

GLOBAL INSIGHTS

Gloom, Doom and Potential Blooms: Afghanistan in Perspective

Written by Rohil Vaidya

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An inglorious closure to the arc in the current story of Afghanistan is taking shape. Almost twenty years after declaring a ‘War on Terror’, US military troops left Afghanistan, homeward bound. While US personnel returned, American war machinery and infrastructure was left behind and only changed owners, symbolic of the larger political transformations underway in Afghanistan. American-made Humvees still patrol the streets of Kabul but the Taliban is now at the wheel. The conversation has moved away from the international realm to one far more domestic – concerned with fault-lines within the interim Taliban government, dangers to a fragile Afghan civil society, the potential for an anti-Taliban resistance, and related questions of state-building and citizen-state relations. While the embers of the Taliban offensive cool, questions around the future of the Afghan state have moved to Afghanistan’s territorial borders. The world is coming to terms with the transition and is no longer asking questions of the US in the Islamic Republic but rather of the Islamic Emirate in West Asia.

For most observers, the speed of the Taliban’s takeover was dizzying. While the world-at-large still reels from the Taliban counterpunch, taking stock and writing the right narratives is important. This blog will attempt to answer two questions: first, what fractures and fissures in the history and creation of the US-backed Afghan regime reduced it to one with almost no resistance, and second, what potential energies does the formation of the Islamic Emirate hold for politics, within and outside Afghanistan.

TALIBAN COMPLEXITY

After the US-led invasion in 2001 removed them from power, the inherent complexity within the Taliban was not well understood by those outside Afghanistan. The true nature of these loosely-defined, armed tribal-identity groups jostling for political power is important to bear in mind. In a highly decentralised political context, these armed tribal groups have fuzzy self-identities, constantly shifting alliances, relationships and objectives, based on a calculus of managing political power, influence and legitimacy. Often following the contours of tribal-identity politics, the Taliban, and the Afghan Mujahideen generally, are not monolithic organisations. This is not to mention the broader non-linearity and complexity of world politics itself, often obscured by simple descriptions offered as explanations. In order to cut through the quagmire of reality, however, (careful) approximations, assumptions and estimations are theoretical necessities.

US presence in Afghanistan spanned almost an entire generation, and millions in Afghanistan were born after the formation of the Hamid Karzai-led presidential republic in 2004. This US-backed Afghan

government did not achieve much stability. Constant explicit corruption weakened their legitimacy to govern, the Afghan Security Forces gradually fell apart from the Kabul government they were meant to defend and stabilise, and voting exercises meant to legitimate government rule often failed. Tribal identities, strengthened under the Afghan civil war, remained stronger than any larger “Afghan” national identity while suspicions around the government as a legitimate authority remained. The larger disillusionment against the US-backed Afghan government denied it the popular support needed to minimise the Taliban threat and become the popular choice. The Taliban remained relevant through tribal-connections and an on-the-ground presence, which it brought to bear in its takeover of the government.

FAILURE OF CHANGING US OBJECTIVES

The liberal democratic project under George W. Bush failed to stabilise Afghanistan as fighting persisted, despite US claims that they had accomplished their mission. The War on Terror, initially meant only as a retaliation against terrorist groups, was soon reinforced with an ethical-political project of liberal democracy building. Barack Obama signalled a shift in 2009 as objectives changed, the ‘War on Terror’ label was dropped. The US committed to an increased military presence in an initial surge designed to secure what Obama considered to be the true frontline of US-led counterterrorism, rather than the ‘distraction’ of Iraq. Ultimately, though, Obama moved to reduce the presence of the US without initiating necessary capacity-building measures that would enable the Afghan governing establishment to trend towards self-sufficiency and stability. Donald Trump followed through with the philosophy of a reduced presence, but was determined to accelerate the reduction of all US commitments to Afghanistan. His presidency saw the US strike a deal with the Taliban in 2020 to allow the peaceful exit of US personnel by May 2021 in negotiations that excluded the Afghan government. This agreement was a crucial moment for the US in Afghanistan. It signalled a complete shift from a gradual change to commitments, towards the abandonment of the American Afghan project. In a massive break from conventional US practice, the Taliban was made a legitimate discussant in the future of Afghanistan, at the expense of the Afghan government, which was suffering a legitimacy crisis already. The US wanted out and the Islamic Republic was on its own. New US president Joe Biden was dealt a poor hand in an already losing game, and in his administration’s first major embarrassment, they delayed but followed the deal forged under Trump. The world was witness to the distressing scenes of a frenzied evacuation – a stark reminder of those left behind.

BIDEN’S WITHDRAWAL LEGACY

Joe Biden had an opportunity to go back on Trump’s deal and bring the Afghan government back into discussions towards a medium-term goal of a more stable and peaceful solution. Maintaining a minimal US troop presence was also not unthinkable. Biden instead sought to end what he described as the ‘endless war’ in Afghanistan by eschewing the opportunity for more sustainable peace negotiations and going along with Trump’s plan, in tacit approval of the approach. These were by no means the decisions of the US President alone and were embedded in larger institutional and normative frameworks – those of foreign policy commitments, diplomatic traditions, popular domestic politics.

Counterterrorism was, and still is, central to US foreign policy, with an arrangement of international alliances, treaties and agreements centred around the easy-to-agree upon threat of anti-state “terrorism”. The current shift in the US outlook towards terrorism is broader and goes beyond the vagaries of individual administrations. Troubles within and without have seen the US retreat from active and explicit interventions globally, opening the US up to less boisterous security policymaking, where diplomacy and confidence-building with other nations might play a bigger role. This is not to say that the US has foregone the use of its military as global police, since significant military engagements remain active worldwide. It does, however, point to changes to the underlying philosophies of military intervention and the overtones of the

liberal democratic peace project. A less aggressively ‘liberal’ project with a focus on broader commitments is materialising and, for better or worse, will include illiberal regimes as partners, not subordinates. The diffusion of power away from the US also brings into question their ability to affect direct change in other countries, and the US will need to consider mutual accommodation as a necessary foreign policy strategy.

The US leaves behind a complicated legacy in Afghanistan. While geo-strategically most of its stated long-term goals were not met, there were glimmers of a genuine liberal transformation. The liberal democratic foundation of the Afghan government, although corrupt, still benefitted women and minorities who now face severe threats under the Taliban’s Emirate regime. The achievements of a relatively free media, an on-paper guarantee of law and freedom that might have converted in some form to reality, and the exposure of the Afghan people to a religiously-softer, modern Islamic regime have now been challenged. Despite the Taliban “making the right noises” in terms of promising protections under the rule of (Sharia) law and offering a general amnesty, their current interpretation of Sharia is still unclear and civil society is understandably worried. Human Rights Watch reported the killing of around a hundred Afghan National Security Force members across Afghan provinces, despite the Taliban’s assurance of a peaceful transition. The promises of the Taliban are widely seen to be PR stunts, highlighting their media-savvy leadership, which continues to be brutally violent in their transition to power. These hypocritical positions allow the Taliban flexibility and might make it easier for other states to engage and legitimise with the Taliban without effective international outcry.

IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Looking towards the Afghan neighbourhood, multiple loci of changing relations can be identified. Pakistan, although inconsistently, provided support to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and had a direct role in the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan. Seeing the near-evaporation of Western influence in its neighbourhood has given Pakistan much to smile about. Indian engagements with the erstwhile Afghan government were strong, affecting a geostrategic threat to Pakistan. The stronger alliance Pakistan now enjoys with the Afghan Emirate has turned this status-quo on its head. One of the major failures of the US-led intervention was its inability to coerce Pakistan into disabling their protection and support of various Mujahideen outfits, which simmered and bode their time. China, with a competitive outlook towards the West and India, welcomed the Taliban regime, with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meeting with the Taliban’s co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar after the Taliban’s movement into Kabul. However, China’s motivations seem limited to economic and commercial involvements in the region which are now possible given the US exit. Border issues, especially in the western province of Xinjiang could prove problematic for the Xi Jinping’s Chinese regime which has antagonised the Muslim-majority province with its violent and culturally imperialist rule. Russia, also a stakeholder with much to gain from the new Taliban regime, has expressed worry over the tumult and chaos in the region, focussing on maintaining a rhetoric of border security, responsible rule, and anti-terrorism. The larger short-term picture is clear in that the US and its allies receding from West Asia has opened the door for the entry of eager alternative participants looking to cut deals with the new Taliban Regime.

POTENTIAL BLOOMS

For the US and its allies, however, there are some positive takeaways. The evacuation might have looked rather different had Donald Trump won a second term, with a potentially more precipitous withdrawal earlier in 2021. Those Afghan allies evacuated from the region might have still been trapped in precarity within the new Afghanistan without their safe passage out of the country facilitated by Joe Biden in Washington. The ability of the US to bounce back from the chaos of a hastily-agreed upon ceasefire to organise and negotiate an evacuation and processing on the scale of hundreds of thousands of individuals

does signal something of a shift back towards a US-led engagement and an attempt to lead. Such international leadership was sorely missing while Donald Trump was in office. The indications are that the US under Biden is more serious about engaging in security building through alliances such as the Quad (with India, Japan and Australia) and AUKUS (with Australia and the UK) that hold potential for a more impressive US-led western presence in Asia, challenging a China that now presents a powerful alternative to US hegemony. Framing a (de-hyphenated) liberal democratic alliance, the Quad could form the basis for balancing Chinese influence and might even mitigate further democratic backsliding in previously healthier liberal democracies, like India and Japan. NATO, meanwhile, remains shaken by the Afghanistan debacle, still unsure of the US commitment to the alliance even though Biden has engaged more than Trump, so governments in Europe and Canada are looking to recalibrate their global strategic calculus to bolster their collective security, especially in light of what they perceive as growing threats from China and Russia.

While the evacuation from Afghanistan was tactically disastrous, leaving behind an unstable and dangerous legacy reminiscent of many other US-led interventions, maintaining a continued intense commitment was always a diminishing option for Washington, and US public opinion largely supported Biden's withdrawal. Looking ahead from an individual perspective, one hopes for more subtle and non-military collaborative solutions to regional issues that place primacy on diplomacy and a return to the UN's foundational motivations and philosophies. The US presence in Ethiopia within the Horn of Africa, for instance, must be reinterpreted in the context of the Afghanistan debacle. Long-standing criticisms of the US model of intervention followed by abandonment must be considered seriously for effective peace-building measures to be introduced. Joe Biden's recent statements at the UN promised modesty in mission scope, with focus on narrower issue areas and shorter-term involvements. These are mildly positive indications, but with the US, one never really knows. For now, the Taliban is still transitioning into their governance phase and ironing out initial formalities, often through brutal means. While stated to be an 'interim' government, their willingness to decentralise and democratise power is highly suspect. The Afghan people must be waiting with bated breath to see what kind of regime evolves, while the world outside watches a new member state emerge in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.



Rohil Vaidya is a Research Assistant at Global Insights and is pursuing his MA in International Relations the University of Warwick. His current interests include "middle powers" as increasingly influential actors in international relations and understanding constructivism as a theoretical lens well-equipped to contribute to the discussion of non-Western IR.

