have asked the Afghan Taliban to mediate a number of ceasefires, which seem to have collapsed in late 2022. So, Pakistan is very important to play a timely role to the Afghan government in most of the crucial times.

Iran

Afghanistan's western border is shared with Iran, which opposed the Taliban's leadership in the 1990s but has kept friendly connections with them while highlighting the importance of representation for Afghanistan's ethnic and religious groups with which Iran has strong ties (namely Tajiks, who speak a variant of Persian, and Hazaras, who are mostly Shia Muslims). Before the group's takeover in August 2021, official Taliban visits to Tehran began, and they have continued ever since, including the visit of the Taliban's acting foreign minister in January 2022. However, disagreements in 2022 over refugees and water rights may be a sign of things to come (Hansen & Kousary, 2022). Iran is very strategic to the Afghan government for sharing sympathetic feelings with the Hazara tribe of Afghanistan having commonality of Shiasim. Better role can be played by Iran while supporting a stable and democratic government in Afghanistan which can be representative of all the classes of the people inhabiting the country.

Central Asia

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors, have reacted differently to the Taliban's control. The governments of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have engaged in numerous formal interactions with the Taliban and appear to be prioritizing economic connections, especially the planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline. As a result of its own battles with Islamist militancy and its ties to Afghan Tajiks, the nation's second-largest ethnic group and some of whom disagree with the Taliban's rule, Tajikistan, on the other hand, has opposed the Taliban and provided refuge to the anti-Taliban National Resistance Front (Siddique, 2022). It is a fact that the Central Asian States have opposed the Taliban government on most of the occasions but it is time now to ponder over a reconciliatory approach towards the Afghan Taliban and play the role of a jury for reaching out at a viable settlement among all actors of the country.

China

Since the Taliban's takeover, the possibility of increased Chinese influence and action in Afghanistan has drawn some congressional attention. Prior to the Taliban takeover, China, which had a relatively limited role in Afghanistan under the previous

administration, made some economic investments there (particularly in the development of Afghan minerals and other resources), but major projects have not materialized as a result of the country's instability, a lack of infrastructure, and other obstacles (al, 2022). Despite worries about Islamist terrorist organizations based in Afghanistan, China has given a subliminal nod to the Taliban's authority by underlining that it "respects the autonomous choices made by the Afghan people" during a visit by its foreign minister to Kabul in May 2022 (Shannon Tiezzi, 2022).

US Policy Responses

Since the Taliban took control, the United States has sent more than \$1.1 billion in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and its neighbors (Clayton, 2022). The United States' prior security, development, and stability support, which averaged over \$5 billion yearly between FY2019 and FY2021, is vastly different from the current assistance, even if it is important in preventing further humanitarian misery. These monies funded crucial government services, paid the wages of Afghan soldiers and public officials, and provided some humanitarian help in addition to constituting a significant chunk of Afghanistan's economy. The Biden Administration's FY2023 budget request calls for \$345 million for health, education, and other types of aid in Afghanistan; but, the absence of a U.S. diplomatic mission there could make implementation and/or oversight more difficult or limited (Clayton, 2022).

Beyond assistance, sanctions and the current U.S. hold on Afghanistan's central bank reserves appear to be the two U.S. policy areas that are most pertinent to the economic and humanitarian crisis. Although U.S. sanctions against the Taliban have been in effect since 1999 in various forms, it is unclear how much of an impact they are having on the country of Afghanistan's humanitarian situation. Since the Taliban took control, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has granted a number of general licenses saying that sanctions on the Taliban do not preclude aid to Afghanistan and approving a range of humanitarian and business transactions. Nevertheless, the continuation of sanctions may prompt financial institutions or other actors to "de-risk" Afghanistan by forgoing involvement there rather than risking a breach of the sanctions.

The Biden Administration's control over assets held by the Afghan central bank in the United States has also come under examination. The Taliban and several international officials have pushed the United States to relax the hold on those assets, which amount to around \$7 billion, which was put in place days after the Taliban entered Kabul to prevent the Taliban from accessing the funds (Clayton, 2022). In anticipation of continued litigation stemming from the September 11, 2001, attacks, the Biden

Administration declared on February 11, 2022 that it would "attempt to enable access of \$3.5 billion [of the assets]... for the benefit of the Afghan people." The establishment of a "Afghan Fund" (located in Switzerland) was announced by the administration in September 2022. Its purpose is to "make targeted payments of that \$3.5 billion to help create better stability to the Afghan economy."

Discussion and Conclusion

The Taliban control of Afghanistan in August 2021 created great suspense in the international community on account of their sudden come back to power and getting control over the entire country within a few days. Soon upon coming to power, the Taliban adopted a very lenient strategy of ruling the country by giving amnesty to the foreign troops and foreigners that created a good name for them. In comparison to their previous regime during 1996-2001, they worked strategically and focused on strengthening on the security apparatus vis a vis bringing political stability and harmony in the country. Their decision for not framing any constitution and ruling the country as per strict Islamic Law aroused the apprehensions of the stakeholders in the country and the regional actors.

Apprehensions of the people came true when the Taliban government imposed ban on girls and women education in the country. Taliban have expressed their concern over the women's status and getting education on many occasions but the situation took a dramatic turn when ban was imposed on their public activity. This caused great harassment amongst the women circles inside the country as well as abroad the country. Different non-governmental organizations expressed their protest against this decision and showed sympathies with the women. The government of Afghan Taliban needs to reconsider their decision and ponder over the education of girls and women and their involvement in the public activities. This may avoid any possibility of foreign infiltration resulting in the worsened law and order situation in the country and may save the region from becoming insecure states.

Taliban, the current rulers of the country, are not in stable position at the moment. They are also faced with many threats from the elements of, the National Resistance Front (NRF), the ISIS and the ISKP where they have been involved in extra-judicial killings of the people. Killing the insurgents and speaking against the government functionaries is not a solution to ills of the state. An inclusive government representing all the state actors can be the best solution to address the problems of the people. This will help avoid a stable and war-free Afghanistan with no chances of foreign incursion into the internal affairs of the country. The regional dynamics including Pakistan, Iran, China and the

Central Asian States can better play their roles in resolving the outstanding issues of the country and can result in bringing peace and stability in the region. Besides financial assistance from the US government would help a lot in the establishment of a representative government while giving due share to the Taliban in the affairs of the government would do invaluable service to the country. This can result in stable and peace loving Afghanistan with political stability, sound security apparatus and sound economic system.

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