

The Fall of Kabul, Peace Process and Afghanistan's Political Future

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Summary

With the fall of Kabul and capture of power by the Taliban, the peace processes and intra-Afghan dialogue to decide Afghanistan's future have become redundant. In the coming days, the insurgent group will decide the form of the future government, structure of administration, type of governance and the ideology and legal system which could subvert the fragile gains of the last two decades. Battlefield dominance of the insurgents, notwithstanding the pockets of resistance which are in their early stages of emergence, the need to avert a civil war situation and consequent large-scale exodus of refugees and evacuation of its nationals from the war-torn country, has put the international community in a Catch-22 to engage with the Taliban. Democratic experiment of the last two decades and the rights of women and minorities could be a casualty of the marriage of convenience between the international community and the insurgents who are seeking legitimacy, recognition and international aid. The need, therefore, is to kick start a new round of negotiations and engagement that seeks to reverse the losses.

Introduction

The two decades-old democratic experiment apparently ended in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, with the Taliban cadres marching into Kabul without much resistance. Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani quietly flew out the country to "avoid bloodshed"¹ and "possible execution".² Vice President Amrullah Saleh retreated to Panjshir to declare himself the caretaker president³ and announce the founding of a resistance movement against the Taliban. As the Taliban leaders started converging in Kabul, the world expressed its surprise at the swiftness with which the national capital fell and began concentrating on the immediate task of evacuating their diplomatic staff⁴ and nationals as well as some Afghans who worked for them in the country. The intra-Afghan peace and reconciliation process in Doha, which would have provided a platform for an all-inclusive government in Kabul and protected the sanctity of the Afghan constitution as well as the rights of the women and minorities, has lost all its relevance. In the new Afghanistan, the largely forlorn world has

¹ "Afghan president says he left country to avoid bloodshed", *Reuters*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-president-ghani-says-he-left-country-order-avoid-bloodshed-2021-08-15/>. Accessed on 17 August 2021.

² "Afghanistan president says he fled Kabul to avoid execution and chaos", *Financial Times*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/a338537d-6a81-4dac-905c-fc3c6f9d2c8c>. Accessed on 20 August 2021.

³ "Afghan VP Amrullah Saleh claims he is now caretaker president", *The Indian Express*, 17 August 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/afghan-vp-amrullah-saleh-claims-he-is-now-caretaker-president-7458565/>. Accessed on 18 August 2021.

⁴ "Taliban enter Afghan capital as US diplomats evacuate by chopper", *Reuters*, 15 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-troops-arrive-afghan-capital-assist-evacuations-2021-08-14/>. Accessed on 16 August 2021.

two stark choices: first, to delegitimise the insurgents and banish Afghanistan once again as a pariah state; and second, to engage with the legitimacy-seeking Taliban and attempt constraining implementation of its extremist ideology on the hapless country and its population.

Peace Reverie in Doha

Battlefield gains have rarely been altered through peace negotiations. Parties in negotiation mostly aim to talk from a position of strength and impose their view on the weaker adversary, which is seeking an honourable exit from the conflict. Both the February 2020 peace agreement⁵ signed by the Donald Trump administration with the Taliban and the March 2021 peace proposal of the Joe Biden administration,⁶ were essentially directed at one objective – extricating United States (US) troops from an unwinnable long war. At the time of the beginning of US-Taliban negotiations in early 2019, the Taliban controlled 12.3 per cent of the districts in Afghanistan, compared to the government’s control or influence over 53.8 per cent of the districts.⁷ However, as the insurgents continued their campaign of violence and territory capturing spree, the US-commanded North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Resolute Support mission stopped assessing district-level control, possibly in a bid to avoid reporting the gradual worsening of the security situation.

The agreement with the US further strengthened the bargaining position of the Taliban as the reluctant Ghani administration was coerced to accept the terms of the agreement and release over 5,000 imprisoned Taliban cadres, many of whom went back to join the Taliban insurgency.⁸ The Taliban had ceased its offensive against the US forces but continued with its violence against the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and civilians. In no way, the Doha peace process, hailed as a harbinger of peace, could have tilted the military balance away from the Taliban and positioned the Ghani government at par with the insurgents.

Consequently, the only hope that hung on a very thin thread, as both the reluctant parties indulged in on-and-off negotiations, was the insurgents’ nod for an interim government possibly comprising the members of the Ghani government, the other Afghan political elite and the Taliban representatives. However, what further weakened Afghan government’s position is the altered outlook of many Afghan political elites, including former President

⁵ US Department of State, “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America”, 29 February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>. Accessed on 16 August 2021.

⁶ Shirin Jaafari, “Biden’s new plan for peace in Afghanistan garners mixed reactions”, *The World*, 12 March 2021, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2021-03-12/biden-s-new-plan-peace-afghanistan-garners-mixed-reactions>. Accessed on 16 August 2021.

⁷ Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 30 January 2019, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-01-30qr.pdf>. Accessed on 18 August 2021.

⁸ Lynne O’Donnell, “Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to Battlefield”, *Foreign Policy*, 3 September 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>. Accessed on 17 August 2021.

Hamid Karzai who lobbied for the return of the Taliban.⁹ Factors like political opportunism, anti-Ghani sentiment, ethnic primordial loyalties and jockeying for power and influence through outreach to the Taliban could have resulted in the formation of such a bloc which politically empowered the insurgents who were already militarily dominant.

Barring India, which consistently favoured an “Afghan-led, owned and controlled peace process”,¹⁰ notwithstanding its haphazard and isolated attempt at engaging the Taliban,¹¹ regional countries like Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran too have weighed in favour a complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Although most countries, in multiple regional dialogue, including the three-day Doha round which took place in August 2021,¹² opposed the Taliban’s use of force to capture of power, appear to favour peace and stability, ensured and dictated by the insurgents at the helm. While Pakistan sensed the fruition of its objective of regaining strategic depth by the reinstatement of a Taliban regime in Afghanistan, backroom deals, parallel negotiation processes and unilateral outreach to the insurgents by individual countries further weakened the legitimacy and bargaining ability of the beleaguered Afghan government. In these circumstances, the fall of Kabul was a matter of time, although a horrific phase of civil war and bloodshed could only have delayed it.

Limits of Unilateralism

The dramatic transformation in Afghan political landscape, linked justifiably to the US decision to precipitously withdraw its forces, exposes the limits of unilateral diplomatic and military choices. As expressed by the statements of successive US presidents, the Afghan war was directed primarily at al Qaeda which had achieved its objective of killing Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011. Pure and undiluted unilateralism was masked by the NATO clause (Article 5) of coming together of all member countries to the aid of a fellow nation. While such unilateralism was successful in driving away al Qaeda from Afghanistan and dismantled the Taliban regime within a matter of weeks in 2001, the US faltered while attempting to use the trillions of dollars of aid and assistance either in strengthening the host nation’s capabilities, strengthening the democratic institutions, denying a sanctuary to the Taliban in Pakistan or building an effective Afghan Army to fight insurgency and not a conventional war.

Much bigger failure, however, was in the realm of evolving an international consensus on the future of Afghan state and preserving the processes on which billions had been spent.

⁹ Sune Engel Rasmussen, “Afghan Ex-President Hamid Karzai Angles for National Role After Taliban Takeover”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 August 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-ex-president-hamid-karzai-angles-for-national-role-after-taliban-takeover-11629557682>. Accessed on 22 August 2021.

¹⁰ “Peace process must be led, owned and controlled by Afghan’: India on historic talks between Taliban and Afghanistan”, *Hindustan Times*, 12 September 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/peace-process-must-be-led-owned-and-controlled-by-afghan-india-on-historic-talks-between-taliban-and-afghanistan-read-full-statement-here/story-3Ew8ip6HxysvHUBkNDLuzl.html>. Accessed on 17 August 2021.

¹¹ “Suhasini Haidar, “Indian delegation met Taliban in Doha, says Qatari official”, *The Hindu*, 21 June 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indian-delegation-met-taliban-in-doha-says-qatari-official/article34895560.ece>. Accessed on 20 August 2021.

¹² “Doha talks on Afghanistan end with call for accelerated peace process, halt to attacks”, *Reuters*, 13 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/doha-talks-afghanistan-end-with-call-accelerated-peace-process-halt-attacks-2021-08-12/>. Accessed on 15 August 2021.

Notwithstanding the fact that Pakistan remained perhaps the only country which continued to push for a Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan, the acrimonious bilateral relations shared by the US with China, Russia and Iran affected the outcomes of the numerous efforts at envisioning a unified end state in Afghanistan. The direction of each peace process was influenced by the unilateral and hasty decision of the US to pull its troops out of the war-torn country. Despite several suggestions from both within the US and outside, the withdrawal plan was never sought to be linked to the conditions on the ground, nor was the Taliban ever constrained to enter into a ceasefire agreement. War in Afghanistan for successive US presidents remained an instrument to elicit domestic political support based on American political calendars rather than needs of the Afghan on the ground. Such a war could not have been won.

Taliban 2.0

To fill the vacuum created by its absence, the US did not attempt to bring in an international coalition to maintain and preserve the gains of last two decades but sought to impose an artificial solution. This was based on the underlying assumption that the Taliban, waiting to assume political power in Kabul, are amenable to peace negotiations and, hence, would be willing to modify their orthodox worldview. The proposed solution essentially envisioned an inclusive transitional government with an in-built check and balance mechanism to restrict the Taliban's preference for establishing an Islamic Emirate.

Even though there is no clarity on the future of the peace and negotiation process, in the initial days after capture of power, the Taliban have sought to project the image of a reformed entity. They have promised safety of all Afghans, including the ANDSF troops, and government officials, including women, have been asked to re-join their offices. The group has promised to keep the schools open for girls and curb narco-trade. It has asked international non-governmental organisations to continue their projects in the country as well as provide safe passage to diplomats and foreign nationals seeking to leave the country.

These moves, however, remain interspersed with incidents of brutality, Taliban cadres forcing young girls to marry their fighters, public execution of ANDSF soldiers and looting of weapons, vehicles and money from civilian homes.¹³ While the objective of projecting itself as a reformed entity is mostly geared towards seeking international legitimacy, recognition, and flow of financial assistance, the group's leadership seem to have largely failed to curb its foot soldiers from imposing the group's worldview.¹⁴ To an extent, the truncated presence of the international press and the Taliban's use of social media helped the group to shift the focus away from the acts of retribution. However, discussions with the Afghans staying put in the country helps bring out numerous instances of persecution and imposition of its feared ideology. The Taliban are still deliberating on the structure of government they want

¹³ "Taliban ask for list of girls above 15, widows under 45 to be married to their fighters: Reports", *Hindustan Times*, 16 July 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/taliban-asks-for-list-of-girls-widows-to-be-married-to-their-fighters-reports-101626413987086.html>. Accessed on 21 July 2021.

¹⁴ Yuliya Talmazan and Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Images of bloodied Afghans contradict Taliban's claims of moderation", *NBC News*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/images-bloodied-afghans-contradict-taliban-s-claims-moderation-n1277042>. Accessed on 20 August 2021.

to form, but it is evident that Afghanistan henceforth would be governed by *shariah*.¹⁵ The era of democracy, which with all its limitations, provided the Afghans the right to choose their representatives and participate in policy making, is over.

Negotiations 2.0

In an interconnected world, military triumph often imposes unique limitations on the victorious actor. Being a rational actor, it is forced to act with grace or at least put up a façade of being a responsible inheritor of power. The Taliban leaders are attempting to follow the same path. Their actions generate a sense of hope, although these may only be temporary and misleading. However, at the same time, these provide opportunities for the international community to seize the moment. Mutual interest, for the sake of ending the long war and bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan, could become the platform to initiate another round of dialogue. The spectre of Chinese and Russian ascendancy in Afghanistan could influence the US' decision to engage or recognise the Taliban regime. India's policies towards the Taliban too could be shaped, not by its past proximity with the Karzai and Ghani governments, but by the need to keep the Pakistani and Chinese influence under check.¹⁶ The spectre of an unstable Afghanistan yet again turning into an epicentre for terrorism, affecting the region and beyond, would not make the option of banishing Afghanistan as an area of no strategic significance would be detrimental.

At the same time, it is unlikely that the resistance movement launched by Saleh would find much overt backing. Saleh has invoked the name of Ahmad Shah Massoud, assassinated leader of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, and has called for international backing to his Panjshir-based armed movement against the Taliban. In the initial days, the group has wrested few districts from the insurgent control. At the same time, the Taliban continues to find new allies among elements within the deposed government. On 21 August 2021, Ghani's brother, Hashmat Ghani Ahmadzai, joined the Taliban and announced his support for the group.¹⁷ It has also reached out to Karzai, former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of Hiz-e-Islami. Saleh's ability to garner international support would be difficult unless he demonstrates spectacular military advances, which the projected 300,000-strong ANDSF was not capable of.

Role of the International Community

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, after his initial rant against recognising the Taliban regime,¹⁸ has revised his position to confirm that "[the United Kingdom] will work with the

¹⁵ "No democracy, only Sharia law in Afghanistan, says the Taliban", *The Hindu*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/no-democracy-only-sharia-in-afghanistan-taliban/article35986616.ece>. Accessed on 21 August 2021.

¹⁶ Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "A 'test case' for India's great power aspirations", *The Crisis in Afghanistan*, The Middle East Institute, Washington DC, 13 August 2021, [The crisis in Afghanistan | Middle East Institute \(mei.edu\)](https://www.mei.edu/the-crisis-in-afghanistan).

¹⁷ "Former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's brother pledges support to Taliban, says report", *India Today*, 21 August 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/ex-afghan-president-ashraf-ghani-brother-pledges-support-to-taliban-says-report-1843640-2021-08-21>. Accessed on 21 August 2021.

¹⁸ Laure Turner, "No one wants Afghanistan to become breeding ground for terror – PM", *BBC*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-58224383>. Accessed on 21 August 2021.

Taliban if necessary”.¹⁹ As other countries are constrained to find such need-based rationale to engage with the Taliban, it will be useful for them, however, to use the opportunity to push for a new round of intra-Afghan dialogue. The need of the Taliban leaders for legitimacy and recognition could be used to limit the imposition of the group’s regressive policies. Every effort by the non-Taliban political entities to make the new regime in Afghanistan inclusive, with strict internal mechanisms for protecting women and minorities, would have to be supported. The instrument of international aid and assistance must remain linked to the progress in this front in the near to medium term. Afghanistan cannot be abandoned yet again without huge costs for the international community.

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¹⁹ “Boris Johnson Says UK Will Work With Taliban If Necessary”, *NDTV*, 20 August 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/boris-johnson-says-uk-will-work-with-taliban-if-necessary-2515245>. Accessed on 21 August 2021.