

No Clear Winner, One Clear Loser in Afghanistan

Written by Gabriel Honrada and Daniyal Ranjbar

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Depending on which perspective, the Fall of Kabul could be described as an utter tragedy or a stroke of military genius. The humanitarian tragedy that unfolded has been widely documented on international media, with desperate Afghans fleeing for their lives from advancing Taliban forces, alongside an outpouring of global sympathy to the beleaguered Afghan people. Arguably, this humanitarian crisis was the culmination of the smart application of protracted and irregular warfare strategy and tactics, wherein the technologically inferior Taliban outlasted the political will of far superior Western forces. Eventually, the Taliban mounted a campaign of rapid dominance, which saw the embryonic Afghan military put up a token resistance before surrendering or fleeing in droves to neighboring countries.

Afghanistan has been marked by sporadic conflict and chronic instability since the 1979 Soviet-Afghan War. However, its strategic location and substantial natural resources have always been a contested area for regional and international players. As the conflict has reached this decisive phase, it has profound implications for all regional and international parties involved. What can be said in the aftermath is that there is no clear winner but one clear loser.

US: Finding a Silver Lining

For many, the Fall of Kabul is a US defeat comparable to the Fall of Saigon. Scenes of US helicopters and aircraft being swarmed by desperate Afghan civilians in a last-ditch effort to escape the Taliban were juxtaposed with pictures of South Vietnamese civilians crowding US helicopters and aircraft in a desperate bid to escape Communist rule.

Despite being portrayed as a US defeat, the US still managed to win in some areas of the Afghan Civil War. First, the US still maintains its superpower status. Unlike the Soviet-Afghan War, which was instrumental in bringing the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US defeat in Afghanistan barely affects the US' global political, military, economic, and cultural preponderance. Second, the long-overdue US withdrawal from Afghanistan can be seen as part of a larger US military drawdown in the Middle East to reorient its strategic attention and free up resources for the Indo-Pacific. Third, the US may have indirectly created a stay-behind force in the Taliban. Similar to NATO's organized stay-behind forces intended to continue guerilla resistance against the Soviet Union, the Taliban will continue to be a security concern for Russia, China, and Iran, posing a threat to those US adversaries' most vulnerable borders with Afghanistan.

However, after withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan and allowing the Taliban to take over the country, the US lost a strategic foothold in Central Asia. US combat aircraft based in Afghanistan could quickly strike at weakly defended military targets in Russia, China, and Iran. Further, the US also lost access to Afghanistan's substantial rare earth metals and lithium reserves, deemed strategic resources for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Moreover, the US also lost control of the Afghan opium trade, which may have served as a covert source of income and could be weaponized against US adversaries such as Russia, China, and Iran, fueling corruption, crime, and the HIV pandemic in those countries.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is undoubtedly the most controversial decision taken by the Biden Administration, although the preceding Trump Administration touched off the process. This unpopular decision

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comes when the US grapples with intensifying internal political, racial, social, and economic divisions. US veterans of the Afghan Civil War, along with other sectors of civil society, can become vociferous critics of US domestic and foreign policy, eventually sapping US political and public will for future military interventions, thereby diminishing US credibility for its allies in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific. If anything, the Fall of Kabul and Fall of Saigon have demonstrated that the US can abandon allies at will if it so wishes. In military terms, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan showed that the US is vulnerable against adversaries employing asymmetric warfare strategies and tactics. With a far superior military, the US has lost against a much lesser equipped irregular force like the Taliban. Its military capability versus adversaries who employ hybrid warfare strategies combining asymmetric and conventional warfighting features is now questioned.

China: Opportunity in Crisis

China has long been a critic of US presence in Afghanistan, as Afghanistan has a shared border with China, and that the US and China are competing for global dominance. Afghanistan may have been just another front in the US containment strategy to encircle China with military bases, as it did with the Soviet Union. That said, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has created opportunities but also opened security challenges for China.

First, the US withdrawal has removed a credible threat next to China's borders, as US combat aircraft based in Afghanistan can be used to strike at China's sparsely populated and lightly defended Xinjiang region. Second, China can use this opportunity to flex its diplomatic and political muscles in recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. This can be seen as an attempt to overturn the West's monopoly in defining state legitimacy. China can use this opportunity to break this Western monopoly as part of its efforts to create a China-centric international system.

Third, the US withdrawal enables China to access Afghanistan's strategic resources such as rare earth metals and lithium to fuel its rapidly growing economy. Now the second-largest economy, China can potentially overtake the US economy in the coming years. In connection with this, China can integrate Afghanistan as the hub in its Belt and Road geopolitical project, connecting Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan to China. Fourth, with the US out of Afghanistan, China can control Afghanistan's opium trade and weaponize it against the US, adding to the financial and social costs of the growing US opioid epidemic.

However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan also poses security risks to China. First, the Taliban can support the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM) based in Xinjiang. The ETIM and Taliban have close ideological and cultural ties, and the Taliban has allegedly provided sanctuary for ETIM fighters. While China and the Taliban may have agreed that the latter would withdraw support from the ETIM in exchange for political support and economic assistance, it remains to be seen if the Taliban will keep their word. In addition, Afghanistan under the Taliban can be used as a sanctuary for terrorists plotting attacks on China's Belt and Road projects in Central Asia and Pakistan.

Russia: Reconsolidating Influence

Similar to China, Russia benefits from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in the sense that a credible threat near its lightly defended frontier adjacent to Central Asia has been neutralized. US combat aircraft based in Afghanistan can attack Russian forces stationed in Central Asian countries and parts of Russia adjacent to the region. Admittedly, the Taliban accomplished what Russia could not during the Soviet-Afghan War, which prevented the US from gaining a foothold in Central Asia, threatening Russia's vulnerable areas. Further, the Taliban victory gives Russia a reason to strengthen its military cooperation with Central Asian countries. This will prevent instability in Afghanistan from spilling over into Russia and adjacent countries, and it will counterbalance China's growing influence in Central Asia as the region is perceived to be well within Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has also created a possible haven for radical terrorists in Russia. Afghanistan has allegedly been used as a training ground for Chechen rebels fighting in the Caucasus. There have been reports that some of the fiercest resistance to US forces in Afghanistan came from Chechen fighters. In

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addition, Russia remains a top destination of Afghan opium. As opium revenues make up much of the Taliban's income, Russia can expect an upsurge in drug proliferation in its territories as the Taliban attempts to increase opium production and produce synthetic drugs to earn funding for their domestic agenda in Afghanistan.

Pakistan: Keeping the Pot Boiling

In terms of security and economic value, Afghanistan is critical to Pakistan's core national interests. Pakistan has allegedly supported the Taliban since its formation during the Soviet-Afghan War. Despite the strategic importance of Afghanistan to Pakistan, a stable Afghanistan does not work in Pakistan's favor.

First, Afghanistan's instability and resulting lack of economic activities make it a captured market for Pakistan. Afghanistan has become a dumping ground for cheap Pakistani products, which, alongside chronic instability, has hindered Afghan industries' growth while providing a steady profit for Pakistan. Second, Afghanistan's lack of functioning state institutions and substantial ungoverned spaces make it an ideal sanctuary and training ground for Pakistani-sponsored anti-India terrorist groups. Third, Afghanistan provides Pakistan strategic depth in case of an all-out conflict with India. Afghanistan's rugged and mountainous terrain makes it an ideal defensive position for Pakistani forces to regroup and hold out against numerically and technologically superior Indian forces.

However, a stable Afghanistan under Taliban rule opens the former to sponsor the Pashtun separatist movement in Pakistan's territory. The Taliban is a predominantly Pashto organization, and Pashtun nationalism is one of the critical components of the Taliban's ideology. Further, Afghanistan was the only country to vote against the creation of Pakistan in the United Nations in 1947. This was because the creation of Pakistan would divide the Pashto people between Afghan-Pakistani borders. Further, the Pashtun population in Pakistan lives in one of the country's poorest and underserved locations and thus has many reasons to resent living under Pakistani rule. A Baloch separatist movement in Pakistan backed by the Taliban in Afghanistan can pose a significant threat to Pakistan's territorial integrity and security.

India: Playing a Bad Hand

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is a huge strategic loss for India. In the coming years, India may find itself at a disadvantage in its rivalry between Pakistan and China, with Afghanistan's strategic space being exploited by the latter against the former. Despite that, India may still find a silver lining in this course of events.

The Fall of Kabul cemented the Taliban as the top authority in Afghanistan. That said, India could dwell on the possibility of a Taliban-sponsored Baloch separatist movement in Pakistan to squeeze the latter from the north, simultaneously applying military pressure from the south in Jammu and Kashmir. However, this remote possibility depends on the emergence of a stable Afghanistan under Taliban rule, combined with the continued poverty and mismanagement of Pakistan's Tribal Areas. India can play on the fact that even if, at present, it does not have the means to influence events in Afghanistan directly, the Taliban will want recognition and financial ties with India to counterbalance Pakistani influence to remain independent from external influence.

However, that marginal and remote possibility may be primarily offset by India's losses in Afghanistan. One of India's main interests in Afghanistan focuses on turning it into a hub of regional connectivity. Additionally, India views Afghanistan as an essential component of its plans to access Central Asian markets, energy, and resources, as India's only path to Central Asia goes through Afghanistan. Afghanistan played a crucial role in the US-sponsored New Silk Road project, which aims to connect Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan via trade, transit, and power routes. With Afghanistan falling under Taliban rule once more, India may have lost its only overland access to Central Asian resources, energy, and markets, as India's only path to the region crosses through Afghanistan. Further, as China makes headway in recognizing the Taliban as a legitimate government, the focus of Afghanistan as a critical hub of regional connectivity may fall into the China-sponsored Belt and Road Initiative.

These developments can also affect India's capability to participate in the Quad Alliance in the Indo-Pacific region. India might find itself dealing with more immediate land-based threats from a Pakistan-Taliban-China nexus on its

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land borders.

Iran: Two Sides of the Coin

Same with Russia and China, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan removes a significant threat to Iran, as US combat aircraft based in Afghanistan could be used to attack Iran. It can be recalled that the US RQ-170 drone captured by Iran in 2011 was flown from Kandahar in Afghanistan.

Although Iran almost invaded Afghanistan in 1998 after the Taliban murdered its diplomats and was said to have covertly assisted the US to overthrow it in 2001, Iran is confident that the Taliban will be more moderate and open to negotiations this time. Further, Iran may have already been reassured of the Taliban's intentions, as before the Fall of Kabul, Iran and the Taliban were in negotiations about the security situation in Afghanistan.

There are two different views about the Taliban in Iran. The first view is that a Taliban government in Afghanistan is inevitable, and Iran must accept this reality to manage mutual tensions. This view is popular with the conservative and hardline Iranian defense and security sector. They believe that the Taliban is a better alternative to a Western-backed proxy government in Afghanistan. The second view, which is popular among political moderates in Iran, holds that while it is necessary to recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government, Afghanistan will still become a space for terrorist groups hostile to Iran.

The common denominator between these two views is that Iran must recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government. However, these views differ markedly on their prognosis of the Taliban. Nevertheless, both conservative and moderate political factions in Iran believe that recognizing the Taliban is necessary to address more immediate security challenges, such as terrorism, the flow of refugees, and the opium problem from Afghanistan.

Taliban: Still Much to be Done

While the Taliban is savoring their victory in Afghanistan and is working swiftly to consolidate their control over the country, they still face significant internal and external challenges. First, the Taliban need to maintain their internal cohesion and integrity. Although the Taliban is a Pashto-dominated organization, much of their recent success can be attributed to the successful co-opting of other ethnicities in Afghanistan, such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Hazaras. It remains to be seen whether the Taliban will disintegrate due to internal infighting between ethnic, tribal, and personal loyalties or maintain the cohesion necessary to function as a state governing body.

Second, the Taliban face the colossal task of rebuilding Afghanistan's shattered economy and state institutions to win domestic legitimacy. The dysfunction of Afghan government institutions and the security sector enabled the Taliban to win local legitimacy in many of Afghanistan's poorer rural areas. It would be ironic if the Taliban's incompetence and brutality in governance resulted in mass resistance against their rule. Further, organizations that have seized state power through force of arms and not through political processes such as elections have often striven to win domestic legitimacy through stable but not necessarily strong economic performance that benefits key stakeholders and intolerance of political opposition.

Third, the Taliban still face the challenge of winning international recognition as a legitimate government. In the past, only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have ever given some form of recognition to the Taliban. No country wants to be the first to recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government of Afghanistan officially. That said, the Taliban still needs to have wider international recognition so, at the very least, it can attract funding and foreign investment to bring in much-needed revenue. China and Iran seem to be edging closer to extending formal recognition to the Taliban based on their pragmatic interests in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan: An Uncertain Future

Under the Taliban, Afghanistan can evolve in one of three possible directions. First, Afghanistan can become a hermit state like North Korea, a self-contained unstable state living in relative autarky. Afghanistan has always been a

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remote, unstable country throughout its history, and preceding Afghan governments never had complete control. However, due to Afghanistan's strategic location and resources, external powers will unlikely leave a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan alone.

Second, the Taliban might win limited international recognition for its stakeholders, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, with Russia, China, and Iran in the future. This scenario is dependent on the Taliban's capacity to maintain cohesion and resisting breaking apart into smaller factions from different regional and external powers vying for foreign patronage.

A third but extremely remote possibility is for the Taliban to be fully recognized as a legitimate government by the international community at large, but not by all states. In some ways, the Taliban functions like a secret society in the sense that it offers benefits to a tightly controlled inner circle while shunning all outside interactions. However, secret societies can become mainstream organizations when they begin to provide net benefits to general society. Likewise, if the Taliban can turn things around by playing wisely on Afghanistan's strategic importance, they may be eventually recognized as a legitimate government in the long run. After all, there are no clear-cut rules on how states are formed and legitimized.

Conclusion: One Clear Loser

The Afghanistan conflict has provided the necessary dynamics of instability and lacks institutions making it an inviting strategic space for competing regional and international parties. As the conflict has reached a decisive point in the Fall of Kabul, major parties must reevaluate their position relative to the new circumstances in Afghanistan. While the conflict is now widely portrayed as a defeat for the US and its allies and as a victory for the Taliban and its supporters, victory or defeat is not a black-and-white matter. The winners of the Afghan Civil War may find themselves embroiled in issues that were not apparent at the time of their victory, while the defeated parties can still look forward to playing the long game.

Nevertheless, one thing is certain. The brunt of the material and human costs of the Afghan Civil War were paid by the Afghan people, with their country facing an uncertain future under Taliban rule, having sacrificed innumerable lives, and suffered unspeakable horrors under decades of foreign domination and infighting. As the Taliban tightens their grip over Afghanistan, emboldened by their string of victories and empowered by powerful foreign patrons, perhaps the humane thing to do is understand that not all in Afghanistan can be saved, but in what can be saved lies the future of the Afghan nation.

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