



End of Afghan Conflict?

Syed Imran Sardar

Research Analyst

Institute of Regional Studies

2021

END OF AFGHAN CONFLICT?

SYED IMRAN SARDAR

Celebrations continue across Afghanistan as well as in some parts of the region in the wake of United States withdrawal. The end game in Afghanistan, however, has different meanings to different people. For the Taliban, it is a victory. It is a defeat of the United States.¹ The fall of a superpower that long kept the Taliban away from running the country on their terms. For many Afghans, it is freedom, a joyous moment as their country is liberated after decades-long foreign occupation. Similarly, there are mixed views at the regional level. For religious sects, Taliban's rise is indeed a beacon of hope to regain their lost ascendancy. For intelligentsia, it is a point of inflection, a glare opportunity to instill the region-ness within the region. Many people are rather deeply sceptical about the peaceful coexistence of the people and the societies belonging to different ideologies. The purpose here is not to contemplate how various segments of the society view US pull-out and Taliban's ascendancy but to shed light on underlying three broad narratives that continue to shape up the minds of the people across the globe.

One, the Taliban have changed. Proponents of this category argue that the Taliban have given an amnesty to their opponents and have allowed women to continue with their education and work. They want to have good relations with the world and even with the US too. They have publicly reiterated their commitment to not allowing their soil for any kind of terrorism.

Second, the Taliban have not changed altogether. Followers of this category strongly believe that there is no change in the Taliban. The so-called leniency that the Taliban is showing is just an eyewash. Their ideology and worldview are not changed. For sake of recognition, and legitimacy they have softened their stance for time being. They are actually buying time to get their feet on the ground.

Third, the Taliban have become even ultra-conservative and extremist. Proponents belonging to this category hold that the Taliban have learned the art of war in the last twenty years. They have learned new techniques as they have fought shoulder to shoulder with Al-Qaeda since both are deeply aligned.² Now they have more weapons in their possession, and would likely impose their will on the people and beyond.

Given that, one cannot be sure how things will turn up in the near future. Will the changed Taliban or a neo-Taliban keep up with their promises? The answer to this million-dollar question in the given scholarship is elusive. The international community and even

the people of Afghanistan have yet to establish whether the Taliban have really changed their mindsets. Apart, the internal division between the Taliban is also a challenge. There is an ongoing ideological tussle within the Taliban as some are in the favor of a lenient approach (moderate) and others are not (hardliners). The hardline Taliban perceive modern Taliban as 'apostate militia'.³ Amid uncertainties, religious groups across the region continue to show solidarity with the Taliban through social media, and public sermons. Pro-Taliban ideology among the religious circles is not only visible, but also growing. Looking at the recent trends, one cannot ignore the broadening horizon of the Taliban and their ideology beyond Afghanistan. The future of peace in Afghanistan and the region is largely dependent upon who are the main actors and where are their investments directed at?

Immediate neighbors of Afghanistan have approached the Taliban, probably on this basic premise that the Taliban have changed and are more likely to be further changed if given due respect and ownership. Mindful of other potential stakeholders in political calculus, Pakistan, Iran, and China are also maintaining contact with them to facilitate an inclusive setup. Apart, Central Asian states have also softened their stance towards the Taliban. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan also appear to be friendlier towards the Taliban.⁴ China and Pakistan are working closely with the Taliban and other stakeholders to not only support them for political settlements, but also looking after humanitarian issues. Iran too has approached the Taliban by offering its services as a facilitator in the peace process and forming an inclusive government.⁵ Russia and Turkey have also stepped in and held out their olive branch to other regional countries for the development of Afghanistan under new the realities. Thus, regional countries' approach toward the Taliban appears to be in complete contrast to the US' approach. However, recent engagements between the regional countries cannot be said 'an alliance in making' rather it is a kind of common understanding on how to take up the issue of security within and outside Afghanistan.

While looking at the recent political developments in Afghanistan, one can argue that the Taliban will have an upper hand whatever the political setup concludes. Recent engagements with the Taliban in this regard is an acknowledgment of Taliban's role in peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction of Afghanistan. However, reaching out Taliban is born of necessity; a necessity of collective security and minimising the risk of conflict spillover.

China's pro-Taliban approach is arguably for two primary reasons. First, cooperation with the Taliban would largely defuse terrorist threats on Chinese soil. Secondly, since the Taliban is all set to gain power, and the US had long barred Afghanistan's entry into Belt and Road Initiative, China is looking for enhanced cooperation to prepare a ground for future investments. Pakistan too, is working closely with China, the Taliban, and other potential stakeholders to start implementing its geo-economic agenda envisioned in its national development goals and the CPEC. Iran's pro-Taliban approach is possibly because of two

reasons; first, Tehran will have greater leverage in the coming nuclear talks while working with the Taliban and others in mainlining peace and security in Afghanistan. Secondly, Iran, despite huge historical differences with the Taliban, cannot afford anti-Taliban sentiments on its soil as the people of Iran are in a state of distress over price hikes, and rising unemployment.

India, however, is taking a cautious and incremental approach. The US and western countries are also pursuing similar approach. These states altogether fall in the anti-Taliban category. Their approach is constructed on the second and third narratives mentioned above. Currently, India is holding its cards. Its intervention can be delayed as it requires time to reshape its strategy while working with the US and western countries. The nexus between the US and India at this point is crucial and needs to be understood. India is closely working with the US on the matter of Afghanistan wherein the particular focus is Pakistan and China and their engagements in Afghanistan. Linking US withdrawal with an end of its containment policy as well as a war on terrorism would be a wrong metaphor. The US has declared that its interest in Afghanistan remains as it was twenty years ago; to prevent terrorist attacks on its territory.

There is extensive literature on rising militancy, Taliban-ISIS relations, Taliban-Al-Qaeda nexus, emerging challenges to the world and other related areas premised around the role(s) of US, India, and the western media, particularly in the aftermath of fall of Kabul to the Taliban. This reveals that how western media is manipulating the situation in Afghanistan to build up its own narratives. And these narratives thus provide the basis for future interventions. So, going through recent trends, one can imagine that ground for an intervention in terrorism related issues is being prepared. There is a possibility that the US with the support of western countries turns up with a concrete plan in the coming years. And that strategy perhaps would entail demands such as closer cooperation, intelligence sharing, sharing of resources, and probably some soldiers on the grounds, depending on how developments take place. This would certainly disrupt the regional equilibrium. The chances of such intervention will be increased in the wake of regional countries' inability to restore peace and stability in Afghanistan.

There is also a possibility of US sanctions to limit the Taliban's legitimacy. In both scenarios, there will be mounting pressure on Pakistan as compared to others in the region. India, on the other hand, is all set to raise the issue of terrorism both at regional as well as international forums. This is evident from PM Modi's resolve to take up the issue of terrorism in the coming SCO summit in the presence of PM Imran Khan.⁶ India has already taken up this issue in the Doha meeting, with the Taliban. It is interesting to note that India, on one hand, is struggling to get on the good side of Taliban while on the other hand, it engaged in is creating hype on terrorism and human rights violation in the wake of the Taliban's take over in Afghanistan.

There would be an apparent shift in US policy towards Asia. The US will have to reorient its focus on the revival of the Quad while working with India and other member countries. However, both the US and India will remain vigilant in Afghanistan and would not leave any stone unturned to exploit the security situation to prevent Chinese inroads into Afghanistan. The China-Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus would remain under the radar of the US and India's secret agencies. The surge of terrorist incidents targeting Chinese on Afghan as well as Pakistan soil must not be ignored. On the people front, India, through disinformation warfare will further accentuate the differences that exist in the society on the rise of the Taliban. All these developments establish that the US and India partnership on the issue of Taliban and Talibanisation would remain as strong as it was on Afghanistan's soil. So, 'It is not a game over for New Delhi'¹⁷ as well as for the US.

The focus of international politics will remain on China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan as they continue with their efforts to fill the security vacuum. For all these three countries, this is not an easy task as the non-state actors, and militant organizations also trying to maximise their power through reviving their own networks. The risk of non-state actors taking control in some parts of Afghanistan is real. In addition to that, the exploitation of sensitivities embedded in the competing narratives about the Taliban is posing serious challenges to ongoing efforts. Regional countries will have to work for years perhaps decades to restore peace and tranquility in Afghanistan. There is little scope for immediate success.

The world is looking at Afghanistan in the larger framework of human rights, however, the situation on the ground for the regional countries, particularly for Pakistan is much more complicated. Bordering countries have to be extra vigilant and better prepare themselves to tackle unfolding security challenges that require greater coordination. A collective response against negative reporting and misleading information is also necessary. Nevertheless, the road to peace in Afghanistan is patchy. It is not the end of the Afghan conflict; it is the beginning of a new battle of competing narratives that transcend 'good Taliban or 'bad Taliban politics.

Notes and References

- 1 Said Zabihullah Mujaid, the Taliban's spokesperson, quoted in 'Foreign powers ponder how and whether to engage with the Taliban' *The Economist*, 4 September 2021, www.economist.com.
- 2 Lydia Khalil, 'Afghanistan will be a boon for international Jihadism,' *The Guardian*, 21 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/21/the-talibans-return-to-power-in-afghanistan-will-be-a-boon-for-international-jihadism>.
- 3 'A Taliban-run Afghanistan will be less isolated than the West may hope,' *The Economist*, August 18, 2021, <http://www.economist.com/>.
- 4 Dante Schulaz, 'Taliban Takeover Concerns Afghanistan's Neighbors,' 17 August 2021, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/taliban-takeover-concerns-afghanistans-northern-neighbors/>.
- 5 'In Tehran talks, Iran offers help to resolve Taliban-Afghan crisis,' *The Jerusalem Post*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/in-tehran-talks-iran-offers-help-to-resolve-taliban-afghan-crisis-673102>.
- 6 Sachin Prashar, 'At SCO summit, PM Modi set to focus on terror in Imran's presence,' *Times of India*, 6 September 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/at-sco-summit-pm-modi-set-to-focus-on-terror-in-imrans-presence/articleshow/85961952.cms>.
- 7 See Myra MacDonald in 'Pakistan in control, China to cement grip in Afghanistan's new Great Game,' *Express Tribune*, 23 August 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2316847/pakistan-in-control-china-to%02cement-grip-in-afghanistans-new-great-game>.