

## Afghanistan: The Terrible New Game

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15<sup>th</sup> September 2021

On being elected President Biden boastfully announced that America was back. Instead, the stunning events of the past weeks have done untold damage to America's credibility and reliability in the eyes of its partners and foes alike. The rapid collapse of the Ghani administration and Afghan Army has, rightfully, prompted a great deal of criticism, finger-pointing and accusations of betrayal across the political spectrum. Make no mistake - The hard-won progress of the past twenty years will be washed away by the Taliban's strict version of Sharia law, the interpretation of which we have already been assured has not changed. That process has already begun with earnest behind the media-savvy façade of press conferences and crocodile smiles. Only the desperate scenes at Hamid Karzai International Airport accurately portray the depth of despair being felt across the country.

Western commentators have been quick to draw parallels of the withdrawal to the Fall of Saigon in 1975 and in some ways it is correct. However, that retreat delivered Vietnam firmly and definitively into the Soviet bloc, where it stayed until the collapse of the USSR. In a multipolar world, Afghanistan's future will be much less certain, sitting at the centre of a Venn diagram of competing geopolitical interests. As the West retrenches, focuses on its own safety and the inevitable wave of refugees heading north and west in the coming years, others will now seek to fill the vacuum left in and around the country by the collapse of the Western-backed administration.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told reporters last month that, *"we don't want any internal or external enemies."* This impossible assertion should be read in two very different ways. On the surface it seems an overture of peace and reconciliation to all men (and even women at a push). Domestically, however, the wider population will read it as "get on side or suffer the consequences". With the Taliban itself split into numerous factions, the worst excesses and instincts of its powerful regional commanders will undoubtedly prevail in the coming months as they take revenge and settle old scores against their tribal and religious foes. The extrajudicial execution of musicians and comedians in recent days underlines this fact. The Taliban will strive to be the sole voice in Afghanistan and representative on the international stage.

Abroad, it is a stark warning to those who would once again seek to topple or undermine the Taliban and an invitation to those less scrupulous to do business. For the past two hundred years Afghanistan has faced constant meddling, whether it be from the USSR/Russia, the UK, the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan, each with their own set of aims, fears and priorities. One must now also factor in the influence China. The future will be no different with foreign stakeholders only too keen to gain an upper hand in the region. Until now, America's presence in the region prevented the creation of a proxy war similar to those that we have seen in Libya, Syria, the Donbass and Yemen. That relative balance has now been disrupted. The Taliban will naturally have foreign policy ideas of their own, but how they will choose to interact with the world is as yet unknown. Countries that have chosen to retain diplomatic presence in Afghanistan are,

by remaining, already under starter's orders. It's geographic position and underdeveloped economic potential, in the form of precious minerals, and oil, mean that it is simply too important to ignore. That is not to say, however, that the journey will be simple.

Russia and China are in a quandary. Unsurprisingly, the retreat of the West has been met with glee in many quarters. Russian news reported President Ghani fleeing with cars and helicopters full of money, thereby painting the image of a fallen dictator and America's latest stooge. However, it knows the issues Afghanistan can create for Russia. After all, the USSR's ambitions in the country disintegrated faster than the Coalition that followed them. Islamist extremism could spread (along with the continued supply of heroin – whether the Taliban opts to prioritise religious doctrine over one of their most vital cash cows is yet to be seen) into Central Asia and the Caucasus, reigniting local insurgencies. No wonder Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have already held talks with the Taliban to this end. Although the Taliban has been invited to both Moscow (and Beijing) for closed talks, since 2017 in the case of Russia, there is unease at the Taliban's close links to Al-Qaeda and their ability to export terrorism. The divisions within the Taliban mean that there can be no guarantee that anti-Kremlin fighters will not benefit from the new reality – divisions between the diplomatic elements in Kabul and provincial warlords are already spilling out into the public sphere. Without unity these divisions will help to serve a vast collection of terrorist groups operating in the "gaps" handsomely. The likes of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan have seen huge numbers of fighters leave to the Middle East since their own defeat in the 1990s. With the collapse of ISIS' territorial possessions in Syria and Iraq, Afghanistan now offers a safe harbour for funding and training for the next phase of conflict, in the Middle East or at home. Even Pakistan, a safe haven for the Taliban and its leaders for decades, may also feel the blowback from such a regime across the mountains.

China may choose to characterise Xinjiang and the issue of its persecuted Uighur population in a similar light. This perceived threat may be useful to Beijing, Moscow and others as the countries bordering Afghanistan will be increasingly concerned at the destabilising threat across their borders (both of an extremist and narcotic nature) and seek further safety in the warm embrace of Mother Russia or another superpower. It is not a coincidence that on the 5<sup>th</sup> August Russia carried out joint military drills in Tajikistan

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and Uzbekistan. This is good for expanding regional influence, but there is a dichotomy in that it must also exaggerate the regional threat that the Taliban, or at least Afghanistan the landmass, poses. Friendly overtures to the Taliban will be on the menu, something that the Taliban may likely wish to reciprocate, but ultimately can never be trusted.

China is, of course, greatly expanding its military presence in its sparsely populated western regions, thereby extending its influence against India and securing additional security for its One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR). India itself is in advanced talks to establish a base in Tajikistan, thereby outflanking China. And so, a new type of Great Game is born free from US interference – not exactly what Biden had in mind supposedly returning America to the fold. It is these types of divisions and competing interests that will drive the geopolitics of the region for decades to come. Afghanistan is a key piece in that jigsaw and not only to those above.

Where the major players in the Middle East are concerned, Afghanistan represents a new frontier into which they can pour their billions. The funding of terrorist groups across the Middle East from the likes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, albeit through private rather than predominantly government channels, will inevitably lead to another arm of an already multi-faceted conflict. Although Saudi Arabia's relationship with the Taliban has cooled significantly since 9/11 at a government level, the geostrategic placement of the country means it cannot be ignored. The withdrawal of the West will only serve to remove the remaining sliver of restraint from their allies and enemies alike. Iran, for its part, will take any issue with the persecution of the Shia minority of Afghanistan that will likely follow Taliban rule. Their traditional enemies, long-standing supporters and funders of Al-Qaeda will naturally look to bolster their presence in a country that shares an enormous border of almost 1,000km with Iran. Saudi Arabia will, however, still have to keep in mind their American allies. Although the Taliban have promised they will not harbour foreign fighters, there is no bold division between the Taliban and jihadi groups with similar aims. That promise simply cannot be taken seriously.

The reshuffling of the pack will throw up numerous opportunities and threats across Central Asia and the Middle East. The effects of these will cover the globe. The inevitable return of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban's

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links to like-minded groups will stir up a great deal of unease, not just in the West but even those attempting to ingratiate themselves into the new power structures. At present, the Taliban have a blank canvas. Between 1996 and 2001 only three countries recognised the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan – Saudi Arabia, UAE and Pakistan. Now, a plethora of wealthy and powerful suitors are lining up. Despite their initial pleas for acceptance on the international stage, the Taliban has not changed its dogma (except perhaps in understanding the power of modern media). The world has changed, however, which leaves open the question of how the Taliban will choose to interact and deal with it.

For the West, much of its influence in Afghanistan will now hinge on being able to continue the aid and support work for ordinary citizens. The fact that 80% of the previous government's budget came in the form of aid funded by overseas donors should not be forgotten and will be key to any engagement going forward<sup>1</sup>. For the West, any kind of recognition of the Taliban would be seen as indirectly legitimising them - something that may be too much to stomach so soon. The Soviets eventually managed it, albeit over thirty years later. And yet that may be the only avenue left open to the West - a seat at the table and a chance to negate the very worst excesses of the regime, particularly as the economic and social (in particular, food security) structures of the country collapse and affect the abilities of the Taliban to govern. Any future discussions with the Taliban are going to have to resolve the issue of legitimacy sooner or late. No Western politician, however, would concede such a notion so soon. Others may not be so discerning. And so, with depressing historical monotony, the wheel of history turns and the so-called "Great Game" starts again.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9276/CBP-9276.pdf>

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