

Afghanistan: Changing Situation and Regional Responses

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Two years of negotiations between the United States (US) and Afghan Taliban led to an agreement on withdrawal of US troops from the war-ravaged Afghanistan. America had initially committed to complete pullout of its forces by early May, 2021. However, the new Biden administration modified the timeline and now US military withdrawal will be completed by end of August.¹ On ground, the US has nearly completed the withdrawal barring few hundred soldiers for guarding the US Embassy compound. Moreover, US Air Force is conducting few airstrikes to support Afghan army fighting the Taliban from its bases in Bahrain.

As the withdrawal of troops progressed, Taliban made advances on the ground by capturing around half of Afghan districts. There have been reports of the Taliban taking control of more than 200 of 421 total Afghan districts. The development, it is feared², has been precipitated in the wake of US forces prematurely handing over the Bagram Air Base to the Afghan National Army. The Afghan National Army, which is both inexperienced and ill-equipped to challenge the battle-hardened Taliban, besides being disillusion and demotivated has struggled to hold its ground.

The developing situation poses a grave security threat to Afghanistan's neighboring countries, as the Taliban have seized multiple border-crossings. The Taliban have reiterated multiple times that they would not let Afghan soil be used by any group against another country; however, most powers are unwilling to just take their word for it.

The Afghan conflict is sparking a region-wide competition for influence in Afghanistan. In essence, regional rivalries are being revived in Afghanistan with much more vigor than before.

Regional Stakeholders and Evolving Situation

The regional countries have different stakes, risks and interests in the developing situation in Afghanistan and are thus treading according to their strategic objectives, which makes the Afghan predicament all the more complicated. This section explores interests and concerns of regional neighbours of Afghanistan as peace and security situation evolves at a fast pace.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/us/politics/biden-afghanistan-withdrawal.html>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57682290>

China:

The Taliban offensive can cause instability on the border with China as militants affiliated with East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) will be able to operate with more autonomy and pose challenges to China in Xinjiang province. Beijing is already concerned about spillover effect of the violence and with increased risk to stability in Xinjiang, Chinese sensitivities will increase manifold. This is also manifested in the fact that China via a special flight evacuated its nearly 200 citizens.³

India:

India is not a direct neighbor of Afghanistan, yet it is a crucial regional stakeholder in peace and security in Afghanistan. As the Taliban gain more ground in Afghanistan, India will be wary of spillover of extremism and militancy. Recently, India has evacuated its diplomats from the consulate in Kandahar and has promised weapons and equipment supplies to Afghan national army to support their war effort.⁴ At the same time, New Delhi has made efforts to engage Taliban directly in Doha. These contacts are meant to break the ice between Taliban and India, as New Delhi seeks to secure its long-term interests in Afghanistan.

Iran:

Iran's role in the current crisis seems to be a kind of balancing act, as it is engaged with the Afghan government for dialogue and stability while also maintaining their ties with the Taliban. However, the prevailing violence would pose a challenge for Iran due to its economic and trade interests in Afghanistan which could be jeopardized.⁵ It may also lead to refugee influx which can cause instability on its eastern border. The complete takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban would be counterproductive for Iran despite its apparently friendly ties.

Russia:

Russia is also perturbed over the possibility of extremists' infiltration among the refugees coming to Central Asia through the Tajikistan border due to the conflict. Moscow has, thus, sought to keep the Collective Security Treaty Organization's forces battle-ready. Russia is

³ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/china-evacuates-more-than-200-citizens-from-afghanistan/2298196>

⁴ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2310071/indian-planes-ferry-arms-to-afghanistan>

⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-07-11/iran-knows-the-triumphant-taliban-in-afghanistan-will-not-be-good-neighbors>

seeking to activate a Tajik military base in case of escalation of violence and instability, despite assurances from Taliban that they would not attack the Tajik-Afghan border.⁶ Russia and Central Asian States fear an upswing in religious extremism, especially among the Tajik and Uzbek radical groups, and therefore want to prevent the conflict from spilling across borders.

Pakistan:

In Pakistan, there is heightened concern among the civil society about pro-Taliban militant groups already calling for support to Taliban in their fight against the Afghan government.⁷ At the same time, Pakistani decision-makers remain concerned about movement of extremists from Afghanistan to Pakistan and vice versa, which can potentially spark a new wave of violent extremism in the region. This could undermine the gains made by counter-terrorism operations undertaken by Pakistan Army during the last decade. The upswing of violence in Afghanistan would also cause a refugee spillover in Pakistan which would be detrimental for progress as it is already struggling with a frail economy. Pakistan government has thus considered closing down the western borders⁸ and is engaged with Iran in order to emulate the latter's refugee camp model to contain the inevitable inflow of refugees fleeing Afghanistan in the wake of violent conflict. Camping the refugees on the Afghan side of the border is the first and preferred option of the government, however, contingency planning is also underway and sites have been identified for establishing camps on Pakistani territory. Up to 0.7 million fresh refugees are being expected. Currently Pakistan is hosting nearly 3 million refugees.

Turkey:

Turkey generally supports the Afghan government but its non-combatant troops in NATO have constructively maintained a cordial relationship with Taliban and other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. However, since it is due to take over the security of Hamid Karzai International Airport after the complete withdrawal of western forces from Afghanistan, the task is wrought with security risks as some factions of the Taliban see this as an intervention of NATO troops, which can lead to clashes with the Turkish forces. Turkey might not be able to stay for long without reaching an agreement with the Taliban.

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-says-it-controls-most-afghanistan-reassures-russia-2021-07-09/>

⁷ <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/taliban-donations-soar-pakistan-ahead-us-pullout-afghanistan>

⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1635037>

What Next?

Even though occasionally there have been reports of efforts to break the stalemate in the peace dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan Government in Doha, practically the process that started September 2020 has made no progress towards a peaceful settlement of conflict, rather there has been intensification of violence. The Taliban have recently claimed to have drawn a written peace plan but at the same time have continued their military advances.⁹ This has led to doubts about their commitment to a political settlement of the dispute.

They have, meanwhile, reiterated on multiple occasions that they would not like to continue with the current democratic structure in Afghanistan as they see it as corrupt and installed by the US, and wish to convert the country into an Islamic emirate.

It is feared that the central authority would not be able to sustain the Taliban onslaught, especially if the externally sponsored warlords play a negative role in the conflict. Nevertheless, the continuation of war in Afghanistan would have dire ramifications for the rest of the region. Due to this reason, the neighboring countries cannot stay indifferent to the evolving situation in Afghanistan for long.

In this case, it is necessary for Pakistan and regional players' policymakers to consider the following recommendations:

- The Afghan elites must be incentivized to unite for effective dialogue instead of infighting as it is their responsibility to decide the future of Afghanistan's governance.
- Pakistan and other regional actors must persuade the Afghan Taliban to halt violence and negotiate a compromise with the Afghan Government.
- Pakistan must enhance its diplomacy and cooperation with the Afghan Government so as to reduce mistrust and bitterness between both the neighboring countries.
- Engagement and cooperation among all regional states needs to be ramped up, while setting aside their strategic interests, to make talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban progress; and facilitate a non-violent solution to the current crisis, as a civil war would prove to be counter-productive for Afghanistan and the entire region.

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/6/taliban-to-present-written-peace-plan-at-talks-next-month>

- Engage China in the process for peaceful intra-Afghan settlement as it is a major player due to the Belt and Road Initiative and its assistance for Afghanistan's reconstruction and developmental goals.
- Pakistan needs to enhance internal security and expedite border fencing with Afghanistan.
- Coordinate with International Humanitarian Organizations in order to make arrangements for facilitation of refugees in the case of violent escalation.

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