



Pakistan Rejoicing the Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan

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The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan is not surprising but certainly, the timeline of the takeover has been significant. The political leadership fell apart with President Ashraf Ghani fleeing the country and the Afghan security forces losing morale and ability to fight the Taliban. The Afghan security forces were higher in numbers but struggled to fight in the absence of the US air support and to defeat the propaganda/psychological war launched by the Taliban who constantly had all-out support from Pakistan.

Pakistan has been rejoicing the Taliban takeover in Kabul and sees it as its strategic victory. In its mind, its long-cherished dream of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan has finally been accomplished. Islamabad always desired a pro-Pakistan regime in Afghanistan to cater to its strategic objectives including; managing the rebel voices and controlling the Pashtun sentiment in its tribal areas, dealing with the challenges of the disputed Durand Line, using the Afghan soil to train anti-India terror groups and most importantly, deny India any space in Afghanistan.

Although Islamabad has tried to officially maintain a stance that it desires a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, the reactions within Pakistan after the Taliban takeover project a grim reality. There have been noticeable reactions at three critical levels in Pakistan. At the political level, Prime Minister Imran Khan said that the Taliban has "broken the shackles of slavery". Remarks made by Neelam Irshad Sheikh, a leader of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) have generated ample debate. At a national television show, Neelam Irshad Sheikh said, "Taliban have said that they are with us, and they will help us in [liberating] Kashmir." The statements reflect the sentiments of the Pakistani ruling elites. Definitely, Pakistan is expecting a 'return gift' from the Taliban in response to the unrelenting support

it extended to the group to fight the American and NATO forces, bring down the democratically elected Afghan government and defeat the Afghan security forces.

At the level of religious groups in Pakistan, there is a feeling of victory of the radical ideology. The Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (S) JUI and Difa-e-Pakistan Council termed the Taliban victory as the glorious victory of the ideology of Maulana Sami-ul-Haq (Socialnews.xyz, August 24, 2021). The Jamia Hafsa Seminary in Islamabad celebrated the Taliban victory by chanting slogans, singing the song 'Salam Taliban' and hoisted the Taliban flags at its rooftop. The ideological wave within Pakistan will get strengthened which will have severe fallouts in the long run for not only Pakistan but also for the region. But certainly, the Generals in Rawalpindi don't feel that way.

Pakistan military and the ISI, in their minds, are closest to achieving their strategic objective of controlling Afghanistan. In a significant development, which is not unexpected, the ISI has reportedly sponsored a terror outfit styled as Hizb-e-Wilayat. Although details of the new outfit are not known reports suggest that the organisation has been floated to target the Indian assets in Afghanistan. The group comprises of approximately 10,000 fighters and will be headed by Dr. Anwar Firdausi (First Post, August 24, 2021). Militants from Pakistan sponsored anti-India groups, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) have been also sent to Afghanistan and reportedly fought in the support of the Taliban against the Afghan forces. Pakistan clearly intends to undo whatever India has managed to do so far to improve Afghan lives.

Islamabad continues to project that "peace in Afghanistan would mean peace in Pakistan", but the fact is, that an unstable Afghanistan serves the objectives of Pakistan much better as compared to a democratic stable Afghanistan. Pakistan now aspires to expand itself in the region through its unchallenged presence in Afghanistan. Its all-weather friend, China, is keen to engage and invest in Afghanistan to be able to secure its security, strategic and economic interests. Taliban have welcomed the Chinese investments and in the coming years, Afghanistan will see an expansion of the China-Pakistan alliance.

While Pakistan celebrates the Taliban victory in its neighbourhood and is not able to assess the potential ideological blowback on its society and security environment, India needs to be watchful of the developments. Pakistan will exploit the Afghan soil to nurture and train the anti-India terror groups. Afghanistan will provide Pakistan a convenient base to prepare for its covert war against India without the scrutiny of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) which has kept Pakistan on the grey list since June 2018 despite Pakistan's aggressive diplomacy. Pakistan has been portraying India as an enemy of the Taliban and will continue to do so. India is actively evacuating its people from

Afghanistan and stays committed to the stability of Afghanistan. The Taliban victory has been glorified by the Islamic terror groups, which now feel emboldened. The spill-over impact of the radical ideology is something New Delhi needs to guard itself from.

