

Instability in Afghanistan and the Prospects for Regional Connectivity

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Introduction

A new reality has emerged in Afghanistan with the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Now the international community has to find constructive ways to work with them to save Afghanistan and its people from long-term setbacks. Countries with interests in Afghanistan like the Central Asian Republics (CARs), China, Russia, Iran, India, and Pakistan will now need to negotiate and deal with the Taliban government in the likely future scenario. It might not be the most ideal circumstances most countries globally had hoped for in Afghanistan after nearly two decades under the US control. However, the way the withdrawal came about and the rapid speed at which the Taliban were able to control nearly the entire country, the international community might not have any other choice. Still, Afghanistan is an important transit point in the region connecting West, South, and Central Asia and often has been dubbed the 'Heart of Asia' providing important regional connectivity. With the collapse of the government in Afghanistan and the interim takeover of the Taliban all the regional projects now are suspended up in the air as many wonder if the Taliban can provide the stability needed for them to progress and succeed.

Rebuilding of Afghanistan post-9/11

Post invasion by the US after the 9/11 attacks, there was a major undertaking of rebuilding Afghanistan which resulted in major transitions and formidable changes. The US forged ahead to try to rebuild the country into a Western liberal democracy spending huge amounts of money on the endeavour. Still, the shadow of the Taliban could not be eradicated even by the US and its allies. Over the years, the US—along with regional players like China,

Russia, India, and Pakistan—has played its part in aiding in the development of Afghanistan into an emerging stable democracy along with sitting at peace talks in Doha with the Taliban representatives. However, all these developments in Afghanistan along with help in establishing an elected government and training its armed forces could not stop the re-emergence of the Taliban and the subsequent withdrawal of the US. For the Taliban, the US was an occupying force trying to enforce their ideology onto Afghanistan and that sentiment did help them in gathering support and their subsequent re-emergence and eventual takeover. It was just that no one expected the withdrawal to occur in such a disarray costing not just human lives but also the international prestige of the US. The haste in which the US withdrew without a proper peace settlement with either the established government or the approaching Taliban made their failure more than obvious.

US Withdrawal and its Aftershocks

Now that the Taliban have taken over, the US and its allies have frozen funds and foreign reserves amounting to \$9.4 billion held in US banks while others like the UK and Germany have suspended their aid programmes along with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the World Bank to exhibit their decision not to legitimise the Taliban.¹ Retaliation by the Taliban in the form of an order to stop the use of foreign currency within the country is just going to exasperate the eventual humanitarian crisis. Day-by-day the humanitarian crisis in the country worsens. There is an influx of refugees into other countries, many languishing in refugee camps. Those left behind are doing no better with an economic collapse imminent unless countries that have an interest in Afghanistan push for international organisations like the IMF and even the US to stop this

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financial punishment that will impact the citizens of the country more than the Taliban regime. Since early September, the US through certain operations in Afghanistan like the UN World Food Program has resumed some funding including \$200 million that will work through local staff and not the Taliban.² Besides the humanitarian crisis, there is also a fear for the rights of women in Afghanistan on the lines of the 1990s. Another reason the international community must try to work with the Taliban in an effort to ensure that the rights of women in Afghanistan are not gradually trampled upon.

Decades ago, at the height of the final major conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States during the cold war, Afghanistan was used for a proxy war between the two super powers of the time. In the end, the Soviet Union was defeated and later on collapsed, affecting the emergence of the US global dominance. Afghanistan was a collateral damage and had been forgotten to fend for itself. The takeover of the Taliban and it allowing terrorist groups a safe haven put the country once again on the radar of the West. Now that the US has withdrawn and its authority majorly eroding in the region it still can play a vital role along with China, Russia, and all of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries like the CARs, Pakistan, and Iran to ensure long-lasting peace and avert resurgence of terrorist groups.

'Heart of Asia': Afghanistan's Importance for Regional Connectivity

Besides the issue of security emanating out of an unstable Afghanistan, the region is also focused on connectivity and economic development. The primary initiative has been the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that would connect Afghanistan to the CARs, Pakistan, and China through various projects including CPEC. Other initiatives include the Central Asia Regional Cooperation Program (CAREC) with its main aim to connect the region through transit corridors making it easier for trade between countries. Other avenues involve energy projects like CASA-1000 providing hydropower to Pakistan via Afghanistan from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Just by understanding these connectivity initiatives, we can deduce that Afghanistan is indeed the 'Heart of Asia' and plays a vital role in connecting its neighbouring

countries. Its regional neighbours need to see that Afghanistan is a major transit route for energy resources like pipelines of oil and gas as well as power transmission lines. For the CARs, it is the gateway to the sea for the expansion of their trade and Pakistan a gateway to Central Asia. China also has a vested interest in the country wanting to tap into its natural resources as well as benefitting from its potential as part of its BRI.

Afghanistan as a Gateway to Regional Connectivity for Pakistan

Pakistan—sharing a 2,670 km long eastern border with the country along with cultural and historical ties—has a vested interest in a stable Afghanistan. Pakistan has had better relations with the Taliban in the past and will hope that the same can be repeated. Still, the new Taliban might not be as willing to listen to the Pakistani government as they had in the past. Still, Pakistan is hoping to revive trade with Afghanistan that declined from during President Ghani's time in office by 80 per cent and overall in the last decade from \$2- \$1.5 billion annually to \$754 million in 2020.³ Bilateral trade and security for transit trade towards CARs are one of the main goals for Pakistan in hopes of forging stronger ties with the current Taliban government at present.

For Pakistan, forging substantial links with the CARs is vital and the most economically feasible and viable routes happen to pass through Afghanistan. Using CPEC to create a transit corridor and a trans-shipment hub connecting CARs through Afghanistan to Pakistan and vice versa could lead to an estimated \$5 to \$10 billion increase to Pakistan's economy. Although an unstable Afghanistan might curb the strong foothold India has been trying to establish in the country, the long-term value for Pakistan is a stable Afghanistan that makes its pathway into Central Asia more viable. To reconnect Afghanistan with the region economically, all states will need to be involved to ensure that Afghanistan is not pushed to the brink of instability and chaos. Therefore, a stable and prosperous Afghanistan is in the best interest of Pakistan in the long term. Internationally, Pakistan has been actively working towards international engagement with Afghanistan and the Taliban. In this year's UN General Assembly

on September 24 Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan called for the world community to work with the Taliban government and help the country with its much needed humanitarian aid.⁴ The PM further reiterated these sentiments at the SCO and CSTO joint forum where he stated, "The international community must reach out to reaffirm their support and solidarity with the Afghan people at this critical juncture. Sustained international humanitarian assistance and economic support will save lives and underpin stability. Allowing Afghanistan's frozen assets to be used for the welfare of the Afghan people will also be a step in the right direction."⁵

China: The emerging Player in Afghanistan

Even before the Taliban takeover, China's interests had been growing in Afghanistan and it played a vital role in the peace talks between the previous government, the Taliban, and the regional states involved along with the US. On July 28th, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and a Taliban delegation met and set on course Taliban assurances for protection of Chinese interests in Afghanistan that included major investments in development and reconstruction.⁶

These negotiations proved vital for the country as soon as the US withdrawal took place. By September 2021, China was already calling for humanitarian aid and pledged \$31 million for assistance that included food, Covid-19 vaccines, and other medicines.⁷ The Chinese Foreign Minister Yi criticised the US for freezing Afghanistan's assets at the virtual conference of G20 foreign ministers on 23rd September and China subsequently sent its first instalment of Chinese aid.⁸

China's interests in Afghanistan are not entirely altruistic as the country has what China is interested in, opportunities to build infrastructure and industry building. Along with that, China is also interested in the mineral resources found in the country that have been hardly explored to full potential. Afghanistan is said to have rare elements and vast reserves of silver, gold, platinum, iron, uranium, copper, and lithium among others, and these are estimated to be worth \$1 to \$3 trillion.⁹ The Taliban are willing to work with the Chinese to give

them access to these resources to generate revenue.

Indian Investment in Danger?

An unstable Afghanistan is a major loss for India as it has over the years invested more than \$3 billion in the country and was engaged in bilateral trade amounting to about \$1.5 billion.¹⁰ The Taliban regime coming into power is a big blow for India's strategic interests in Afghanistan. This strategic location is very significant for regional connectivity, which is one of the reasons India had invested so much time and money on Afghanistan. This investment also included more than 400 infrastructure projects across the country. To try to salvage its investment and bring attention to the approaching humanitarian crisis, India has decided to call regional neighbours to come for the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on 10th November. Although the talks are about the instability in Afghanistan and the crisis that is looming ahead, India is very much interested in finding a way to protect its interests and hopes to find a way to work with the Taliban in terms of bilateral trade. It has also invited Pakistan and China to this meeting. Whether they would be able or willing to join could also impact how impactful the meeting would be for finding a way forward in helping Afghanistan stabilise.

Conclusion: Creating a Stable Afghanistan

Although regional connectivity for all the countries neighbouring Afghanistan and its extended neighbourhood is important, without it being stable this is unlikely to happen. Unless countries in the neighbourhood and globally are willing to accept the new reality of the Taliban and are willing to help Afghanistan, it could lead to a humanitarian crisis and further deterioration of rights of women in the country. Also, without trying to find a way to work with the Taliban most other countries that have invested in infrastructure projects like China and India and countries that need Afghanistan as a transit for trade with other countries in the region like CARs, Iran, and Pakistan will not be going ahead without hindrance and economic loss. A stable Afghanistan is also imperative for its immediate neighbours as an influx of refugees along with

dangers of cross border terrorism are a major worry for all. Even though states like Pakistan, China, and India have varying interests in Afghanistan, they would be best served by finding a way to work and

coexist with the Taliban and urge the international community to help stabilise the country. This is the only way prospects for any kind of productive regional connectivity can materialise.

Notes and References

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