

COMMENT 211 - The threat of the Taliban's rising to power in Afghanistan - Where will Pakistan stand?

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After months of speculation, *the dice is cast*: the US will [withdraw](#) its remaining combat troops from Afghanistan. Contrary to the vision by some optimistic sections of both the Afghans and the international community, the country is far away from becoming ‘[a better place](#)’ to live in.¹ There are no indications yet that the Taliban are interested in the establishment of any other order than that based on their fundamentalist vision of a draconian, Islamist regime. The fact that US troops are pulling out without any political settlement – and that Washington apparently [did not work](#) out an immediate Afghan policy – adds to the grim perspective Afghanistan is facing. The [lack of clarity](#) on the future of the Afghan government, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), and the citizenry remains. There are simmering concerns about the hopelessness of the intra-Afghan peace negotiations and the outbreak of another civil war. The theoretical option of a Taliban-Kabul agreement might be the ‘[tactically most acceptable for all parties](#)’; however, it seems unrealistic. The Taliban and other militant Islamist forces, all of which are becoming increasingly stronger and [emboldened](#) by the withdrawal of US and NATO, are more likely to [pursue a military takeover](#) than to accept a compromise with the Ghani administration.

The region's states puzzle about their Afghan policies in a ‘post-withdrawal scenario’. This is gaining additional significance since US President Joe [Biden's](#)

¹ [According to](#) George W. Bush: ‘By helping to build an Afghanistan that is free from this evil and is a better place in which to live, we are working in the best traditions of George Marshall’ and ‘Marshall knew that our military victory against enemies in World War II had to be followed by a moral victory that resulted in better lives for individual human beings’.

[‘pull-out decision’](#) means not only that Washington once again is abandoning Afghanistan, but also that it is [shifting the responsibility](#) for the fate of Afghanistan towards its neighbours, India, and the United Nations (UN). Nevertheless, the US administration stresses that it is still committed to Afghanistan. Most importantly, accordingly to the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, Washington is not willing to accept a seizing of power by the Taliban through a military takeover.² Here, it is interesting to note that both Khalilzad and President Biden (at least officially) seemed to be [convinced](#) that not only the US and its allies would resist a coercively established Taliban regime but that so would regional actors as well, particularly Pakistan³. However, Islamabad is known for the ambiguity in its official rhetoric regarding implemented policies in its foreign affairs – a phenomenon sometimes described as Pakistan’s [‘double game’](#) in Afghanistan. As such, one of the most crucial questions is: where does Pakistan precisely stand regarding the perspective of a new Taliban regime in general and a militarily enforced one in particular?

Until recently, Pakistani authorities expressed in public statements their opposition to a Taliban rule and [rejected accusations](#) of promoting an extremist Islamic government in Afghanistan. More concretely, [unlike was the case in the 1990s](#), one should expect that Islamabad considers a Taliban-dominated⁴ or militarily-enforced Taliban regime⁵ as against the national interest. [According to observers](#), Islamabad’s preference is for ‘a political settlement that sees the Taliban having a share of power rather than absolute Taliban control over Kabul’. There are several reasons why this is.

A unified and prospering Afghanistan is perceived by Pakistan as a rival competing for influence in the region. Generally speaking, Pakistan is interested in stability in Afghanistan – but a stability ensured by pro-Pakistani forces. Furthermore,

² Literally, Khalilzad [stated](#): ‘But if they obstruct a negotiated settlement and instead pursue a military takeover, they will be opposed not only by the United States but by our allies, partners, and the region. They will face isolation, regional opposition, sanctions, and international opprobrium. There is remarkable consensus within the region and the international community against a military takeover by the Taliban.’

³ [According to](#) Khalilzad, ‘Pakistan’s leaders have emphasized publicly and to U.S. officials that they do not support a military takeover by the Taliban’.

⁴ Introduced via a political settlement/power sharing arrangement.

⁵ Understood as seizing power through a ‘military victory’ over the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and militias of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA).

Islamabad is promoting connectivity projects via Afghanistan with Central Asian states, particularly Uzbekistan⁶; however, it does not wish to witness the emergence of Afghanistan as *the* trade, transit and transshipment hub for Iran, China and Central Asia up to Russia. Any Iran-Afghanistan connectivity links in particular are perceived as a challenge to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor/CPEC (Wolf, 2019). The CPEC aims not only to improve Sino-Pakistani connectivity but [also to bridge](#) primarily (preferable exclusively) the connectivity gap with Central Asia via Afghanistan through its Gwadar port or other Pakistani port facilities.

Moreover, the possibility that a Taliban-controlled Kabul could establish ‘[redefined](#)’ political and diplomatic relations with Islamabad’s arch enemy New Delhi contributes to Pakistan’s threat perception. The [paranoiac fear](#) of ‘[strategic encirclement](#)’ by an hostile India and a Indian-friendly Afghanistan is deeply entrenched in national defence and security considerations by Pakistani decision-makers.

Although a return to civil-war conditions seems most likely, a re-established Taliban regime would possess sufficient economic resources, military capabilities, and selective international support⁷ to enforce order in large parts of the country. In that case, Afghanistan could become a challenge for Pakistan’s ambitions to be the leading regional connectivity provider/hub capable of attracting large foreign investments. Much depends on the willingness by the Taliban to offer security guarantees for development projects⁸ - and on their ability to deliver. Of course, it remains to be seen whether and how far can the Taliban maintain internal cohesiveness after a political settlement or military takeover – as well as manage [competing influences](#) from outside powers, foremost Iran and Pakistan, over its various factions.

⁶ For example, Islamabad and Tashkent agreed on the construction of a 573-kilometer railway route from Pakistan’s Peshawar city to Afghanistan’s cities of Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif all the way to Uzbekistan ([trans-Afghan railway line](#)). The project is almost entirely financed by the [World Bank](#). The connection between [Mazar-e-Sharif and the Afghan border town Hairatan](#) was already established (completed on April 5, 2013) by a project funded overwhelmingly by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Besides, both railway and road are being promoted. Here, a first pilot shipment from Karachi via Kabul and Termez (UZB) to Tashkent under the Transports Internationaux Routiers (TIR) Convention, a customs agreement that facilitates the international transport of goods, was facilitated with the [help of USAID](#).

⁷ Such states who do not care whether the country’s constitutional order is overthrown and hope to achieve leverage among the Taliban or at least among certain of their factions.

⁸ For examples, the [Taliban offered protection](#) for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural-gas pipeline, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) power line, and the further connection between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan by railway.

Another reason why Pakistan will remain averse to the notion of a Taliban-dominated government in Kabul is the fact that the former Taliban regime (1996-2001) did [not respond positively](#) to Pakistani demands, foremost the recognition of the Durand Line as an international border. In this context, the ‘[visit](#)’ by a heavily armed convoy of Taliban officials to the Pakistani Mohmand Agency in the summer of 2001 sent a clear signal to the Pakistani military that Kabul (also under the Taliban) and Islamabad do not share the same views on the common border – as well as on the belonging (nationality) of the Pashtun tribes on the Pakistani side of the Durand line. Islamabad is aware that a Taliban government – despite Pakistani sponsorship – will not feel ‘subordinated’ to Pakistan. Moreover, in issues of most sensitive national interests, it cannot rely on even pro-Pakistan factions of the Taliban. That Pakistan ‘[helped bring the Taliban to negotiations](#)’ but were [not able to convince](#) them to launch substantive negotiations with the Afghan government, agree to a comprehensive ceasefire, or comply with any of the conditions set in their peace deal with the US are all indications of this rationale.

Besides the question of the movement’s reliability, Afghanistan under the Taliban could not only again become a base for terrorist organisations with a global agenda but also become a base for groups specifically targeting Pakistan. According to experts, the Taliban ‘[could very well support anti-Pakistan Islamist militants](#)’. In recent years, the Pakistan’s military and ISI have unsuccessfully attempted to convince the Taliban to break ties with the *Tehreek-e-Taliban* (TTP)⁹, especially after the reported [resurgence](#) of this group¹⁰ and the [increased threat](#) of TTP attacks in Pakistan orchestrated from Afghan soil.

Finally, the potential reestablishment of an *Emirate* means the abolishment of the *Republic*, the constitution, and guaranteed fundamental and political rights. This, combined with the expected rising level of violence, target killings of key figures

⁹ The TTP functions as an ethnically diverse umbrella organisation of [approximately 40 to 42 groups](#) comprising numerous domestic militant Islamist groups and foreign fighters (for example from Arab, Uzbek, Afghan, Chechen areas). The largest and dominant constituent of the TTP is the Mehsud Group, which is ethnically Pashtun and forms the core of the organisation. The agenda shared by the TTP’s various factions is to overthrow the government and establish Shariah law in Pakistan – as well as to combat US/NATO forces in Afghanistan. It is reported that several TTP factions are closely linked with Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban.

¹⁰ After the death of its emir Hakeemullah Mehsud in 2013 and the takeover of a ‘non-Mehsud’ as new leader, the TTP found itself in an escalated factionalism. Only after intervention by the Afghan Taliban (Haqqani network) could the [leadership crises](#) be resolved and some of the breakaways (such as the Hakimullah Mehsud group, “Sajna” Mehsud division of Khan Said, and the Jamaatullah Ahrar group headed by Omar Khalid Khurasani) be reintegrated within the TTP.

of state and society¹¹, and other cruelties against Afghans, will most-likely lead not only to a massive [brain drain](#) of educated nationals but also to another major influx of refugees into Pakistan. This will be not only flanked by [spill-over effects](#) of militancy but also lead to the further radicalisation of Islamist elements of Pakistani soil.

Today, Pakistan's security circles face tough decisions. As they continue to support the Taliban through military, intelligence and diplomatic means in their fight against the ANDSF and allied forces, a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban becomes even more unlikely. As long as the US, and subsequently NATO, remain unclear about how they are planning to maintain their support for the Afghan security forces, said forces' morale and ability to keep the Taliban at bay will further decline. Subsequently, it will not take much longer for the Taliban to capture provincial cities and other major urban areas, thereby pathing the way to a military takeover of Kabul. As such, the Pakistani army and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) need to decide if they want to continue sponsoring terrorism and Jihadism in Afghanistan or finally become a responsible actor willing to contribute to sustainable peace in the region. However, Islamabad's latest refusal to offer the US military bases for a potential counter-terrorism mission in Afghanistan, as well as its ongoing public appeasement of the Taliban, are indications that Pakistan is not willing to give up its '[strategic depth doctrine](#)', which is responsible for the country's deconstructive role in Afghanistan.

¹¹ Such as [civil-society leaders, judges, journalists, and election officials](#).

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