



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 17/2021

22 August 2021

TALIBAN TAKEOVER IN AFGHANISTAN: A PYRRHIC VICTORY FOR PAKISTAN?

Col Sushil Tanwar

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, Pakistan, TTP



Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS]



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

The swift takeover of Kabul by the Taliban has created a flutter in the regional geo strategic landscape. As the diplomatic community across the globe struggles to evolve a cogent policy response to the critical dilemma of providing legitimacy and international support to the new regime, it is Islamabad (read Rawalpindi) which is currently in a state of maximum anxiety over the future course of events.

The centrality of Pakistan to the Afghan Cauldron, both as a problem and as a solution, has never been in doubt. It not only deftly exploited its leverage over Taliban leadership especially the 'Quetta Shura', but was also smart enough to portray that it has limited influence over Taliban and therefore can only be a 'facilitator' and not a "guarantor" to the Afghan peace process.

Establishment of a favourable regime in Afghanistan in accordance with its theory of "strategic depth" has been a long cherished national objective of Pakistan. A friendly, if not pliant, ruling dispensation in Kabul in the form of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is therefore being seen as a victory of sorts by Pakistan Establishment.

Tango With Taliban – Will it last?

It is hard to fathom that Taliban would have survived the 'twenty year war' without support from Pakistan. Despite their denials, it is apparent that the well planned & perfectly orchestrated military campaign by Taliban would not have been possible without active involvement of the Pakistan Army. There were a number of unverified reports about presence of Pakistani personnel, Special Forces and ISI officials during the course of fighting. Treatment of injured cadres & funeral prayers for the dead was also a common phenomenon across the Durand Line.

Despite such an umbilical cord between the two, Pakistan is in no hurry to officially recognise the Taliban government and has preferred to "wait and watch" the reaction of international community. However in a clear indicator of its renewed geo strategic importance, Pakistan is presently one of the four diplomatic missions still operating in Afghanistan (Iran, China and Russia being the other three).

Taliban on the other hand are now under no compulsion to blindly toe the Pakistani line and are expected to develop an independent world view, something which Rawalpindi will be wary of.

It is still early to predict the exact nature of the new regime in Kabul. There are doubts over the monolithic nature of Taliban leadership and their ability to replicate the resounding success on the battle field in governing & rebuilding the war torn nation.

However, while the Taliban will continue to closely bank upon Pakistan at least in initial stages of its rule, any attempt by Pakistan to forcibly influence Kabul on core policy decisions will be met with fierce resistance.

Mullah Baradar, who was incarcerated by Pakistan in 2010 for independently reaching out for peace talks with then President Hamid Karzai, and then released in 2018 for peace talks with Trump administration, has emerged as one of the prominent faces for leading the next government. Only time will tell if he and other Taliban commanders have been able to completely forget the ignominy suffered at the hands of 'Deep State' in Pakistan.

Battered Past, Uncertain future

Ever since its birth in 1947, when Afghanistan voted against Pakistan in United Nations, the relations between two countries have been marked by mutual distrust and acrimony. Disputed nature of Durand Line, mutual interference rooted in Pakhtun nationalism & allegations of cross border terrorism has resulted in an environment wherein peaceful coexistence of these two neighbours has been reduced to a mirage.

Pakistan has always claimed that due to the existing geographical contiguity, it stands to benefit the most from "a stable and peaceful" Afghanistan. It is already a reluctant host to more than 2.7 mn Afghan refugees and any further deterioration of situation in Afghanistan will only add to the influx of refugees with enormous socio-economic and security costs for Pakistan. The construction of the fence along the approximately 2670 km long border & strict control measures on border crossings by Pakistan are designed to alleviate these fears. It is though quite unlikely, as the Taliban government has shown while they were in power earlier, that any government in Afghanistan will approve the fencing project which not only unilaterally demarcates the disputed border but also divides the ethnic affiliation of communities across the Durand Line.

Safe sanctuaries of terror groups in Afghanistan, some allegedly funded by arch enemy India, has been one of the main grievances of Pakistan. Despite public assurances by Taliban about "Afghan territory not being allowed to be used against any country", the enduring ideological linkages between Taliban and other fundamentalist groups such as TTP (as reflected in the congratulatory message on Taliban victory sent by TTP emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud) may prevent any significant actions by the new Afghan government against these outfits. This was evident in the in-camera briefing held in the month of July this year for the Parliament members by Pakistan Army in the presence of COAS Gen Qamar Bajwa and DG ISI Lt Gen Faiz Hamid where in Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban (TTP) were depicted as "two sides of the same coin". Since then, many TTP fighters

including some key commanders such as Deputy Chief Faqir Muhammed have been freed in various prison breaks like in Bagram and Pul – e-Charkhi during the Taliban offensive. A resurgent TTP along with other insurgent groups will pose a formidable challenge to security forces in Pakistan who are already extensively committed in maintenance of internal security duties.

While Pakistan may draw some consolation from the loss of Indian influence in Afghanistan, it will be cognizant that the “Triumph of Taliban” will add further impetus to the ever growing religious fundamentalism in Pakistan and embolden the ‘Jihadis’ thus further aggravating the already fragile security environment.

Towards Geo Economics – An Arduous Journey

Over last few months, Pakistan has declared what it calls a paradigm policy shift from ‘Geo politics to Geo-economics’ wherein it is projecting itself as a potential hub for commerce and connectivity particularly for Central Asia and West Asia. The installation of a favourable regime in the form of Taliban along with the unhindered support by China for execution & expansion of CPEC will encourage Pakistan in its desperate efforts towards economic revival.

The dramatic turn of events has also cast a shadow on the future of Chabahar in Iran. Although progress on the Indian backed port project has suffered due to US sanctions, installation of the Taliban led government will further diminish the prospects of facilitating Indian trade with Central Asia and Afghanistan via Iran. Since Chabahar port was being viewed as an Indian Counterweight to Gwadar, this will certainly be welcomed by Pakistan.

The economic prospects have however been dampened by the fact that Pakistan by itself lacks the capacity to undertake any meaningful investment and is wholly dependent on international partners especially China. While China acknowledges that Afghanistan can play a significant role in its ambitious BRI initiative and much needed integration with CPEC, it does not currently see enough incentives to invest heavily in the region till the sensitive issues of political legitimacy and favourable security climate are not fully addressed. Similar concerns will also adversely affect a deeper economic involvement of other stake holders like Russia and Iran.

The Great Game - Crafting an International Image

With the return of Taliban, history has turned a full circle and the role of Pakistan in scripting this monumental change will always remain controversial. Obsessed with anti-India rhetoric, it has unfortunately spent much of its energy in portraying India as a “spoiler” & attempting to undermine Indian influence in Afghanistan.

There are some concerns that Pakistan may now use this opportunity to give an impetus to terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. However, the current geo political environment, FATF sword of Damocles and robust posture of Indian Army along the Line of Control will make it extremely difficult for Pakistan to successfully undertake this adventure.

In addition, the public expressions of gleeful admiration for Taliban victory & contempt for United States of America demonstrated by a wide cross section of Pakistan society including government functionaries & retired generals, has only strengthened the suspicions of the international community and will certainly harm Pakistan's attempts to cultivate a favourable image.

Since its relationship with USA after a disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to turn negative, Pakistan is currently trying to collaborate with other stake holders particularly China and Russia so that it can facilitate the process of international recognition to the Taliban regime.

The key challenge for Islamabad though is to establish a semblance of good will amongst the people of Afghanistan. Although it has taken certain measures in recent times such as broader engagement with sections of Afghan society & relaxation of visa regime, Pakistan may ultimately find it difficult to win over the majority of Afghan population who view Pakistan with deep suspicion and blame it for much of its human tragedies.


