

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The major world and regional powers are currently engaged in monitoring the aftermath of the Taliban take-over in Afghanistan. It happened rather fast, and till now, with minimal bloodshed. While some blamed the American security establishment for lack of anticipation, there are others who feel that it was all stage managed. The two hypothesis are being pushed into the media by interested parties. Surely there have been back channel parleys at all stages. It is interesting to understand the background.

On February 29, 2020, an agreement<sup>1</sup> for bringing peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (which is not recognised by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban) and the United States of America was signed at Doha, Qatar. The US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad was the chief negotiator.

The comprehensive peace agreement covered signed guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the US and its allies. It also recorded the timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan. In the presence of international witnesses, it was committed in writing that Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the US and its allies. The Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020. Lastly, a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. The participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the date and modalities of the permanent and comprehensive ceasefire,

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1. "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan", Signed in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> Accessed on August 21, 2021.

including joint implementation mechanisms, which will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.

As per the Trump era deal, the US was to originally pull out all its troops by May 31, 2021. Taliban would not attack US soldiers till then. Taliban stood by the deal. After Joe Biden became the President in January 2021, the Biden administration signed another agreement to vacate by September 11, 2021. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani was to resign, paving the way for forming a 'National Government' with Taliban as main partner. Clearly Ashraf Ghani was unwilling to resign<sup>2</sup> even till the late stage, and wanted to fight using the Afghan Army. To hasten the end, the US decided to pull-out almost 25 days before the deadline. This did result in chaos everywhere.

Meanwhile Ashraf Ghani's negotiators ex-President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah began meeting the Taliban.<sup>3</sup> The US military was in touch with the Afghan Army Chief and other Generals. Afghan forces resistance to the Taliban was mild. Ashraf Ghani fled initially to Uzbekistan and later took asylum in UAE. Interestingly, he did not move to the US.

Abdul Ghani Baradar is an Afghan militant who was one of the founders of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Baradar was captured in Pakistan by a team of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers in February 2010, and was held in confinement in Pakistan, and was released on October 24, 2018 at the behest of the US. Since his release he played an increasingly influential role within the Afghan Taliban movement. In February 2020, Baradar signed the Doha Agreement on the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan on behalf of the Taliban. On August 17, 2021, Baradar returned to Afghanistan for the first time since the fall of the original Taliban government in 2001. It

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2. Eileen AJ Connelly, "Afghan president resists pressure to resign as allies wither amid Taliban rout", *New York Post*, August 14, 2021, at <https://nypost.com/2021/08/14/afghan-president-resists-taliban-pressure-to-resign-as-allies-wither/>. Accessed on August 21, 2021.
  3. Akhil Oka, "Afghanistan political crisis: Taliban Leaders Meet Ex-President Hamid Karzai, Abdullah Amid Impasse Over Govt Formation", *Republic World*, August 18, 2021, at <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/taliban-leaders-meet-ex-president-hamid-karzai-abdullah-amid-impasse-over-govt-formation.html> Accessed on August 21, 2021.

was rumoured that Baradar will become the president of Afghanistan. But the interim government announced, as we go to press, names him as deputy prime minister and Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund as acting prime minister. Clearly, he appears to be an American sympathiser and was not acceptable to Pakistan.

Panjshir Valley, the only district unconquered by the Taliban, has seen resistance to Taliban. The First Vice President (FVP) of Afghanistan, Amrullah Saleh, who was part of the erstwhile Russia backed Northern Alliance, has moved to Panjshir Valley. Russians are keen to get back their lost status of a major power. Meanwhile China is also engaging with Taliban and Pakistan to seek a foothold in the geo-politically complex region. China, not only has the economic muscle to pump in developmental and military aid, but also wants to use Afghanistan to extend the Belt and Road initiative. China also wants some level of assurance on the Islamic revolution not being transported to Xinjiang. Some analysts feel that the West would be happy to see China getting embroiled and stuck in the quick-sand of Afghanistan.

Whether Pakistan will gain from the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan or would face greater Pashtun and Baloch unrest, and a refugee crisis, only time will tell. Immediate concern of most countries is to move their citizens and sympathisers out of Afghanistan.

The Afghan government's collapse and worsening security situation appears to have Iran on edge.<sup>4</sup> Iran is looking for an opportunity to increase its local influence. Shi'a-dominant Iran has had a long history of ideological differences and political rivalry with the Afghan Taliban. It does have security concerns, and has been bolstering its military deployments on the Afghan frontier.

India has traditionally engaged in developmental diplomacy.<sup>5</sup> It had won the hearts of the ordinary Afghans. India was also liked because it was

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4. Farzin Nadimi, "Iran Sets Its Eyes on Afghanistan", The Washington Institute, July 19, 2021, at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-sets-its-eyes-afghanistan>. Accessed on August 21, 2021.

5. News Desk, "Diplomacy, Transportation, Health: India's 2 Decades Worth of Efforts at Risk as Taliban Storm Afghanistan", News18, August 14, 2021, at <https://www.news18.com/news/india/transportation-health-dams-indias-2-decades-worth-of-efforts-in-afghanistan-could-now-go-up-in-smoke-4085381.html>. Accessed on August 21, 2021.

not meddling in local politics. Indian citizens were sometimes under attack mainly by Pakistan backed terror groups. While many in India are concerned, India has currently adopted a wait and watch approach, and will make its diplomatic moves only after the real Taliban comes out in the open, and till then, not to rush into an 'Afghan Strategy'.

Significant amount of arms and ammunitions and military platforms that were meant for Afghan Armed Forces is now with the Taliban. As of August 15 this year, the Afghan armed forces had approximately 186,000 personnel. The Afghan Air Force (AAF) had over 200 refurbished aircraft, which included A-29 Super Tucano attack aircraft, Lockheed C-130 Hercules and Pilatus PC-12s as military transport aircraft, as well as UH-60A Black Hawk, Mil Mi-17, Mi-24, and other types of helicopters. They also had Aero L-39 Albatros and Cessna 182 trainers. The AAF had 7,000 personnel, of which around 450 were pilots, including a few women pilots. As of August 15, 2021, the armed forces were disbanded due to change in government and the fall of Kabul. Nearly 25 per cent of the aircraft have been flown out and taken refuge in Uzbekistan. The Uzbekistan Air Force has said it "forced" the landing of 46 Afghan aircraft, carrying as many as 585 armed servicemen, for trying to illegally cross the country's airspace.<sup>6</sup> Many Afghan aircraft are lying unserviceable at different airbases.

Closer home, India's face-off with China in eastern Ladakh continues with no immediate end in sight. After the 12th Corp Commander level meeting on July 31, 2021, the two sides agreed to disengage from Gogra region, restoring the Line of Actual Control. Effectively, India and China have now backed down in four of the six flashpoints including Galwan, and north and south banks of the Pangong Lake. The standoff in Depsang and Hot Springs continues. Meanwhile, breakdown in trust has led India and China to further mobilise forces and accelerate construction of roads, airfields and defences in respective areas of the India-China border.

China also continues to move more modern weapon systems into the

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6. India Today Web Desk, August 17, 2021, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/afghanistan-crisis-aircraft-forced-land-uzbekistan-taliban-latest-update-1841885-2021-08-17>. Accessed on August 21, 2021.

region. Infrastructure at the two major Chinese airbases in the region Hotan and Kashgar has strengthened, also work is in progress at Nagari Gunza. They are also building a fourth airbase near Afghanistan border, near the CPEC corridor north of Gilgit, at Taxkorgan, Xinjiang.<sup>7</sup> Satellite images and intelligence reports have indicated presence of J-10, J-11 fighters and H-6 bombers. Also J-20s have made show of force transit visits. The Chinese have also showcased some electronic warfare and Microwave systems. Most importantly, China has been using the government and Communist Party mouth pieces like *Global Times* and CGTN to carry on psy ops. Chinese have mastered grey-zone operations.

Xi Jinping's Tibet visit,<sup>8</sup> the first by the Chinese President in 30 years, brought him very close to India's eastern boundary and was also meant to be signal to India about Arunachal. China has begun a recruitment drive to get Tibetans to join PLA. 100 years celebrations of China's Communist Party were a grand show to highlight how an authoritarian regime had brought up living standards of its people.<sup>9</sup> The free world is trying to expose China for its actions in Xinjiang and Tibet. Chinese people clearly lack freedom and have been cut-off from the world. But their standards of living are apparently going up.

Despite Covid still being active in many parts of the globe, and reports of additional waves of newer strains being anticipated, the world has started opening up to movements and day-to-day activities. The Olympics were finally held in Japan.

The third area of global action remains the Indo-Pacific. While China has been making aggressive display of force and threatening overtures towards Taiwan, the military show-of-force by many countries such as US, UK and

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7. Xinhua, Construction site of Taxkorgan Airport in Xinjiang, Chinese Government, June 5, 2020, at [http://english.www.gov.cn/news/photos/202006/05/content\\_WS5ed9a405c6d0b3f0e94999e3.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/news/photos/202006/05/content_WS5ed9a405c6d0b3f0e94999e3.html). Accessed on August 21, 2021.

8. IANS, "Xi Jinping's recent visit to Tibet and its impact", *The Times of India*, August 7, 2021, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/xi-jinpings-recent-visit-to-tibet-and-its-impact/articleshow/85124584.cms>. Accessed on August 21, 2021.

9. Andrew Nathan, "An Anxious 100th Birthday for China's Communist Party", *The Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2021, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/an-anxious-100th-birthday-for-chinas-communist-party-11624635205>. Accessed on August 21, 2021.

France has been on the increase in South China Sea region. The US has moved significant number of bombers to Guam.<sup>10</sup> India has been engaged with all the players. It openly supports rules-based regional architecture centred on maritime security. Will China forcefully occupy Taiwan is being speculated. The dialogue between QUAD countries continues to increase. In what form will QUAD evolve is still being watched. Meanwhile, India continues its policy of strategic autonomy, while balancing its relations with Russia.

The China-Russia strategic partnership is growing. Russia has been pushed towards China by the US and its European partners, partly because of Ukraine. The threat of "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act" (CAATSA) for India's S-400, surfaces in US Congress on and off. But there is no going back, and the US also realises it. With nearly 60 per cent of the equipment with Indian armed forces being of Russian origin we have to continue to remain connected for decades ahead. Russia needs India as much as India needs Russia. Russia and China have unequal, unreal relationship, one of convenience. China is becoming independent of Russia for arms supplies. And in fact taking over many of Russian arms markets in Asia and Africa.

Yes, China-Pakistan nexus is of concern. It is Pakistan's insurance against more powerful India. Also the CPEC helps China reach out to the oil rich Middle East and closer to Africa. Lease of Gwadar port does give China easier access to the Indian Ocean. Now the two are trying to work together on Afghanistan.

Since World War II, major powers realised that one who controls the aerospace controls the planet. Aerospace power continues to be the dominant means of prosecuting war. It offers prompt multiple response options to the political leadership. Air and space give a vantage point to see wide area, allow connectivity and large distance high speed weapon transit, and help targeting. Today, space greatly supports all warfare on earth. Aerospace offers speed,

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10. Caitlin Doornbos, "Air Force deploys four B-52 bombers to Guam for 'strategic deterrence' mission", *Stars and Stripes*, February 1, 2021, at [https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia\\_pacific/air-force-deploys-four-b-52-bombers-to-guam-for-strategic-deterrence-mission-1.660532](https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/air-force-deploys-four-b-52-bombers-to-guam-for-strategic-deterrence-mission-1.660532). Accessed on August 21, 2021.

range, accuracy, and lethality for achieving military effects. Even armies and navies are wanting to spend more and more on air assets. Air power and future of all warfare are intertwined. Some level of air superiority, will still be a pre-requisite for all operations on the surface to succeed. Air power is inherently strategic in nature and simultaneously provides conventional deterrence.

Advantage of air power is ability to exploit swing-role capabilities. When you say Rafale is an omni-role fighter, it means it can do many roles in a single mission. Air campaigns can be executed simultaneously against different spread out target systems. It can influence outcomes and actions of the surface forces. It can simultaneously produce physical as well as psychological effects. Strategic air lift is an area of strategic reach and strategic effect. IAF has repeatedly demonstrated it. More recently IAF's transport fleet was extensively used for moving Covid related supplies and container trucks. Also C-17s were used to evacuate Indian nationals from Kabul.

Air power is technology intensive and has early obsolescence. Therefore, it requires greater investment in R&D and also funding. We have seen how China has been investing in aerospace power including aircraft carriers and missile forces. IAF is looking at reach from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca, using long range aircraft supported by FRA and AWACS. IAF transformation is being driven from just being platform-based to being capability-based. Effects based, and network-centric operations are the new normal. Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) has become even more crucial for decision-superiority in net-centric warfare. Aerospace domain is best suited for ISR. Since all countries are engaged in network-centric warfare, cyber and electronic warfare is where action is. Securing own networks and denying the same to adversary will be important. Air and space platforms will greatly support cyber and electronic warfare operations much deeper into the enemy territory. Due to the multi-dimensional nature of conflict, increasing levels of synergy amongst the armed forces and civil agencies is operationally critical.

The future is unmanned. Artificial Intelligence supported autonomous systems will fly independently or in conjunction with each other in a swarm or with manned aircraft as a team. India is working on many unmanned systems, but more needs to be done.

Buying technology is expensive and often no one shares it. *Atmanirbharta* is most important. We have finally come of age with the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) program. We need to increase production, and also hasten development of MK1A and MK2. The fifth-generation Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) must succeed for India to come into a bigger league. It is time to get the private sector into defence production. India also needs a push in aircraft engine technologies. We are building good helicopters. We have good missile and space programs. There is a lot of action in directed-energy weapons. The anti-drone capability requirement has just got highlighted after the Jammu incident. We are told that major investments are being made in both drones and manned-unmanned teaming. Hypersonic flight and weapons will be difficult to engage, and need to be developed.

This *Air Power Journal* has a bouquet of articles on very contemporary subjects. After its military modernisation starting 2015, China has put its space, cyber and electronic warfare assets, among others under the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLASSF). Some call it a game changing reform. India needs to study the same and note its implications. Artificial Intelligence (AI) will greatly support autonomous operations and prompt decision-making. In many ways, it would be a strategic disruptor in aerospace power employment. India needs to push this capability. We have an article on predicting adversary's psyche and intent using AI. We also have a close look at the trends in military aviation technology. There is a major shift of alignments in West Asia with the signing of Abraham Accords<sup>11</sup> to recognise the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace, through mutual understanding and coexistence, as well as respect for human dignity and freedom, including religious freedom. More countries have improved

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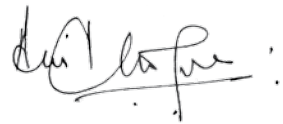
11. "The Abraham Accords Declaration", US Department of State, at <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>. Accessed on August 21, 2021.



relations with Israel. Lastly Russia, China, and Pakistan continue to be strange bedfellows, living unreal relationships of temporary convenience.

It shall continue to be the endeavour of CAPS to put aerospace and global strategic issues in correct perspective and give our readers enough facts and cross opinions to form a comprehensive view on important current issues of interest to India and its global concerns and ambitions. It is our endeavour to promote strategic thinking and inculcate the reading habit, for which it's never too late to start. It imparts knowledge, stimulates mind, and helps build character and comprehensive personality. We also want some of our readers to write for us on contemporary subjects.

Happy reading and Jai Hind.



Air Marshal **Anil Chopra**  
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