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# Afghanistan's Political, Economic, and Military Scenarios after the Taliban Takeover in 2021



Regional Studies  
Vol 39, Issue 3  
pp.27-60  
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<http://irs.org.pk>  
P-ISSN: 0254-7988  
E-ISSN: 2959-5459

Date of Acceptance: 1 July 2021

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## Abstract

*Since the Taliban's ascension to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 numerous scholars, academics, and policy makers have predicted scenarios that will define the country's future outlook. The literature on Afghanistan however, is limited to military, political, and economic scenarios prior to the 2021 Kabul takeover, which necessitates an in-depth analysis of developments and trends following the formation of the new government. This paper explores the unfolding post-September 2021 military, economic, and political scenarios in the country through the collation of data and employing a mixed-method research design to reach conclusions. It contends that Afghanistan's stability in the post-Taliban era is inextricably linked with external factors, the actions of the Taliban, and its ability to curb extremism internally which will define its future positive or negative outlook.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Taliban, takeover, governance, post Taliban takeover

## Introduction

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan ended the 20-year war waged against Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in August 2021 and resulted in the Taliban assuming power yet again after their government was previously ousted in 2001 at the time of the surrender of Kandahar.<sup>1</sup> Their return to power in September 2021 resulted in the expulsion of the government of President Ashraf Ghani and their capture of Kabul surprised many intelligence officials, as the group decimated the Afghanistan National Army within a month.<sup>2</sup> The policies that the Taliban would adopt and the potential impact that their governance

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would have on the future of Afghanistan necessitates further scholarly inquiry about the economic, military, and political scenarios that may unfold under their rule.

## **Methodology**

Much of the literature regarding Afghanistan's future scenarios has two major loopholes. Firstly, the analysis presented by the vast majority of academics and scholars such as Antonio Giustozzi and Neamatollah Nojumi take into account policies adopted by the Taliban during their rule from 1996-2001 which were characterised by launching insurgencies against an occupying force, exercising a monopoly over Afghanistan's opium trade, and committing egregious human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings.<sup>3</sup> There is, hence, a need to address the literature gap by reflecting on whether the post-September 2021 Taliban government would continue, improve, or implement their policies of the late 1990s which had a significant impact on Afghanistan's political and economic landscape.

Secondly, speculation and superficial research must pave the way for definitive conclusions on whether Afghanistan will witness economic prosperity, be able to tackle internal and external security challenges or whether the government in Kabul will resort towards secularism, inclusivity, and religious tolerance. This requires a firm grasp of the trends, facts and scenarios which have unfolded after the takeover in 2021. For this purpose, this research employs the *mixed method design* which combines quantitative analysis with qualitative research to reach conclusions.

## **Independent and Dependent Variables**

This paper focuses on how the political, economic, and military policies pursued by the Taliban may have a trickle-down effect on the Afghan population, the region at large, and also the international community. The policies of the Taliban government and the international community's response towards their rule are

*independent variables* underpinning this research. Whereas, after-effects such as possible financial breakdowns and humanitarian crises or positive developments such as a decline in terrorist activity in Afghanistan are *dependent variables* for this study.

## Research Questions

Furthermore, there is a need to map out future scenarios unfolding in Afghanistan with available data which is critical for policy makers to devise strategies and formulate policies that will have an impact on the Afghan population. Scenarios built up by accommodating information after the August 2021 Taliban takeover also provides a context through which contingency planning on the part of the stakeholders in countries such as Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, the United States, and the Taliban themselves can take place. Given the above, this paper seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What is the Taliban's political dispensation in the post-September 2021 scenario? Do the policies adopted by their government bear the potential to impact political stability or the Taliban's international standing?
2. What will be the state of the Afghan economy under Taliban rule in light of pressing realities such as sanctions being imposed, freezing of Afghan national assets, and a failing banking sector?
3. What primary security threats would Afghanistan face under the Taliban rule? Can Afghanistan and the international community cope with emerging threats from non-state actors and terrorist organisations if the Taliban fail to curb terrorist threats?

## Political Scenarios and Political Stability in Afghanistan After the Taliban Takeover

The definition of political stability deals with clarifying concepts such as *politics* and *political structure*.<sup>4</sup> Political behaviour on the other hand is any act by a member of society that has an impact on

the distribution of power. Undermining the power structure by political entities such as governments must be averted by adopting measures to maintain the distribution of power.<sup>5</sup> For instance, good governance, provision of excellent public service, and adoption of people-centric policies hinge on a social contract between the population and the ruling government. Recent history is replete with examples where the violation of the social contract between the governed and the government resulted in upheavals and resistance in the form of popular agitation aimed at regime change, for instance, during the Arab Spring of 2011.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, right-wing populist protests in Europe, rebelling against the status quo by denouncing policies on immigration such as during the 2015 European Migrant Crisis is an example of discontentment of the population against the ruling government which ended up posing challenges for EU member states, including France and Germany.<sup>7</sup> In Asia, protests in Hong Kong against Chinese interference deals can be characterised as popular agitation to preserve economic and political freedoms through rejection of Communist Party rule over the Special Administrative Region of China.<sup>8</sup> The aforementioned examples illustrate the breaking down of the social contract between the governed and the government. The social contract theory which originated in the age of enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century hinges on the principle of individuals consenting to surrender some of their liberties in favour of submitting to a higher authority that governs and maintains the social order.<sup>9</sup> The absence of *general will* as mentioned by the theorist Jean Jacques Rousseau can usher in chaos in societies, as citizens withdraw support to central authorities.<sup>10</sup> 21<sup>st</sup>-century examples of the absence of general will include calling for or disputing elections to replace existing governments, launching armed resistance movements, and employing civil disobedience against regimes.

## **Afghanistan and the Social Contract Theory**

The swift takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021 was done in the absence of popular sovereignty which renders the definition and applicability of the social contract theory redundant. The Taliban government was not elected by popular sovereignty as mentioned by Jean Jacques Rousseau as a prerequisite for legitimacy but through opportunities presented by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Doha Peace Deal of 2020, which stipulated that an intra-Afghan dialogue would take place.<sup>11</sup> The Taliban's ascension to power, hence, cannot be attributed to popular mandate and was met with little resistance which challenged their rule with the exception of sporadic protests, which quelled in certain cities.<sup>12</sup> The protests were also directed at securing political freedoms instead of regime change with the majority of the Afghan population agitating for an inclusive government, rolling back policies that mistreat women, and the practice of forced incarcerations and evictions.<sup>13</sup> The fact that such agitation continued till December 2021 demonstrates that the Taliban have not been able to uphold the aspirations of the Afghan people that it sought to govern.<sup>14</sup> The resistance to their rule has been unarmed and consisted of Islamic democrats, feminists, and secularists which poses no threat to their political standing. When intra-Afghan peace talks stalled in 2021, 44 per cent of Afghans believed that peace could be achieved in the next few years, whereas in 2019, a year before the Doha Peace Agreement of 2020, 13.4 per cent of Afghans had sympathy for the Taliban.<sup>15</sup> The sympathy from the population stems from the predominantly Pashtun population in Afghanistan. With limited public support and a government that was formed by using force in the absence of a popular mandate, it can be concluded that the Taliban lack legitimacy.

Their ability to seize control of Kabul can be attributed to the signing of the Doha Peace Deal in 2020 with the Donald Trump administration. The agreement laid out a framework for US troop

withdrawals with guarantees from the Taliban that they would not kill or hurt American soldiers in return. The joint declaration also included commitments from the Taliban to not let Afghanistan's territory be used for transnational terrorism with the group expected to conduct military operations against terrorist organisations such as the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the United States agreed to facilitate conditions for all warring parties to reach a peaceful political settlement, yet the agreement did not stipulate conditions such as the Taliban coming into power through popular mandate only.<sup>17</sup> Additionally and contrary to the Doha Peace Deal of 2020, no intra-Afghan dialogue took place after the US withdrawal in 2021 with the Taliban securing power in the absence of dialogue with the Ashraf Ghani government which was not a party to the Doha Peace Deal of 2020. This resulted in the Taliban declaring their regime in Kabul as the *de facto* sovereign government of the country through the use of force. With peace talks stalled, the use of force employed and the opposition decimated and overwhelmed, Afghanistan under Taliban rule lacks legitimacy internationally and continues to confront questions over whether constitutionality, guaranteeing protection of women's rights under the Islamic Emirate, securing freedom of expression, and respecting human rights will be upheld under the new political dispensation or not.<sup>18</sup> As a result, political stability in Afghanistan cannot exist in the absence of both international recognition and popular will.

The failure to hold an intra-Afghan dialogue has resulted in pessimism over the brand of Taliban's governance after September 2021, especially if it mirrors what was witnessed in 1996-2001.<sup>19</sup> This includes strict enforcement of punishments such as extrajudicial killings which were condemned worldwide. Additionally, the refugee exodus with throngs of Afghans leaving the country for Europe and countries in close proximity, such as Pakistan, marks a stark contrast to the initial optimism expressed over sustainable peace in the country

prior to the Taliban takeover.<sup>20</sup> Internationally, the Taliban have actively sought legitimacy yet have confronted American sanctions and freezing of assets from the European Union over fundamental human rights guarantees such as abandoning controversial practices such as extrajudicial killings.<sup>21</sup> While pernicious sanctions, lack of legitimacy, and the absence of public will have an inevitable impact on Afghanistan's political stability under the Taliban, it is also dependent on domestic political cohesion within the new government which necessitates further examination.

### **The Taliban's Political Orientation and Cabinet**

The Taliban have remained a predominantly Pashtun political dispensation after assuming power in 2021 with the composition of an interim cabinet, comprising all male figures and including just one member of the Shia Hazara community as Deputy Minister of the country.<sup>22</sup> As a result, repeated calls from the international community to ensure that an all-inclusive government representative of various ethnic groups has not materialised. A representative government must reflect the multi-ethnic population of the country with gender parity that includes members of the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Turkmen, and Baloch population, as a determinant of political stability.<sup>23</sup>

Ethnic discrimination at the political level can prove to be a catalyst for popular agitation and political instability. Afghanistan's challenge to ensure inclusivity and the probability of anti-religious sentiment against the Taliban depends on the government providing adequate representation between diverse religious and ethnic groups in government ministries, the educational sector, the economy, and the military which includes, accommodating the Shia Hazara population that has historically been marginalised and persecuted by groups such as the Taliban themselves.<sup>24</sup> The ability of the Taliban to include Hazara representatives in the cabinet, relevant ministries also need to ensure adequate minority representation, alongside groups such as Tajiks and Uzbeks, that can prove to be a critical variable in

determining the Taliban's standing, both domestically and internationally.

Inclusive politics alone will not holistically determine the Taliban's international standing or domestic stability in Afghanistan. Granting legitimacy, relief from sanctions, and unfreezing of assets by the international community are equally important. The profiles of the Taliban cabinet, however, demonstrate that the members have terrorist and criminal records which make them liable to prosecution by international courts. Since the 2021 takeover, the thirty-three members of the cabinet include founding member, Mohammad Hassan Akhund, who is the Prime Minister and is also on the UN sanctions list in accordance with paragraph 20 of UNSCR 2160 (which came out in 2014).<sup>25</sup> Similarly the Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani has a US bounty of \$ 5 million on his head and is wanted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for his role in the January 2008 attack on a hotel in Kabul which resulted in six casualties including an American citizen.<sup>26</sup> Sirajuddin Haqqani is also a primary accused in cross-border attacks against the United States and coalition forces in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> Other members of the Taliban cabinet are also under the UN sanctions list as per UNSCR 1267 adopted in 1999 as a response to the Taliban's sheltering of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda.<sup>28</sup> The United Nations Security Council has not nullified the language of its resolutions in the year 2021, with all cabinet members with criminal records or being retained on the UN sanctions list being liable to prosecution. This compromises the Taliban's international legal standing.

### **Political Legitimacy and International Standing of the Taliban Government**

The fact that no sovereign country has recognised the Taliban government makes it clear that political stability in Afghanistan will remain absent notwithstanding the economic policies adopted by the government. Additionally, the Taliban's capacity to govern is linked



with the provision of international aid, the absence of which will result in a tenuous and unpredictable situation in the form of financial meltdowns and humanitarian disasters. Both the international sanctions regime and the Kabul government have shown little flexibility in meeting each other's demands with the government's cabinet and political orientation under sanctions. The government's ability to stave off economic stagnation while securing political legitimacy poses a challenge to the government's political standing. Other variables in this regard include policies aimed at inclusivity, respect for human rights, and addressing challenges to internal cohesion, which are simultaneously ethnic, religious, and sectarian.

### **Economic Scenarios in the post-US Withdrawal Era**

Throughout its history, Afghanistan has remained an impoverished and least developed country (LDC), according to World Bank classifications, with heavy reliance on international aid for sustaining its economy.<sup>29</sup> Its status as an LDC has remained constant throughout the 20-year US-led war on terror with a perpetual state of conflict resulting in widespread insurgencies, lawlessness, and terrorism which has hampered investments in the country. Afghanistan, however, has benefited from UN and US assistance throughout its history. But a trickle-down effect on the local population which results in a higher standard of living for the average Afghan citizen has remained elusive of it. This gap can be attributed to the US government's failure to develop a coherent strategy or understanding regarding the long-term impact of its assistance programmes.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, the lack of skilled workers, the absence of a robust manufacturing base, and reliance on remittances to fuel economic growth have resulted in an underdeveloped market sector. Even prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, there were daunting economic and developmental challenges due to a precarious

security situation with widespread terrorism perpetrated by terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda contributing to the lack of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The Kabul Airport attack in 2021 in the immediate aftermath of the takeover demonstrated that terrorism remains a significant challenge for Afghanistan in the post-withdrawal era with economic revival that is subject to an improvement in the security environment, recognition of the Taliban government, as well as investments in key sectors of the economy such as agriculture, in addition to unfreezing of assets and a waiver of sanctions.<sup>31</sup>

### **Afghanistan's Flailing Agricultural Sector**

Afghanistan is also an agrarian economy with an underdeveloped secondary and tertiary sector. After the US withdrawal and the takeover of the Taliban in 2021, poverty levels in the country worsened. According to the United Nations Food Programme (UNFP) and the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) October 2021 assessments, 45 per cent of the Afghan population were facing starvation.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, natural disasters such as prolonged drought in late 2021 which was the second in four years, resulted in nearly 7 million citizens harvesting crops 15 per cent below the global average with a detrimental impact on the economic activity.<sup>33</sup> This agricultural stagnation, in addition to the sanctions imposed on the Taliban internationally, provides a bleak outlook for the future of agriculture in Afghanistan. Due to US sanctions on the Taliban as well as the freezing of \$9.5 billion worth of Central Bank assets, Afghan farmers have confronted dwindling financial support due to lack of subsidisation of the flailing sector, resulting in higher probabilities of rural displacement.<sup>34</sup> While humanitarian assistance from the European Union and the United States is directed at addressing issues of famine and hunger after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the persistent decay of the agricultural sector requires necessary investments and programmes which enhance productivity such as foreign subsidisation.<sup>35</sup> This is despite the fact that Afghanistan was on

its way towards achieving self-sufficiency in national wheat production by the year 2020.<sup>36</sup> Much of these achievements are at a risk due to a lack of investments in wheat and grain production as well as other agricultural produce in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from the country in August 2021.

### **Impact of a Precarious Security Situation on Afghanistan's Agricultural Sector**

Dwindling financial assistance and a cash-strapped government alone do not explain the overall decline of the agricultural sector in Afghanistan. The country's history is replete with terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP) employing explosive violence and undermining food security by deploying landmines, resulting in civilian casualties and the destruction of arable land.<sup>37</sup> The deployment of landmines by terrorist organisations has resulted in unwanted vegetation and a decline in nutrient levels in arable soil which has compromised agricultural productivity as well. In 2020, anti-personnel mines constituted 98 per cent of all casualties in Afghanistan with 72 per cent of them being children. In 2021, despite significant efforts by the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan, 3,939 hazards threatened 1,529 communities and posed a challenge to arable soil and the livelihoods of Afghan farmers.<sup>38</sup>

The Taliban government had declared landmines as an *un-Islamic* weapon in 1998, while 81.3 per cent or approximately 3,300 square kilometres of Afghan land had been cleared of these weapons in the year 2020.<sup>39</sup> The absence of landmines could have otherwise resulted in an 88 to 200 per cent increase in agricultural productivity in the country in 2003 and with the Taliban confronting the threat of terrorism internally, successful military operations to uproot threats from terrorist groups such as the ISKP will continue to have an impact on the future of the agricultural sector in the year 2020 and beyond.<sup>40</sup> Afghanistan also acceded to the Convention on the Prohibition of the

Use of Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction in the year 2002, committing to destroying all anti-personnel landmines by the year 2013 as per Article 5 of the Convention.<sup>41</sup>

### **GDP Growth Prospects and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) under the Taliban Rule**

Other aspects of the Afghan national economy are equally important and are confronted with significant challenges since the Taliban takeover. Some of the country's key economic indicators such as its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), unemployment figures, and the price of crude oil have nosedived since October 2021. Before the takeover, Afghanistan's GDP increased significantly during 2002-2020 and a year after the US-led war on terror to \$19.8 billion.<sup>42</sup> This growth, however, was tied to foreign assistance which was often squandered by the political elite and resulted in no impact on the material well-being of the Afghans. According to Nazif Shahrani, Professor of Anthropology, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian Studies at Indiana University, the country's 2004 constitution gave the Afghan president unbridled powers and paved the way for cronyism, nepotism, and corruption to flourish within the country.<sup>43</sup> This includes how the dissemination of international funds for development resulted in many local representatives being excluded from the budgeting process.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the suspension of foreign aid from the United States, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Germany which equates to \$9.5 billion, \$440 million in special drawing rights (SDR) and \$300 million, respectively, amounts to over 40 per cent of Afghanistan's GDP.<sup>45</sup> Stunted GDP growth is inextricably linked with the suspension of international aid to the country which the Taliban can only avail of if they abide by international requirements such as respecting human rights and upholding the rule of law.

Another indicator of the health of the national economy is investor confidence which has historically thrived in the absence of

turmoil and terrorism within a sovereign country. History is replete with examples where war-torn countries have witnessed dramatic declines in FDI with rising unemployment and soaring inflation rates as a direct result of war.<sup>46</sup> Afghanistan's economic outlook mirrors those of conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya where the absence of political stability resulted in lower foreign investor confidence. The responsibility to govern, provision of adequate public services, and generation of commercial activity can only take place in the absence of damaging terrorist attacks, civil wars, and violence. An analysis of the FDI for the years leading up to the year 2020, demonstrates a notable increase of 131.76 per cent in 2017 which sharply declined from 2018 onwards in Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup> Further isolation of Afghanistan due to the Taliban's lack of legitimacy can worsen declining trends of investments as mentioned by Abdul Qayum Shafaq who contends that globalisation and integration into the international economy has a positive impact on the FDI in countries.<sup>48</sup> Banning the usage of foreign currencies to boost the local Afghani is also critical for promoting and increasing the flow of FDI into the country.<sup>49</sup>

### **Inflation and Income Inequality in Afghanistan 2021-22**

Inflation in Afghanistan leading up to the US withdrawal spiked gradually which had an impact on energy prices raising them by 12 per cent during the period.<sup>50</sup> Energy shortages which are the backbone of industrial productivity have also worsened the economic outlook as Afghanistan relies on 80 per cent imported electricity.<sup>51</sup> The energy crisis has had an impact on the budget execution rates which predate the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan where the rates in 2020 were 32.1 per cent as compared to 28.4 per cent in July 2021.<sup>52</sup> This figure is projected to decrease in 2022 as sanctions have impacted budget execution rates and unfettered access to international aid has had a debilitating effect on the Taliban's ability to finance its massive trade deficit amounting to 28 per cent of its GDP in the year 2020.<sup>53</sup>

With such trends persisting, shortages of fuel alongside the depreciation of the national currency and a gross humanitarian crisis in the post-conflict era will materialise.<sup>54</sup>

Income inequality and pervasive poverty are other indicators underlining the health of the national economy and as a result of the aforementioned trends regarding fuel shortages, poverty rates have increased. The UNDP report in October 2021 claimed that by the year 2022, 98 per cent of the Afghan population would have plunged into severe poverty.<sup>55</sup> Ten million Afghans are also expected to plunge into poverty in the year 2021 alone with income levels falling below the poverty line which is defined as a segment of the population living below \$US 0.94 per day in a country.<sup>56</sup>

The United States government under its USAID programme announced nearly \$64 million in humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover in August 2021.<sup>57</sup> The Taliban's ability to address budgeting issues, however, continue to rest on the recognition of the Kabul government and not humanitarian aid. The senior leadership of the Taliban acknowledged that freezing of assets is tantamount to non-payment of salaries to government officials which has an impact on public service delivery.<sup>58</sup> The decision to retain asset freezes would also have an impact on the Taliban government's ability to pursue investor-friendly policies. Lastly, the draining of resources in the overall service and construction sectors of the Afghan economy which accounted for 58 per cent of the GDP in 2020 will also be negatively impacted due to the financial drain.<sup>59</sup>

### **International Efforts to Address Afghanistan's Economic Decline**

Alongside American assistance, the G20 Summit held in Italy in 2021 resulted in the European Union announcing 1 billion Euros as humanitarian aid for Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup> However, the provision of aid is solely to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of the Afghan people in

the absence of recognising the Taliban and does not translate into long-term economic stability with investments in primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors of the economy. 80 per cent of Afghanistan's electricity supplies which have an impact on the smooth functioning of industries is also imported and faltering budget executions and limited allocations for development projects hamper long-term economic growth prospects after 2021 which cannot be addressed by humanitarian aid alone.<sup>61</sup> Economic growth is also predicated upon a skilled labour force and high productivity. The vacuum left from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has resulted in a severe brain drain due to a massive exodus of citizens leaving the country. Shortages in qualified doctors, engineers, economists, investors, and policy advisors dampen long-term growth prospects which can only be addressed if a conducive environment incentivising rehabilitation of existing professionals is provided by the Taliban. Lack of professional staff to run government institutions poses managerial problems and prevents oversight of growth-oriented, investor-friendly economic policies which can have a positive impact on GDP growth. In September 2021, Afghan coffers were empty with uncertainty prevailing over the government's policies, hurting the overall health of the economy.<sup>62</sup>

Given that the health of the national economy is linked with the provision of international aid, much depends on the US, the Taliban, and the EU negotiations in releasing the \$9 billion worth of Afghan Central Bank assets or waivers of EU sanctions despite the latter committing \$1.15 billion as humanitarian aid. In retrospect, Afghanistan had already been receiving close to \$600 to \$700 million per month before the Taliban takeover in 2021, which did not have a positive impact on key economic indicators such as per capita GDP.<sup>63</sup> International donor agencies would, thus, need to weigh the costs of collaborating with the Taliban to deliver aid or have the country face a humanitarian crisis of significant proportions. Countries in close geographical proximity to Afghanistan have shown an interest in

providing unfettered assistance to the country yet have been hesitant in according the Taliban government legitimacy. The Moscow Format of 2021, for example, which was established in 2017 and consists of Central Asian States, India, Pakistan, Russia, and China released a joint statement in October 2021 calling for the convening of a UN Donor Conference which would provide Kabul with unconditional access to humanitarian aid.<sup>64</sup>

Countries such as China which was a co-signatory to the joint statement issued at the Moscow Format pledged assistance for reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan targeting critical infrastructure.<sup>65</sup> Prospects of extending the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects such as the \$46 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan have gained renewed interest after the end of the 20-year war. While this has not practically materialised, Afghanistan's entry into the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has made it eligible to benefit from financing for sustainable development such as technical and financial facilities for solar energy and railway connectivity.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, CPEC's extension into Afghanistan as part of the BRI in the post-war scenario is predicated upon unconditional assistance to the Taliban regime and infrastructural development providing an industrial base to manufacture goods to be exported to markets in Pakistan. Investments in the flailing energy sector through building electricity plants and irrigation systems as part of regional corridors can also provide relief to the otherwise cash-strapped, impoverished, and damaged economy.

### **Afghanistan's Military Scenarios under the Taliban Rule**

Afghanistan has been embroiled in military conflicts for decades even before the 9/11 attacks on the United States by Al-Qaeda. The 1979 Soviet-Afghan war involving the Mujahideen and smaller Maoist groups against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the Soviet Army is an integral part of its history.<sup>67</sup> Analysing



Afghanistan's military scenarios in the post-US withdrawal scenario must account for internal, transnational, and terrorism-related threats that have plagued the country and conclusions must be drawn as to whether the Islamic Emirate Army of the Taliban government can ward off palpable threats.

As far as the Taliban's military takeover is concerned, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mike Milley, while testifying before a US Senate panel in September 2021 said that he did not give President Joe Biden a unanimous recommendation to leave Afghanistan immediately after the Taliban takeover of the country, given the potential of security quagmires that could emerge.<sup>68</sup> Milley's assessments, however, did not account for the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan, the capitulation of the Ghani administration, or the absence of political dialogue in the aftermath of the US withdrawal. The inability of the Afghan forces to ward off the Taliban offensive demonstrated that the previous Afghan National Army (ANA) lacked the logistical training needed to quell a Taliban offensive which led to its immediate capitulation.<sup>69</sup>

### **Factors Resulting in the Disintegration of the Afghan National Army**

Despite \$83 billion spent on equipping, developing, and training the ANA since the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan under the George Bush administration, the ANA capitulated in front of a Taliban offensive despite the latter carrying light ammunition.<sup>70</sup> A contributing factor to the Taliban's victory was widespread corruption in Afghanistan's defence and interior ministries with documented evidence of ammunition, funds, and rations disappearing and hampering the ANA's ability to carry out land operations.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, ammunition previously directed at defending against Taliban advances by the ANA were sold in the black market and eventually ended up with the Taliban in August 2021.<sup>72</sup> Fund requests sent by senior commanders for ghost soldiers' salaries were also

rejected and resulted in the Afghan forces remaining significantly underpaid which had a psychological and operational impact on their ability to defend Afghanistan against Taliban advances.<sup>73</sup> Demoralisation stemming from financial embezzlement after the US withdrawal resulted in many former soldiers serving under the Ghani government accepting the Taliban's amnesty schemes which were publicly announced as official pardons from the government.<sup>74</sup>

The combination of corruption and embezzlement in Afghanistan's ministries contributed to the ANA's disintegration. The army also has a history replete with one of the highest casualty and desertion rates in the world.<sup>75</sup> Politically motivated appointments under the Ghani administration also affected the military's functional ability with a prime example of President Ashraf Ghani replacing the former Afghan Army Chief Lieutenant General Wali Mohammed Ahmadzai with Special Operations Commander Major General Haibatullah Alizai alongside twice replacing the interior ministers and reshuffling of six core commanders.<sup>76</sup> The lack of continuity as a prerequisite for the smooth functioning of the army as an institution greatly hampered the ANAs defensive capabilities which predate the US withdrawal from the country. Given the centrality of the Chief of Staff of any sovereign military in issuing directives and preparing doctrines for military operations, the constant transfers and changes in the central command by the Ghani administration also influenced the army's ability to conduct counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban.

The collapse and dysfunctional nature of the ANA meant that the Ashraf Ghani government had to resort to mergers with Islamist parties and militias under the command of Atta Muhammad Noor, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Haji Muhammad Muhaqqiq who are leaders of the Hezb-e-Junbish, the Jamiat-e-Islami and the Hezb-e-Wahdat Islami to ward off the Taliban insurgency.<sup>77</sup> The Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek Islamist parties were expected to tackle the Pashtun

dominated Sunni Taliban, yet the resistance was thwarted after the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif, prompting all Islamist parties to flee the country.<sup>78</sup> The subsequent seizure of Kabul coincided with the complete centralisation of power by the Taliban with blanket control over military activities which isolated the role of Islamist parties in resisting the group's advances.

The Taliban have relied on guerrilla warfare to conduct their operations against the Western-backed Afghan government and their supporters through actions including ambushes and sabotage and hit and run tactics that decimated rival political parties and resistance movements.<sup>79</sup> Their ability to monopolise power through military force is based on a multifaceted strategy such as employing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as part of rural ambushes with the experience of 80,000 fighters who have resisted American occupation for 20 years.<sup>80</sup>

### **The ISKP Threat in Afghanistan under the Taliban Rule**

After consolidating power in 2021, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate army became the sole armed force of the country, tasked with preventing existential threats to the country's internal security. The primary terrorist threat to Afghanistan emanates from the ISKP which claimed responsibility for the Kabul Airport attack just days after the Taliban took over the capital.<sup>81</sup> The attack which left 183 civilians dead during evacuation efforts resulted in a tit-for-tat response from the United States in the form of two drone strikes, with the second strike killing ten Afghan civilians in August 2021 which included seven children.<sup>82</sup> The ability of the Taliban to counter the ISKP threat will determine how the future security landscape of Afghanistan will develop.

Operationally, the Islamic Emirate Army includes military units that will be reorganised such as the Army Corps in Kandahar which is called *Al-Badr*.<sup>83</sup> However, eliminating the presence of ISKP goes

beyond operational arrangements and deals with tactics employed on the battlefield. The tactics employed in 2021 by the Taliban to counter ISKP, for example, have been similar to those employed by previous Afghan governments which includes unlawful detentions, extrajudicial killings, and justifying violence against certain groups by labelling entities and citizens as ISKP, Al-Qaeda or defectors without providing substantial evidence.<sup>84</sup> Persistence with this strategy can result in squandering potential benefits of crackdowns as has been witnessed in the Nangarhar province where 80 fighters were detained as per Taliban claims. According to author and journalist Wesley Morgan, who has reported extensively on the Afghanistan conflict, the Taliban leadership must act decisively against the ISKP through military operations.<sup>85</sup>

Afghanistan's ability to counter IKSP also has a regional and international dimension to it with the spill-over effects of terrorism within the country inadvertently influencing regional countries in close geographical proximity. ISKP has a transnational, apocalyptic goal of ensuring universal submission to its self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate with its area of operations transcending Afghanistan's boundaries to countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and India.<sup>86</sup> The Taliban have stated that the ISKP remains an existential threat and have categorised them as a terrorist group while the senior leadership blames the United States for the Kabul Airport attack which took place in an area where US forces are responsible for ensuring security.<sup>87</sup> The challenges of dealing with ISKP, however, are manifold given their numerous chapters in regional countries, a flourishing global network, and their ability to disseminate propaganda as a tool of promoting their ideology.

Another issue that could complicate potential military operations launched by the Taliban against the ISKP is defections. There is a historical precedent to such concerns given that, in 2014, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadem of the Taliban became one of the first

leaders of the ISKP in the Helmand and Farah provinces as a defector.<sup>88</sup> Khadem had previously served in the Taliban government in the 1990s as well as resisted the US occupation forces. Similarly, members of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is an Islamist armed group along the Pakistan/Afghanistan border has also pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in the year 2015, six years before the US withdrawal from the country.<sup>89</sup> The ability to unify the Taliban under the central command of Haibatullah Akhundzada will prove to be a challenge to arrest probable defections to the ISKP. Yet, as per Wesley Morgan, the decision to take down ISKP could potentially usher in greater unity in the Taliban as compared to targeting the residual presence of Al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan.<sup>90</sup>

On the regional front, Afghanistan is not embroiled in military conflicts with any neighbouring state with the Taliban assuring neighbouring countries such as Pakistan that their soil will not be used as a launching pad for heinous terrorist attacks by the ISKP. There is, however, a direct linkage between ISKP attacks and intensified counter-terrorism operations from regional countries and from the United States and its NATO allies in Afghanistan, which involves active military presence in the country. Transnational and domestic attacks akin to the Kabul Airport attack can translate into greater military engagement from the United States involving troop deployments by the Biden administration which will be resisted by the Taliban. This is dependent upon policy making from the US Congress on how to deal with the terrorism threat if it spirals beyond control and poses significant international and regional challenges.

## **Conclusion**

An appraisal of the political, economic, and military situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in 2021 demonstrates that the situation in the post-US withdrawal era is fluid, tenuous, and prone to social breakdowns. Persistence with sanctions, inability to promote inclusion, and respect for basic human rights by the Taliban and

escalating terrorist violence across the country could have major internal, regional, and global implications. The following conclusions have been extracted from this study:

1. The Taliban's legitimacy and sanctions imposed on its leadership are directly linked with Afghanistan's economic survival. International recognition of the Taliban government is subject to the initiation of key reforms, such as securing equal access to education for women, establishing a broad-based coalition government accommodating different ethnic groups, and preventing torture, mass incarcerations, and summary executions.
2. Afghanistan's economic outlook beyond September 2021 is bleak with a declining agriculture sector beset by supply-side shocks and a cash-strapped government. Persistent security issues which include the presence of the ISKP threaten infrastructural projects from materialising, which is a significant challenge for an agrarian economy.
3. \$9 billion worth of assets being retained by the US Federal Reserve is strangulating the economy and preventing the Taliban from instituting economic reforms which include subsidisation of agriculture. Lack of access to basic amenities is directly linked with a dearth of international aid which is contributing to poverty, destitution, displacement, and terrorism.
4. The disintegration of the Afghanistan National Army and the primacy of the Islamic Emirate Army by the Taliban government has meant that Afghanistan confronts the chief security threat of the ISKP which has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks within the country. Battlefield competence of the IEA heavily relies on the financial stability of the national economy which is compromised if sanctions are not lifted on the federal government.

5. Afghanistan's economic survival is heavily linked to regional initiatives such as the Moscow Format of 2021 or the Antalya Platform for diplomacy which seeks to assist the country without conditioning assistance with the nature of the regime governing it.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Based on the conclusions drawn from this study on Afghanistan's unfolding, political, economic, and military scenarios under Taliban rule, the following policy recommendations are suggested for the Taliban government in Kabul, NGOs, regional countries, and the international community:

1. The international community must press for the immediate release of \$9 billion worth of Afghanistan's Central Bank assets which are plaguing economic recovery and stifling productivity in the country. Taliban's commitments towards upholding human rights can be monitored after the release of the funds.
2. Regional countries which have been providing humanitarian assistance must make concerted efforts towards reviving Afghanistan's flailing agricultural sector which it relies on heavily for revenues. Lack of subsidisation of the agricultural sector in an agrarian economy contributes to widespread poverty and destitution in the country which will result in a humanitarian disaster.
3. The Taliban must adopt an official policy of inclusivity and institute reforms that build a strong case for the group to gain international legitimacy. Reforms include securing equitable access for education for women across the country, dispensing with summary executions, incarcerations, and torture, and promoting ethnic harmony by accommodating Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras which were previously marginalised from the Pashtun-dominated dispensation.

4. The ISKP is the most potent threat to Afghanistan's internal security and the Islamic Emirate Army must undertake punitive actions aimed at decimating the terrorist organisation. Given that the Taliban government practises consensus-building on launching operations through parliamentary procedures in the absence of an opposition, invoking Islamic injunctions as a justification for waging full-scale operations against the ISKP will contribute to its popular appeal and quest to destroy the ISKP.
5. The issue of desertions from the IEA must be taken seriously as a breakdown in security could result in Taliban fighters pledging allegiance to the ISKP. Military mutiny can only be addressed through a zero-tolerance strategy against identified rogue elements within the army ranks.



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