

Afghanistan: Endless Chaos & the Threat to Global Order

By Peter E. Paraschos



Author Peter E. Paraschos

Afghanistan's reputation as an instability generator is well deserved. It is a classic failed state that has spread trouble far beyond its landlocked borders. This has been the case since the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime in 1991 and the emergence of the Taliban movement during the late 1990s. On Aug. 15, 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul and chased the US-backed central government out of power, terminating the 20-year American experiment in transplanted democracy. That the Taliban triumph occurred before the complete withdrawal of US and NATO forces reinforced preexisting pessimistic concerns that Afghanistan cannot be stabilized within its political borders. This time, however, the Taliban say they will govern in a more humane manner while remaining true to the country's Islamic traditions.

The Collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

In February 2020, the administration of President Donald Trump and Taliban officials signed the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan. The agreement committed US and NATO forces to

withdraw completely from Afghanistan by May 2021, called for a ceasefire between the Taliban and Afghan government, and encouraged peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The agreement did not, however, require a ceasefire or a peace agreement as necessary preconditions to ensure the withdrawal of US and NATO forces.

After assuming office, President Joe Biden endorsed the Trump-era deal with the Taliban, but he delayed the US exit by several months past the original May 2021 deadline. On April 14, 2021, Biden announced that US forces would leave Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021, the 20th anniversary of Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks against the United States. NATO members also agreed to a complete withdrawal according to the US schedule.

Like his predecessor, Biden was determined to close out the longest war in US history. The Biden administration was determined to shift the focus of US geostrategic attention from Afghanistan – a tertiary theater – to the Indo-Pacific region and the requirements of the intensifying geopolitical and geostrategic competition with the People's Republic of China. The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan enjoyed broad public support, and the few voices in Washington that urged continuation of the small US military presence in Afghanistan were not persuasive.

Biden predicted that the Afghan government would not collapse after the US exit but doubts about the durability of the Afghan government permeated Washington discussions during the summer of 2021. Although US intelligence assessed in one pessimistic scenario that Taliban fighters could take the city within 90 days after the US military withdrawal, there was some surprise in Washington that the Afghan government collapsed as quickly as it did.

After weeks of rapid military gains during the summer, Taliban fighters entered Kabul on Aug. 15, prompting US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to dispatch additional US Army and Marine Corps units to secure the international airport. On Aug. 30, US CENTCOM commander Gen. Kenneth McKenzie announced completion of the evacuation mission in Kabul. The US military evacuated more than 123,000 US, Afghan, and third-country nationals. On Aug. 31, Biden claimed that the mission was a success and that the decision to exit Afghanistan was correct. He also promised to continue the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan with a focus on "over-the-horizon capabilities".

Humanitarian Emergency & Taliban Governance

The US kept the Taliban occupied with fighting for two decades.



Afghanistan regional map



Former Taliban fighters hand over weapons during reintegration ceremony.

Having gained control of the country, today the Taliban are unconstrained by the demands of relentless insurgency and must govern the renamed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in ways that satisfy international concerns or face continued restrictions on the provision of international assistance, especially from Western governments and international organizations. Failure to do so could also lead to the resumption of external support for anti-Taliban forces inside Afghanistan.

The Taliban continue to face an array of international sanctions that target the financial assets of Taliban leaders and block them from international travel. Some Western countries have suspended aid to Afghanistan. The World Bank has blocked the Taliban from accessing millions of dollars in assistance. About \$10 billion in Afghan assets, most of it held by the US Federal Reserve, remained frozen as of mid-November 2021. This restriction has made it difficult for the Taliban to pay for imports of essential goods or government salaries.

At the same time, the international community aims to mitigate the country's escalating humanitarian crisis and attendant concerns about mass starvation, the outflow of refugees, and terrorism. According to the World Food Programme, an estimated 22.8 million Afghans, or 55% of the population, faced "food crisis" or "food emergency" conditions as of mid-November 2021 due to prolonged drought, conflict, and economic collapse.

Afghanistan accounts for about 10% of total refugees worldwide, with 2.2 million Afghans, or 80% of all Afghan refugees, concentrated in neighboring Iran and Pakistan. After the collapse of the Afghan government, tens of thousands of Afghans fled the country. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that more than half a million could flee Afghanistan by the end of 2021. The Taliban's role in illicit trade is also a significant problem. According to the UN, the Taliban earn between \$300 million and \$1.6 billion annually from opium poppy cultivation, illicit mining, and donations from abroad.

There is acute international concern that the Taliban victory will energize jihadist groups around the world to increase attacks and that jihadists will flock to Afghanistan to establish or expand bases of operations. The general expectation among counterterrorism experts is that the Taliban will likely tolerate, support, or otherwise fail to suppress terrorist organizations present inside Afghanistan.

Currently, there are two terror groups that generate the greatest international concern: Al Qaeda and the Islamic State-Khorasan

Province (ISKP). The Taliban have maintained close relations with Al Qaeda, and counterterrorism experts expect this trend will likely continue. Between 200 and 500 Al Qaeda militants are believed to be resident in the country. The ISKP, in contrast, poses a direct challenge to the Taliban. There may be as many as 2,200 ISKP personnel in Afghanistan, and the ISKP has perpetrated several mass casualty attacks in Kabul. There is a clear risk that the ISKP may attract disaffected recruits from the Taliban. In early November 2021, the Taliban reportedly turned inward to identify any Islamic State infiltrators within their ranks.

The Taliban are mainly an ethnic Pashtun Islamic fundamentalist insurgent group. (About half of Afghanistan's population is believed to be Pashtun, but reliable census data does not exist.) The Taliban, however, are not a monolithic organization. Their leadership is divided among multiple factions, and there is some risk that the organization could fracture as it seeks to assert its political dominance. The Taliban's new system is a theocracy similar to the brutal system they imposed during the 1990s. The Taliban oppose Western-style democracy, and there are no indications that the Taliban plan to conduct elections or respect international human rights conventions.

On Sept. 7, 2021, the Taliban announced a caretaker government centered on an interim cabinet mainly comprised of Taliban officials, with Hibatullah Akhundzada as head of state. There is significant international pressure on the Taliban to include more officials from minority groups to prevent a backlash against the new Taliban government by aggrieved ethnic groups that could ignite an anti-Taliban insurgency and attract outside support. On Sept. 22, the Taliban appointed several new officials one day after Chinese, Russian, and Pakistani envoys met with the head of the Taliban government, Mullah Hassan Akhund, to demand a more inclusive cabinet.

Relations with Great Powers & Neighboring States

As of mid-November 2021, civil war had not erupted, and Afghanistan had not resumed its former role as a proxy warfare arena from the late 1990s. In an odd sense, the rapid failure of the Afghan central government helped Afghanistan avoid protracted civil war by depriving other countervailing factions of the time to organize proper resistance. Moreover, the collapse of the Afghan government has prompted a scramble by neighboring states and global powers to engage the Taliban and bind the new Islamic Emirate in an interlocking web of constraints and incentives.

The Taliban have also reached out to regional countries, notably Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran, for recognition and material support. However, as of mid-November 2021, no country had officially recognized the Taliban as the governing authority of Afghanistan. That said, a multilateral process of consultation and coordination is well underway. Virtually all regional countries are united on the basic demand that the Taliban form an inclusive government and crack down on militant groups that have long established a presence in Afghanistan.

Russia and Central Asia: Since 2015, Moscow has played a significant role in intra-Afghan talks, positioning Russia to deal with the anticipated and eventual withdrawal of US forces from

Afghanistan. Moscow has also taken the lead in organizing a coherent multilateral response to the sudden political change in Afghanistan by hosting the first international conference on the matter in October 2021.

Russia's interests in Afghanistan are primarily security-related. Moscow wants to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for militants who might want to attack Russia and its Central Asian allies. During the late 1990s, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan all confronted attacks by jihadist insurgents based in Afghanistan. Avoiding a repetition of this scenario is at the forefront of Russian and Central Asian concerns. Russia and its Central Asian neighbors also fear that large numbers of refugees might cross their borders seeking refuge should Afghanistan degenerate into civil war.

To guard against these contingencies, Russia will rely on its military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which are members of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Moscow has promised to provide additional security assistance to non-CSTO member Uzbekistan if necessary. In mid-August, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan completed joint military exercises with Russia near the Afghan border. The CSTO conducted additional joint military drills in Kyrgyzstan in early September 2021.

By providing additional diplomatic support and military assistance to Central Asian states, Moscow aims to strengthen its security and its regional prestige. Should the situation in Afghanistan worsen, Russia could deploy additional military forces in Central Asia to safeguard against any influx of refugees.

At different times since 2001, all five Central Asian states have provided basing, overflight, refueling, and logistic support to US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. However, neither Moscow nor Beijing wants any US military presence in Central Asia going forward. US efforts to secure new basing rights in Central Asia to maintain a watchful eye over developments in Afghanistan have failed to produce any clear results.

China: Beijing has developed relations with key Afghan leaders, including the Taliban and former government officials. Diplomatic and economic engagement formed the core of Beijing's initial response to the Taliban's victory. Beijing believes that Afghanistan's internal stability is best guaranteed through inclusive political accommodation based on a power-sharing arrangement with all factions and ethnic groups in the country.

The Taliban government wants strong economic and political relations with China. According to Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, "China is our principal partner and for us represents a fundamental and extraordinary opportunity because it's ready to invest in and reconstruct our country. We hold in high regard the 'One Belt, One Road' project that will serve to revive the ancient Silk Road."

However, China's efforts to develop two major projects in Afghanistan – the Mes Aynak copper mine (2008) and the Amu Darya oil field (2011) – have failed to advance due to poor security conditions. The deterioration of security conditions in Afghanistan could endanger Chinese nationals and infrastructure projects in both Pakistan and Central Asia. A key test for Beijing is Taliban willingness to crack down on members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an anti-China militant group partly based in Afghanistan.

Several hundred ETIM members are said to be resident in Badakhshan Province where China and Afghanistan share a short border.

There is a clear tradeoff for Beijing. The Taliban must limit the operations of militant groups of concern to Beijing in return for eventual recognition and economic largesse. On Sept. 8, Beijing announced that it would donate \$31 million worth of aid, including food and coronavirus vaccines, to Afghanistan. On the same day, Beijing said it was ready to maintain communication with Kabul after the Taliban took "a necessary step" by naming an interim government. As Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "We hope the new Afghan regime during the period of the interim government will listen to the opinions of all ethnic groups and factions in Afghanistan and respond to the hopes of its people and the international community."

Beijing has always been uneasy about the presence of major US military bases in Afghanistan so close to western China. The withdrawal of US and NATO forces alleviates this concern. Like Russia, China has no desire to see the US military gain renewed access to military bases in Central Asia. At the same time, however, Beijing must deal with a US that is now somewhat freer to concentrate its geopolitical and military energies against China in the Indo-Pacific region.

Pakistan: Pakistan played a critical role in assisting the Taliban's rise during the late 1990s, and Islamabad continues to view the Taliban as its chief ally in the war-torn country. Pakistan is widely believed to be providing significant financial and logistical support to the Taliban. The Taliban's victory represents a vindication of Pakistan's strategy of preventing India, or any other hostile power, from exploiting Afghanistan and threatening Pakistan's security from the west.

Islamabad wants to see the restoration of Taliban governance combined with power-sharing arrangements with other Afghan factions that will be acceptable to the international community. As with most of Afghanistan's neighbors, Pakistan's chief priority is the preservation of its own security and prevention of Afghanistan's instability from spilling over its shared border. To begin, Islamabad aims to prevent a wave of desperate Afghans from overwhelming Pakistan's border in search of assistance. In late October, Pakistan's

Photo: US Army



US soldier in Nangahar Province

foreign minister said Islamabad would provide more than \$28 million in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and relax restrictions on trade and cross-border travel.

Islamabad is particularly concerned about Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an armed Pashtun Islamist student group based along the Afghan-Pakistani border. About 3,000 to 4,000 TTP members are said to be resident in Afghanistan. The TTP aims to overthrow the Pakistani state and attacks in Pakistan's tribal belt increased due to the release of Pakistani militants in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's swift victory represents both danger and opportunity for Pakistan. This includes Pakistan's relations with the US, which are being reevaluated in Washington with an eye toward any role that Pakistan may have played in the Taliban's victory. More likely than not, greater distance will define the relationship between Washington and Islamabad. Washington's chief interest will likely be limited to counterterrorism cooperation, including facilitation of any future US counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda or the ISKP.

Iran: During the 1990s, Iran and the Taliban were bitter enemies. Iranian forces nearly invaded Afghanistan in 1998 following the Taliban's murder of several Iranian diplomats in the northern Afghan city of Marzari-e-sharif. Despite its adversarial relationship with the US, Iran quietly cooperated with the US effort to oust the Taliban in late 2001. In recent years, Iran has developed extensive relations with the Taliban in anticipation of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Tehran is concerned that instability inside Afghanistan could spill into Iran, causing greater unrest in the eastern reaches of the country. Specific Iranian vital interests include preventing a flood of Afghan refugees from crossing its border and deterring conflict with the Taliban.

Tehran wants to see an ethnically inclusive government in Kabul that involves leaders from Afghanistan's Shiite community. Iranian officials urge the Taliban to prevent sectarian conflict and suppress Afghanistan's Islamic State affiliate. Iran has reinforced its military forces along its eastern border and expanded security cooperation with Tajikistan, which hosts Russian and Chinese military bases. However, Iran could mobilize its Afghan proxy force, the Fatemioun Division, to defend Iranian interests in Afghanistan if necessary. Iran is Afghanistan's largest commercial partner, with about \$2 billion in annual bilateral trade, nearly one-third of Afghanistan's total trade volume.

India: Delhi established relations with the US-backed post-Taliban government in 2002. Over time, India spent an estimated \$3 billion in Afghanistan to develop the country's infrastructure and institutional capacity. Delhi is not expected to resume annual aid flows to Afghanistan anytime soon, but Indian officials are seeking to establish open lines of communication with the Taliban. New Delhi is concerned that Afghanistan will again become a haven for Pakistani militant groups like Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba that have conducted terrorist attacks against India in the past.

The US: Washington refrained from playing any leading role in organizing multilateral efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, leaving Moscow in the unusual position of playing that role. US interests in

Photo: Kremlin



Can Russia and China stabilize Afghanistan?

Afghanistan remain the prevention and disruption of renewed terrorist threats against the US as well as the mitigation of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis. As of mid-November 2021, several hundred American citizens remained stranded in Afghanistan, a situation that some observers likened to a "slow motion hostage crisis". On Nov. 12, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the US will establish an interest section in Kabul under the diplomatic auspices of Qatar to assist US citizens and engage with the Taliban. Washington had also provided \$474 million in assistance for the year to date, including \$144 million announced in late October. However, the US had failed to establish any operational counterterrorism bases in the region.

Conclusion

The rapidity of the Taliban victory shocked many, but in retrospect it was not surprising due to the absence of any peace agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan central government, the withdrawal of US military support for the Afghan National Army, and the lack of popular Afghan support for the corrupt central government in Kabul. The reality of Taliban control has major implications for regional security and great power competition. Russia and China must now deal with a major geopolitical distraction in Eurasia at a time when the US is reorienting its foreign policy more toward the Indo-Pacific region. The Taliban's willingness and ability to suppress or evict militant groups of concern to neighboring countries is unclear at best and unlikely at worst. Although it is too soon to know whether the Taliban can stabilize Afghanistan, a significant degree of pessimism attaches to the general outlook for stability in that war-torn land. From the perspective of late 2021, Afghanistan is likely to maintain its reputation as an instability generator for some time to come.

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Peter E. Paraschos is director of energy and geopolitical risk at International Technology and Trade Associates, Inc. (ITTA), a consulting company in Washington, D.C. His primary areas of expertise include Middle East and North American oil and gas producers.