Post US Withdrawal Evolving Situation in Afghanistan - Implications and Choices for Pakistan

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Balochistan Think Tank Network
At BUITEMS, Airport Road, Quetta. Phone: 081-2873345-2873346 Email: bttn@bttn.org.pk
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Pakistan unwittingly became an ally and frontline state in America’s so-called war on terror as it could not have fought the juggernaut of America’s military supported by some 29 countries. US on its own, bestowed the dubious title of Pakistan becoming a Non-NATO strategic ally. Thus, it started a vengeful terror campaign unleashed against Pakistan by Taliban living mostly in erstwhile FATA. They became known as Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Following religious Takfiri dogma, TTP unleashed a terror campaign against Pakistan attacking both civil and military assets. They were supported by India’s RAW, some major powers intelligence agencies, Baloch/Brahui separatist from Balochistan and even sectarian terrorists. In the name of attacking TTP in Pakistan, US employing drones attacked suspected TTP locations along Pakistan’s tribal areas for years, adding to human causalities already being caused by TTP. Pakistan was compelled to fight an internal war against terrorism and extremism, paying very heavy cost in men and material. Pakistan facilitated talks between US and Taliban and finally the US and its allies disorderly withdrew from Afghanistan under the Peace Deal with Taliban. The Taliban, already holding some 80% of rural Afghanistan requested the Afghan army not to fight and surrender, who obliged having no heart to fight for the puppet regime of Ashraf Ghani. Within days the Taliban’s uncontested drive ended up by taking over Kabul on 15 August 2021, while Ghani made good his escape a night before. This was not expected by anyone, least of all by the all-powerful US, who felt humiliated, let down and interestingly blamed Pakistan for their debacle. The Taliban wasted no time and formed a Taliban based cabinet to rule, excluding minorities and women. However, Taliban regime has not been recognized by any country, not even Pakistan. The world was not ready for this quick transition and is not happy by the victory of ragtag Taliban resistance and political Islam. Besides, the US/West are smarting due to the humiliated escape, not withdrawal, and are behaving vindictive. US has not abdicated her strategic goals and geopolitical ambitions which are directly clashing with China/Russia. US is now trying to punish Taliban regime, and possibly even Pakistan, as it needs a scapegoat and making new alliances in haste to more aggressively contain China in Indo-Pacific region. Pakistan is once again at the crossroads of history while the world is keenly watching its role in Afghanistan. Pakistan has the unenviable role of managing the undoable demands of US, keeping the headstrong Taliban friendly who must also avoid a collapse, and ensuring its own short/long term national security and interests. A strategic gap of legitimacy and governance has emerged due to failure of the US to ensure peaceful transfer of power and
haphazard evacuation from Afghanistan. The evolving situation in Afghanistan is multi-faceted, has critical implications for the region and needs to be addressed in entirety. This study is a comprehensive analysis of the evolving global strategic environment vis-à-vis the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan, with a view to arrive at recommendations for policymakers of Pakistan. The Research Theme titled *Afghanistan’s Evolving Situation* is at page No. 3 & 4. The Research Team for this policy paper is as follows:

1. Brig Agha Ahmad Gul (R), Consultant/Coordinator-Chief Editor
2. Dr. Zafar Khan, Executive Director

3. **Part I.**
The Evolving Situation in Afghanistan & Prospects for Sino-US Competition - Implications for Pakistan and Policy Recommendations

   Sikander Azam Khan and Sher Ali (Research Officers)
   Supervised by Dr. Zafar Khan, Executive Director and Miss Hanana Zarrar, Associate Director

4. **Part II.**
US withdrawal from Afghanistan – Interests of Major Players and Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

   Aadersh Hamza, Rafi Ullah, and Samand Khan (Research Officers)
   Supervised by Miss Maria Malik, Director Research

5. **Part III.**
Afghanistan after US Withdrawal - Possible Scenarios and Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

   Mujeeb ur Rehman, Ajmal Khan, and Abdul Hadi (Research Officers)
   Supervised by Dr. Aziz Ahmad, Director Research and Dr. Anwar Khan, Associate Director

6. **Part IV.**
Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

   By Faculty of Research BTTN
Executive Summary

This study comprehensively analyses the evolving global strategic environment vis-à-vis the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan. Due to many variables and several stakeholders and not enough information, the validity of recommendations is cautiously placed at about 3 months after which the entire analysis must be reviewed. This study comprises of four Parts. Part I deals with the *Evolving Situation in Afghanistan and Prospects of Sino-US Competition*. The socio-economic and political evolving situation in Afghanistan is precarious. Sino-US competition has intensified and a potential of confrontation exists as the geopolitical ambitions of US have not changed. The two decades long war has ended and the Taliban are back in power, nevertheless a political power vacuum has been created. China is seeking its economic and political interests particularly the economic security through Afghanistan as part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Taliban, on the other hand, are eying China for foreign economic assistance and recognition of its government. The post-withdrawal period will be a new phase of competition between China and the US. Afghanistan is grappling with legitimacy, a post-war economy which is highly wobbly and facing burning issues of human rights of minorities and women. The fallout of Taliban’s failure will be felt by Afghans and then by Pakistan. A number of policies are required to be followed to ensure Pakistan’s vital national interests are not compromised. Part II deals with *US Withdrawal from Afghanistan - Interests of Major Players, Evolving Scenarios and Implications for Pakistan*. Afghanistan has critical importance for China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, the US, India and Central Asian countries across the River Oxus. Taliban themselves and each stakeholder can greatly influence the evolving situation in Afghanistan both negatively as well as positively and create challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. Pakistan should adopt a balanced approach in courting the major players with regard to the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Irrespective of the future reality, Pakistan must prepare to manage each possible scenario in order to protect and promote its national interests. Part III deals with, *Afghanistan after American Withdrawal - Possible Scenarios and Implications for China Pakistan Economic Corridor and Pakistan*. Afghanistan’s evolving situation both domestic and foreign, is too fluid to predict with any certainty the emerging state of global and regional dynamics in politics, economy, and security. The most basic and perhaps also the most challenging scenario to
form hypotheses is the emerging state of Afghanistan itself. Afghanistan’s internal stability and peace itself would evoke different responses from the regional countries and world powers. The US withdrawal does not imply that the US has abdicated its goals in this region. Whichever socio-economic and political scenario emerges in Afghanistan due to internal/external strategic dynamics; it will have direct impact on Pakistan and CPEC. The political vacuum in Afghanistan has serious implications for Afghanistan, the region and Pakistan. Pakistan should be prepared to manage all the adverse as well as positive developments by formulating appropriate policies, which are recommended. Part IV describes, Policy Recommendations for Pakistan. This is a distilled summary of the recommendations suggested in aforementioned Three Parts.
Afghanistan Evolving Situation

1. Owing to American withdrawal, situation in Afghanistan remains fluid. The Afghan national government, struggling to establish legitimacy among different factions of Afghan society, is steadily losing control. Conversely, Taliban are gaining territorial control in different parts of the country, posing direct threat to the central government and Taliban do not seem to accommodate each other on a negotiated settlement. The impending civil war may not remain confined to Afghanistan.

2. The contemporary global strategic environment, which is marred by confrontation among U.S., China and Russia, directly impacts the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Instead of ensuring a peaceful transition, the Biden administration has rushed for the exit, leaving Afghanistan to its fate. Pakistan can be the hardest hit should Afghanistan descent into chaos. India which is being raised by the U.S. as a counter weight to China, is behaving as a spoiler -- further exacerbating Pakistan's security dilemma.

3. In these circumstances, Afghanistan will not only face further devastation but will also be denied the benefits of its potential role as a hub for regional connectivity where sustained Chinese investments in Afghanistan and connectivity prospects under the BRI can become costlier. It is in this context that there is a need to comprehensively study the evolving global strategic environment vis-a-vis situation in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan. Following questions to be addressed during the study.

4. How the interplay of global geo-political environment is affecting the evolving situation in Afghanistan?
   a. What would be the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan post-withdrawal?
   b. What are the possible scenarios of U.S.-China confrontation in view of their recent engagements especially with regards to Quad?

5. What are the interests of major players, e.g. U.S., Russia, China, India, Iran, Afghan Government, Taliban and Northern Alliance etc., in Afghanistan post U.S. withdrawal?
   a. What will be the implications for India and how will it respond to loss of space in Afghanistan?
   b. How will China-India confrontation evolve and what are its driving factors? How will it unfold and what is there in it for Pakistan?
6. What are the likely scenarios emerging out of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, implications and policy recommendations for Pakistan under each scenario?
   a. How fast is the situation in Afghanistan is expected to unfold? What are the possible scenarios and how each will impact security situation in Pakistan?
   b. How can the withdrawal be potentially used to scuttle CPEC?
7. It is requested that this study may be completed earliest but not later than mid/end September 2021.
Part I

The Evolving Situation in Afghanistan & Prospects for Sino-US Competition - Implications For Pakistan and Policy Recommendations

Abstract

This part seeks to study the evolving situation in Afghanistan and likely Sino-US intensified competition. First, under the lens of neo-realism, this paper analyzes the intensified Sino-US competition and potential confrontation Post US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. As of now, the two decades long war has ended and the Taliban are back in power, but due to non-recognition by the world, a power vacuum exists in Afghanistan. Before assuming that the United States has fully withdrawn from Afghanistan with no coercive application of force likely, one must analyze the US and its allies’ interests in Afghanistan. What was the true aim of US invasion of Afghanistan and why did the stated objectives kept changing? It is clear now that Osama Bin Laden was an initial excuse to invade the ill-equipped Taliban’s regime and the true strategic objective was to establish a strategic presence in the heartland of Asia for multipurpose. That, the US could not subdue the freedom loving Afghans, finally forced them to vacate Afghanistan. Second, when it comes to the broader US-China competing strategies, China cannot ignore Afghanistan being its adjacent neighbor. China’s economic and political interests in Afghanistan as part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are therefore, obvious. The Taliban, on the other hand, are eying China for foreign economic assistance and recognition of its government by establishing diplomatic ties. The US post-withdrawal period appears to be a new phase of great powers competition between China and US having critical implications for Pakistan. This part of the paper attempts to provide policy recommendations for Pakistan.

Introduction

The year 2021 has witnessed an end to twenty-year long war in Afghanistan by the US followed by the collapse of Afghan government, the Taliban’s blistering advance resulting into seizure of Kabul and the regime change in the war-torn country. This evolving situation in Afghanistan has spurred debate among the international observers since the fall of Ashraf Ghani’s government. The
withdrawal of the US and the NATO forces from Afghanistan has created a power vacuum leading to competition between global and regional powers. Each major and regional power has critical interests and wants to extend its sphere of influence in Afghanistan and ultimately in the region. The rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan is leading to foreign policy shift amongst many regional countries that are likely to establish cordial friendly ties with the Taliban government. As the US military forces started evacuating from Afghanistan, questions arise if the US has achieved its objectives and more importantly the objectives for sustaining peace and stability in Afghanistan. The US invaded Afghanistan claiming that it would eliminate terrorists’ safe havens from the country and defeating the perceived terrorists as part of the then US led war on terrorism. This aim kept changing to nation building, democracy, and ensuring political stability in Afghanistan.

After withdrawing from Afghanistan, the US has aggressively focused on China in the Asia-Pacific region, which it has now started calling Indo-Pacific, thus intensifying rivalry between them. The post withdrawal scenario is presenting China both opportunities and challenges.\(^1\) When the Taliban government came into power in 1996, China at that time did not recognize the Taliban regime. However, pursuing its political, security and economic interest in Afghanistan, China is closely observing the evolving situation of Afghanistan and is likely to establish ties with the Taliban government.\(^2\) China’s foreign direct investment in the country could provide Beijing an additional source of political influence, but stability in Afghanistan remains the key for the Chinese political and economic interests. Moreover, a peaceful and stable Afghanistan is pivotal to connect Central Asian states that are interested in developing trade activities through Pakistani ports in the Arabian Sea.\(^3\)

The post-withdrawal period is appearing to be a new phase of great power competition between China and the United States since the US is shifting its global strategy from counterterrorism to

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competition among global major powers, particularly against China.\textsuperscript{4} It is imperative to note that containment of China is the top priority of US foreign policy. If China establishes firm ties with Taliban government and expands BRI and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan, it is likely to face intensified competition with the US and its existing/potential regional allies. Instability in Afghanistan has always disturbed peace in Pakistan. Hence, it is important to evaluate implications of the post US withdrawal for Pakistan and provide policy options in order to manage emerging challenges.

**Afghanistan: Post US Withdrawal Scenario**

With the end of two-decades US occupation of Afghanistan and its “war on terror”, Taliban are now back in power. As the US and the NATO forces withdrew, Afghanistan rapidly fell to the Taliban. The withdrawal of US military forces has resulted in huge political shift. Taliban’s return to power has outplayed the western forces, providing opportunities to regional players to establish friendly ties with the new interim Afghan government that is currently dominated by Taliban\textsuperscript{5}. After taking control of the Afghan Capital, the Taliban announced the formation of an interim government on 7 September. However, it does not represent the inclusiveness of females and other ethnic groups which the Taliban had pledged in their earlier mandate towards the formation of such a government. One hopes that the interim Taliban set up will consider forming an inclusive Afghan government comprising both the ethnicity and gender balance.

The US intervened in Afghanistan after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The US intervention of Afghanistan was aimed at eliminating terrorist safe havens from Afghanistan, particularly the Al-Qaeda network which without evidence had been declared responsible for 9/11 attack. As a result of the US and NATO forces invasion, the Taliban regime was ousted. After having been at war for near 20 years, the US and the Taliban signed the historic agreement on February 29, 2020 in Doha, Qatar, that was intended to be an initial step toward an intra-Afghan peace deal. This peace agreement stipulates that the Taliban will prevent the use of Afghan territory by any group or individual against the US and its allies and that the US would withdraw its troops


from Afghanistan. A New phase of great power competition between the US and China could be tested in the post-NATO Afghanistan, as China seeks commitments from the Taliban government to prevent Islamist support to separatist Uighurs in the Xingjian province, in return of Chinese recognition of the Taliban and economic aid to the war-torn country.

**Power Vacuum in Afghanistan and Race for Dominance**

The withdrawal of US military forces has created a political vacuum, leading to competition between regional players which are desperate to extend their sphere of influence in the geopolitically critical country. Historically, Afghanistan is known for being at the center for the “Great Game” of the 19th Century and more recently it is once again pushed towards the similar competing imperatives amidst the emerging Asian powers on the one hand and the US supported QUAD’s formation on the other.

**China’s Policy towards Taliban**

After the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan and the collapse of Afghan regime, China evacuated its embassy from Afghanistan amid violent struggle in 1992. After the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996, China had not established diplomatic ties with the Taliban regime. The Taliban’s fundamentalist-tribal nature, linkages with Al-Qaeda, and the suspicion generating relations with Uyghur militants of China were the factors which widened the gap between China and the then Taliban regime. With the Taliban back in power now, China is dealing with them this time, tempered with the lessons learnt from the past. As the Taliban were approaching to take over Kabul, China started strengthening diplomatic relationship with the Taliban. China hosted a Taliban delegation in July, 2021 and since then China has maintained that it respects the will of the people of the Afghanistan. China played constructive role in promoting political settlement of the Afghan issue, and since then it has been in contact with the concerned Taliban group. It has

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expressed its willingness to develop good-neighborliness and cordial relationships with Taliban-led Afghanistan.\(^7\)

The Taliban government is eying China for recognition and economic aid. Arguably, political recognition from China will hugely benefit the group, but Beijing is cautious. China has no intention to send military troops to Afghanistan, nor will it attempt to fill the power vacuum created as a result of US withdrawal. Though China wants to extend its political influence in Afghanistan, it is also pursuing wait-and-see policy. It indicates to meet the wishes of the Taliban government, but at the same time China wishes to ensure that its own political and economic interest are guaranteed, and its security concerns are addressed.

Apparently, China is likely to recognize the Taliban government in near future. However, due to its security concerns arising from Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, which China has declared as a separatist and terrorist threat in the northwestern Xinjiang province, it appears hesitant unless the Taliban guarantee no interference. The interim Taliban statements give positive message to Chinese authorities. In July, Taliban spokesperson Sohail Shaheen noted, “We care about the oppression of Muslims, be it in Palestine, in Myanmar, or in China, and we care about the oppression of non-Muslims anywhere in the world. But what we are not going to do is interfere in China's internal affairs.” During their first-ever press conference on August 16, 2021 after seizing power, the Taliban spokesperson said, “We want to reassure that Afghanistan will not be used against anybody.” Moreover, Taliban have also assured China that Afghanistan will welcome the infrastructure and investment projects. If Afghanistan becomes sufficiently stable and peaceful, China is likely to extend its Belt and Road Initiative to Afghanistan.\(^8\) China has announced to provide 3 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Afghanistan, as well as emergency humanitarian aid worth $31 million.\(^9\)

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QUAD’s Role in Afghanistan Post US Withdrawal

The QUAD, which is officially called “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue”, is a strategic alliance comprising four countries, India, Australia, Japan, and the US. The alliance aims to exchange strategic intelligence and conduct joint military exercises. Officially, the alliance aims at cooperating for safeguarding joint security and other interests in the Asia-Pacific region. However, observers believe that the forum is formed to contain/counter China’s military and economic rise. Thus, China deems this strategic forum as an attempt to contain its geo-economic ambitions and looks at the alliance as a possible “Asian NATO” in the making. In addition to this, Australia, UK and the US (AUKUS) have formed a new QUAD-type strategic alliance. The AUKUS will provide Australia technology to develop nuclear-powered submarines aiming at not only expanding the strategic influence of Australia as part of initial QUAD, but also containing the perceived expansion of China.10

The QUAD members have keenly invested in Afghanistan in the past and are likely to invest in the future as well. India has contributed $3 billion in reconstruction and agriculture development projects in Afghanistan. The Afghan-India Friendship Dam is a major investment expected to produce 45MW of power and able to irrigate almost 75,000 hectares of land. India also invested in the Chahbahar Port in Iran’s Seistan-Balochistan province that made connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia.11

The geopolitical shift has created serious concerns for India. India is worried about its investment and trade in Afghanistan. As one source reports that, “India has already invested close to USD three billion in aid and reconstruction activities in the country.” It was in India’s interest to see that the US stayed longer in Afghanistan. With the US military and NATO in the final stages of bringing home the remaining troops by September 11, 2021, however, India needs to prepare for

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The burial of another superpower “in the graveyard of empires” resets the regional security balance in South Asia with New Delhi being left to make some tough choices. At Afghanistan Conference 2020, which took place in Geneva virtually, Japan pledged to give $720 million to Afghanistan for development and reconstruction for the next four years. Also, Australia has been actively engaged to support Afghanistan’s war-torn economy and till now has contributed $750 million in development assistance since 2001. On September 11, 2021, talks were held between the Indian and Australian ministers in Delhi. Developments in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal were the main agenda. The two countries vowed to deepen their security cooperation, particularly after the Taliban’s seized power in Afghanistan.

**China’s Interests/Chinese Ambitions in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is often termed as the “graveyard of empires”. A famous historian Paul Kennedy laments that history is the rise and fall of empires; however, in the case of Afghanistan the latter case is appropriate to define the dynamics of major power struggle in Afghanistan. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the country is once again free from foreign troops and Taliban back in power, who fought against the US for 20 long years. Previously, the Great Britain (1839-1842), the Soviet Union (1979-1989), and now the US have lost zeal to fight the un-fightable war in Afghanistan. Planted by the US from Syria, the ISIS is also starting to deepen its fangs in Afghanistan. There is uncertainty in Afghanistan region and the power struggle is imminent by major actors. China especially wants to broaden its geo-economic pursuits, particularly BRI in the region including Afghanistan.

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16 Paul, 348
Ever since the world is in multipolarity phase,\textsuperscript{17} the race amongst major powers is imminent. China being the rising power has shown its interest to project its rise peacefully. However, its rise is being challenged by the erstwhile sole-superpower, the US, who seeks to contain/contest the Chinese-rise in the region/globally and is trying to maintain status quo. BRI is the contesting project between China and the US for regional dominance.

BRI (previously, One Belt and One Road) is China`s topmost project seeking the connectivity of 3 continents, Asia, Africa, and Europe, once termed, “the Earth Island” focusing both on land and maritime routes to meet its peaceful growth of trade and economic rise. The term BRI was coined by President Xi Jinping in 2013, who sketched his motivation from the Silk Road constructed by Han dynasty 2000 years ago, a trade route connecting China with Mediterranean via Eurasia for centuries.\textsuperscript{18} The project (BRI) seeks the Chinese economic ambitions and partnering with the neighboring and regional countries among which Afghanistan holds the central position. China shares a 47-mile-long border with Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor and is strategically important for Chinese ambitions of peaceful rise.

Till now, 138 countries have become involved in the BRI project. The deals and agreements China made with its counterparts are flexible in nature, likewise, the states which are reciprocating connectivity with China are making BRI a win-win situation for the parties involved.

With the current regime change in Afghanistan and Taliban in power, China has three major opportunities inside the country. First, to carry out mega development projects on the rare-earth metals and minerals. Second, to develop and accelerate the trade routes and BRI, and third is to help manage and develop Uyghur minority group, an ethnic community living in Xingjian. Afghanistan holds vast reserves of rare-earth metals, minerals and other natural resources. It includes gold, silver, platinum, iron-ore, bauxite, zinc, and lithium estimated net worth of US $ 1

\textsuperscript{17} A concept of distribution of power in which two or more than two states possess the equal capacity militarily, economically and culturally influencing the world dynamics.

\textsuperscript{18} Richard Ghiasy, \textit{The Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia Regional Impact and the Evolution} (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp 265-289.
With such vast market of trade value, a peaceful Afghanistan is in China’s interest to expand the BRI project.

However, BRI has evoked grave security concern of the west especially US and the G7. Hu Jintao declared in 2003 that “certain major powers have intended on controlling the Malacca Strait, which will give them the ability to cut-off energy supplies to China.”20 The Strait of Malacca connects the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean through South China Sea between Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. China’s progress has been curtailed inside the region. The neighboring countries are skeptical about the China’s role in expanding its exclusive economic zone and territorial expansion by creating man-made islands breaching their interests and even sovereignty. Meanwhile, the US is taking advantage of the situation by striking new alliances and encouraging regional countries to challenge China.

On the contrary, China has been reducing its dependence on imported energy through energy efficiencies and harnessing alternative sources of power, investing in the pipelines that bypass the Malacca Strait, and building credible naval forces capable of securing China’s Sea Line of Communication (SLOCs). Meanwhile, China wants to counter US and lessening its dependency on the Malacca Strait and is focusing more on BRI because its state Xinjiang can connect with Indian Ocean through Pakistan. Thus, China is securing its imports from Africa and the Middle East that will reach its territory through Indian Ocean/Pakistan.

Chinese interests are widely served by investing in the port of Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Chittagong (Bangladesh). All of it is possible due to China’s investment in these countries and securing its broader interests. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean is becoming a multipolar security space, where it is largely perceived that China’s presence is challenging Indian aspirations for a regional dominance and power projection.

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China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

With the shifting alignments in world politics, old allies are now the new rivals, and the case of Pakistan and the US is no different. However, Pakistan’s help in US winning the Cold War and resulting into the disintegration of the Soviet Union notwithstanding, the US is blaming Pakistan for its defeat in Afghanistan and consequent withdrawal. That Pakistan suffered more than 80,000 civil/military/para-military causalities and over US$100 billion economic loss through domestic terrorism triggered because of the US war in Afghanistan over 20 years, is brushed aside by the US. Pakistan knew that its alliance with the US was not working out for either of the party (Pak-US), especially after the US entered a defense alliance with India. It was inevitable that Pakistan would get closer to longtime friend and neighbor, China. This friendship resulted into a grand geo-economic strategy of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC initiated in 2013), uplifting and boosting both countries’ economy.

CPEC is a mega project between China and Pakistan with net worth of $62 billion as of 2020 under the BRI flagship. This project is aimed at regional connectivity and economic integration of the South Asian countries, Pakistan being the major beneficiary. The CPEC aims to focus on energy projects, special economic zones and construction of Gwadar port in Balochistan.

With such massive investment, China seeks to neutralize/lessen the adverse strategic effect of the Malacca Strait in South China Sea as a choking point. China requires freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean to meet its energy needs as well as trade and commerce ambitions to become the major market for the world. CPEC provides the option of bypassing eastern Indian Ocean and provides easy access to the neighboring regional countries too, with major beneficiaries being Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Iran and now Afghanistan.

However, Afghanistan’s national environment is different from the rest of the region as it is in the middle of a socio-political crisis, and none can predict with certainty the emerging stable scenario in the foreseeable future. The newly established Taliban government must adhere to international norms and needs to engage to sort out the differences with all the stakeholders and the regional actors. The Taliban government must practice the promised inclusiveness and should demonstrate practical measures acceptable to international community for its survival and for peace and stability of Afghanistan. They should undertake practical measures to demonstrate that today’s
Taliban are more enlightened than the previous ones. The primary focus of the government should be to find ways and means to resuscitate and revive the national economy, the erstwhile war economy being no more available. BRI can address these concerns of Afghanistan’s new regime and a win-win situation for both the countries economically can emerge.

The Taliban leaders recently assured that they will not allow anyone to use their country against the interests of any other nation and engaging with China in the BRI was under consideration. Earlier in 2016, Taliban gave green light to Beijing to mine in Afghanistan’s Mes-Aynak Copper mine and assured Chinese officials that they were committed to safeguarding the national projects for greater good. With such statements, there is a high probability that the Taliban government would join BRI.

Major western powers such as the US, UK, and France are not interested in Afghanistan’s nation building, however, they wish to dominate the foreign policy of Afghanistan and to a lesser extent, even the domestic dynamic which meets their demands. All attempts to dominate Afghanistan remotely will adversely affect Pakistan, Iran, and China. The emerging situation of Afghanistan and the conduct of the western powers, especially the US will directly affect the security concerns of Afghanistan’s neighbours. Due to economic meltdown and/or socio-economic instability, many refugees can once again start entering Pakistan which will be detrimental to Pakistan’s national interests.

President Joe Biden adhered to his predecessor’s deal with Taliban and even gave a deadline for US troops withdrawal, stating that the Taliban’s were already in power when he took the charge of office. The physical presence of the US has disappeared in Afghanistan, however, their interest in the region very much remains. It is evident that the US, for any number of reasons, can carry out air strikes using drones and stealth technology, which will have serious implications for the neighbouring countries. This is a most likely scenario if the Taliban regime does not accept to a fair extent, ensuring US dictates so far as women and minority factors and demand of not allowing safe havens for any terror group are concerned. It is in Pakistan’s vital interest that Afghanistan

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stabilizes socio-economically. China appears to be also waiting for stable socio-political environment and assurance of non-interference in China’s Muslim minority affairs.

**East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)**

The ETIM is a Turkic speaking ethnic Muslim minority separatist group in northwest China’s Xinjiang province. The group was listed banned and was declared as a terrorist organization in 2002 by the US. Xinjiang province where the group is based, is a vast, sparsely populated area that shares borders with eight countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. China has blamed ETIM for conducting more than 200 terrorist incidents in Xinjiang between 1990 and 2001. With such incidents on hand, the ETIM is likely to become the favourite of the US. Recently, the US also removed ETIM from the terrorist list creating a serious concern for China.

The US does not wish to allow any rival to emerge who can challenge its global hegemony. China’s rise is perceived to be an economic rise, but its political and military power is also rising threatening the US hegemony. The US has become hegemonic power since the 1990s, crushing every regime and leadership that challenges the US vital security interests (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya, Iran and even Pakistan to an extent). The US wants to contain China by any means necessary, uplifting the ban from ETIM is one such example. The US is also making new strategic alliances with its key allies to contain China’s growing power and limit her economic and military growth.

Beijing is following legitimate coercive power to neutralize the Muslim separatist group. The government increased the public security budget for Xinjiang by almost 90% in 2010. Terrorism in the name of Islam is a grave concern both for China and Pakistan. It clearly indicates that the Sino-US competition has gone way beyond the normal diplomatic overtures of give and take and while both appear to be avoiding violence, yet US is increasing the military and political pressures against China.

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24 Ibid, pp 78.
US Strategies in the Region Post-withdrawal - Future of Sino-US Competition

The United States and NATO forces have officially left Afghanistan after a two-decade long war with no concrete gains to show. Though US has vacated its military presence in Afghanistan, yet her interest remains the same, leading to uncertainty about its role in the country’s politics and broadly in the region. As Russia and China are getting closer to the Taliban regime, the possibility of great power competition is expected to grow further. After 20-years long war in Afghanistan with primary objective to eliminate the terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan, the US still believes that terrorist will threaten US vital national interests. The Islamic State affiliates inside Afghanistan and its links with the Taliban are perceived to be threat to the US and her key ally’s national interests, notwithstanding that there are clear indications that ISIS created by the US in the first place in Iraq, was airlifted by US itself, and planted in Afghanistan. The future of Taliban-ISIS-K ties will be of great significance to the US. Whether ISIS and Taliban unite or not, the US is most likely to remain active both diplomatically and when needed, militarily to achieve her goals of containing China. The US - China competition will only grow in time as China is not likely to capitulate nor will the US yield her hegemonic status of being the sole superpower.

Future Scenario of US-China Competition

The bilateral relationship between China and the US following three years of steadily declining during Trump administration remained strained in 2021. The two powers blamed each other over Covid-19 pandemic, engaged in trade war, competed over 5G networks, intellectual rights, human rights, and several other areas. The year 2021 has seen a major geopolitical shift in Afghanistan, as the US has shifted its global strategy of war-on-terror, to compete for retaining global hegemony with greater focus on China. This could be a new phase of Sino-US struggle for global dominance.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan has enabled the US to shift its focus more aggressively towards China rather than trying to contain her only. As the rise of China technologically, militarily, and economically challenges the hegemonic status of the US, competition between these two powers is inevitable. After leaving Afghanistan, US is now intensifying rivalry with China particularly in
Indo-Pacific.25 The recent AUKUS pact which will facilitate manufacture of Nuclear-powered submarines in Australia is a major initiative of US. The US is likely to maintain its leverage in the region. The US will try to influence the Taliban government in order to avoid the emergence of future threats to its interests by working closely with Afghanistan’s neighboring countries. The US would stay in the region and will try to contain China, which has already signaled to establish friendly ties with the Taliban government.

The US will particularly be vigilant to monitor China’s political and economic activities in Afghanistan. To counter Chinese efforts, it is likely to conduct a campaign blaming China violating human rights of the Muslim Uyghurs that she does not respect the Islamic faith, as most of the ethnic group identifies as Muslim.26

**QUAD and its Implications for China**

QUAD was created by the US specifically against China. It is an assertive and aggressive alliance against China in the Indo-Pacific region in which the group members cooperate together.27 For Japan, the Chinese claim on various islands in East China Sea is a grave threat, and for India, the border issue with China all along its north and Chinese presence in Indian Ocean is enough to propel it towards QUAD. Australia is caught up in a strange situation to treat China as a threat yet having China as the major trade partner. The interests of the QUAD members under the US direction are made to converge against China, hence the alliance.

What is in it for the US and the rest of the QUAD members to invest in Afghanistan? First, Afghanistan being a flashpoint to reach out to Central Asia is driving QUAD members to invest. Second, a multilateral channel to create an opening up path for the markets of QUAD group. Third and most important aspect is to contain China’s BRI. The Chinese ambition to politically rise peacefully, through sound economy is its basic drive. All the QUAD members are either directly

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or indirectly affected by China’s this policy. Evidently, each member is having a trade-bone to pick with China and recent trade war events with US, Australia and India prove it. It is therefore, unacceptable for US and its allies to escape this reality and they want to curtail China by hook or by crook.

The Taliban’s relation with any of the QUAD members are not even close to their relations with China. Meanwhile, China being the first country to offer a conditional welcome to Taliban’s regime into power entails that a peaceful Afghanistan is in the interest of China. When the US talks of rule-based world order, it defies that rule herself when it suits her.

**Implications and Options for Pakistan**

With the return of the Taliban to power in the aftermath of the US military withdrawal, Pakistan is rightly anxious over the likely security implications as well as foreign policy pressures. Afghanistan has been experiencing instability for the last four decades with direct effects on adjacent countries, especially Pakistan in terms of refugee influx, trans border terrorism, international false allegations of providing terrorists safe havens, and its repercussions in terms of economic stress. With the withdrawal of US and NATO forces, there have been another round of debates among the international observers with worrying predictions regarding security implications for neighboring and other regional countries. Pakistan has been managing great stress and strain due to Afghanistan’s situation, a state which is not likely to improve anytime soon.

The apprehended influx of refugees fleeing from increased violence or economic meltdown in Afghanistan will pose security concerns for Pakistan. Along with the refugees, TTP, Baloch militants and RAW agents presently hiding in Afghanistan are also likely to cross Pakistan’s border. The refugee influx itself will further complicate the socio-political as well as economic environment within Pakistan.

**Response Options & Policy Recommendations**

Pakistan is not likely to be able to make Taliban “do” what it wants. However, it must adopt a course of action commensurate with its power potential to deal with emerging Afghanistan as well as protect its own vital interests. This part of the paper proposes a two-pronged course of action to government of Pakistan to manage the visible and potential challenges from rapidly changing
Afghanistan’s situation, one focused at foreign policy and the other dealing with domestic national policy, as follows.

**Foreign Policy Level**

- **No-Haste policy** - Pakistan should not be in a haste to recognize Taliban regime. Before recognizing the political leadership and establishing formal diplomatic ties, Pakistan must observe and seek mutually agreed policy with regional stakeholders especially China and Russia while secondarily taking into consideration the US dictates, as far as possible. Balance is mandatory for Pakistan in international relations.

- **Proposition for regional arrangement** - Pakistan should propose a regional arrangement primarily dedicated to Afghanistan’s social re-construction and re-integration. China, Russia and Pakistan could play a vital role in this. China’s probable acceptance and diplomatic ties with Afghanistan’s new regime will strengthen the relations between the three countries ensuring a stable environment.

- **Covert state-level negotiations** - State-level negotiations and assistance from the political leadership of Pakistan must remain in progress at low-key level and covert to avoid international claims of Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan at least till the recognition and establishment of open diplomatic ties. An inclusive political setup must be recommended to the new regime.

- **Policy towards the US** – Pakistan must follow a balanced and negotiated relationship with the US. Pakistan must be prepared to play third party role in bringing the US and the newly formed Afghan government again on table to serve mutual interests.

**National Policy Level**

- **Refugee Regulation** - With the increased probability of refugee influx, government must formulate a regulatory body for refugee management, influx, registration, limitations and necessary assistance for eventually ensuring their repatriation. For this, a national policy with a timeframe must be decided and announced at a suitable time.

- **Border Management** - In future there could be a need of increased security forces along the border against illegal, unauthorized cross-border intrusion from Afghanistan. Dedicated groups should be earmarked for this purpose. Pakistan must not be in a hurry to offer one sided
amnesty to the outlawed Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Before giving amnesty to the country’s cruelest and ruthless terrorist organization, it would be wiser to wait till their leadership seeks amnesty. Indeed, with the Taliban coming to power and political Islam reviving, TTP is most likely to try to assert itself again through bloodshed and violence. The TTP jihadist ideology with a Takfiri and sectarian worldview can still pose deadly threats to national security of Pakistan. TTP’s latest attack in Balochistan which targeted FC personnel is a case in point indicating that the group still believes in their old brutal ways.

- **Narrative Building** – Afghanistan has been subjected to years of anti-Pakistan propaganda propagated by anti-Taliban elements and India. This ought to be countered through our own sustained narratives over a period of time. It should be slow but sustained to reduce the anger against Pakistan and gradually generate a sense of acceptance and appreciation for Pakistan’s 40 years of sacrifices. This narrative building could be done through direct and indirect means. Direct means involve institutional role to inculcate systematically that to assist Afghanistan in nation-building is ensuring peace and security for Pakistan. Positive propaganda, counter propaganda and selective dissemination of information through social and print media are the indirect means of narrative building.

**Conclusion**

This part of the policy paper examined the evolving situation in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan has triggered the start of a new phase of geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics. The US military forces left Afghanistan and the Taliban are back in power with full approval of the US, presenting regional countries with both opportunities and challenges. With the end of the US long-standing war in Afghanistan and Taliban’s unexpected quick seizure of Kabul, a political vacuum has been created in Afghanistan. The regional countries are trying to extend their leverage in the war-torn country and achieve their own foreign policy objectives.

The withdrawal has resulted in the US foreign policy shift, as it has signaled to focus more on China in the Indo-Pacific region now rather than go on trying to physically contain China on land. To counter China’s expansion through Afghanistan, the US is likely to remain engaged in Afghanistan diplomatically and if needed, even militarily. China, the rising world power and an important regional player, is closely observing this evolving situation in Afghanistan. China played
constructive role in the political settlement between the US and Taliban earlier and is now possibly waiting for an inclusive regime in Afghanistan to achieve its political and economic goals. The Taliban, on the other hand, are eying China for economic aid and recognition of their government. Competition between the two major world powers US and China are likely to be more in the region. Being an important regional country and immediate neighbor of war-torn country, Pakistan is likely to face security challenges from the instability in Afghanistan, as in the past. Therefore, Pakistan should have better, viable, and doable foreign policy options towards the evolving would-be inclusive Afghan government. Pakistan should remain vigilant to help the newly appointed Afghan government to contain the spread of extremist and terrorist groups that harm the vital security interests of Pakistan. Pakistan must also keep an eye on how other stakeholders, especially India, behave towards Afghanistan as it will affect the peace and stability in Pakistan.
Part II

US Withdrawal from Afghanistan – Interests of Major Players and Policy
Recommendations for Pakistan

Abstract
Afghanistan has been a center of attention of different superpowers over the past few decades. It proved to be the last battleground of the erstwhile Soviet Union. From the Soviet Union to the US and the varying interests of other regional and global powers (including China, India, Iran and Pakistan), Afghanistan has been a hard nut to crack for many foreign actors. However, national and strategic interests of all these different nations make Afghanistan relevant in different perspectives. Selfish national interest has been the main driving force in the formulation of Afghan policy of different nations. Hardly anyone took interest in the greater good of Afghanistan itself. Hegemonic policies of US notwithstanding, there is no one, not even the UN, in charge internationally who could act as a monitor in international system. There are no police force, military system or courts to check on the non-compliance of international laws. There is no established hierarchy in international system, thus states continue to live in a state of anarchy. In case of Afghanistan, various states have been manipulating and seeking their national interests over the years, with no international organization being a monitor. This part highlights the relevance of Afghanistan for the interests of major players, especially China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and the US in the contemporary times. It is mainly descriptive in nature and by using qualitative means of data collection and analysis it tries to identify the challenges and opportunities that are emerging for the major players in view of US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Different possible scenarios that may emerge from the evolving situation in Afghanistan are considered with appropriate policy recommendations for Pakistan in order to protect and promote her national interests in the emerging geo-strategic environment. Pakistan should adopt a balanced approach in courting the major players regarding the evolving situation in Afghanistan and thereby ensure its own national interests.
Introduction

On 15 August 2021, the news of Taliban takeover in Afghanistan took the world by surprise. Many of the analysts argued that they did not expect the Taliban takeover to be this quick and swift. Some on the other hand argued that they did not see this coming after the US spent twenty long years and invested $5.8 trillion on the war in Afghanistan out of which about $83 billion were spent to develop and sustain the Afghan Army. The evolving situation in Afghanistan since 15 August 2021 has its implications not only for the people of Afghanistan, but also for the region as well as for the global players. Pakistan once again has become the center of interest as the world is trying to assess the kind of role it can and will play in Afghanistan. The US and the western media have made Pakistan a scapegoat for their own failures in the twenty years long war in Afghanistan. Pakistan is once again at the crossroads of history where being the immediate neighbor of Afghanistan it has a significant role to play in stabilizing the region, besides ensuring its own security. The evolving situation in Afghanistan will have many implications and opportunities for Pakistan soon. Keeping in view the past mistakes, Pakistan must choose its allies wisely in order to keep its borders peaceful and its house in order.

To understand the implications and opportunities that may emerge out of the evolving situation in Afghanistan, it is necessary to look at the major events of the past two decades which eventually gave way to the deal signed between the US and the Taliban in February 2020.

Perspective of the US - Taliban Peace Agreement

After the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989, a power vacuum was created. That resulted in anarchy and chaos in Afghanistan and gave birth to different war lords who started governing their respective areas. Due to lack of a strong central authority, those warlord institutions were extractive in nature and common people were fed up with their reign in Afghanistan. Hence, as a resolving solution, Mullah Umar was asked to help against those injustices and tortures faced by the common people. He then gathered his Talibs and overpowered the warlords who had become infamous for their injustices, rapes, loots and plunders. After being successful in Qandahar area, a domino effect was created and people from different areas started to ask help of Mullah Umar and Talibs. These same Talibs later became famous and were known as the Taliban. They became so eminent that by 1995 they successfully conquered 90% of the Afghanistan without any major resistance. Except for the three states, rest of the world did not
recognize the government of the Taliban, instead they favored Taliban’s adversary's rule of Northern Alliance which was governing the leftover 10% of Afghanistan around Panjsher. Taliban ruled over Afghanistan for 9 years until the attack on World Trade Center and Pentagon on 11 September 2001 happened.

After the so-called 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, US blamed Al Qaeda for the catastrophic attacks, who they also held responsible for the bombings on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998), and the US warship U.S.S. Cole (2000). US demanded from the Taliban to deliver them all of the Al Qaeda leaders hiding in Afghanistan, to close terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and handover related persons, especially Osama bin Laden, and give the US full access to terrorist training camps. The US termed these demands non-negotiable and warned Taliban that they would share the fate of the terrorists, if they refused to hand them over. Taliban, on the other hand, refused to hand over Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden without evidence of his involvement in 9/11 attacks. Subsequently, the US invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001 and toppled the Taliban regime. By May 2003, with 11,000 US and allied combat forces in the country, US announced the transition from major combat to stability operations in Afghanistan.

In December 2001, the UN mediated International Conference on Afghanistan held in Bonn and chose the former CIA Agent Hamid Karzai as the Chairman of the Interim Administration for Afghanistan. In June 2002, the Afghan Loya Jirga elected Hamid Karzai as Head of State (President), giving him the mandate to lead the transitional government until 2004 when general elections were to be held. In January 2004, Afghanistan adopted a new constitution, and in

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November, Karzai was declared the first elected President of Afghanistan. In response to these developments, Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar vowed to regain control and sovereignty of Afghanistan. While the Taliban insurgency against NATO and Afghan forces kept intensifying, Hamid Karzai was reelected as the president in 2009, for a second term, amid allegations of electoral fraud and withdrawal of rival candidate Abdullah Abdullah from the runoff race on the pretext that transparent election was not possible under election officials hired by Karzai.

By the same time, the Taliban resistance had escalated to a full-scale insurgency, and they had shadow-governors in 33 out of 34 Afghan provinces. Meanwhile, US announced to temporarily send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan as part of a new strategy, called ‘surge’, bringing the US force presence to about 100,000.

In June 2010, President Karzai convened a “Peace Jirga” which endorsed his proposal to negotiate with insurgents. The Taliban, however, laid the condition of the removal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, prior to any peace discussions. The same year, there appeared a reported change of strategy in U.S. administration – encouraging negotiations with the Taliban. Later, in 2011, Karzai confirmed that US was itself going ahead with the negotiations with Taliban.

In 2011, al Qaeda leader and the alleged mastermind of September 11 attacks, Osama bin Laden, was killed by the US military forces in Pakistan. Following this, President Obama declared that US had largely achieved its goals in Afghanistan and announced withdrawal of additional troops by 2012 and steady drawdown of forces until planned handover of security to Afghan authorities

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in 2014. In August 2013, the US led NATO forces handed over security responsibilities to Afghan National Army and assumed a supportive role. In December 2014, NATO formally ended its combat operations in Afghanistan.

In 2013 Taliban were facilitated to open an office in Qatar from where negotiations were to take place. The formal and informal talks continued between the parties to the conflict. In 2016, Hezb-i-Islami signed a peace agreement with the Afghan government. In 2018, the US agreed to hold direct talks with Taliban, also appointing Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Representative of the US for Afghanistan Reconciliation. The subsequent direct talks between US and Taliban led to the Afghan peace deal under which US was to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan against the guarantee that Taliban would prevent the use of Afghan soil against US and its allies. In view of the agreement the US and its allied forces started withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and eventually the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 marked the end of twenty years long US occupation of Afghanistan. Since then, the world has apprehensions regarding whether the Taliban have amended their ways since the 1990s; whether Afghanistan will slide into chaos following a civil war between different groups; whether human rights of vulnerable groups will be protected or not; whether the power vacuum created by US withdrawal will have its impact on the neighboring countries in the form of a new wave of terrorism. People in Pakistan also have conflicting opinions on the aforementioned areas.

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The rapid assumption of power by Taliban has taken most of the Think Tanks and policy makers by surprise. People all over the world are skeptical about the outcomes and survivability of this new administration. Where on the one hand, it is being hoped that the new Taliban led administration in Afghanistan will not be oppressive as the previous one was, as the group is expected to have become more enlightened. On the other hand, states are also worried lest Afghanistan re-emerges as a haven for different terrorist groups which become security threats for them. It is necessary therefore, to consider the interest of major powers, the US, Russia, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan, possible emerging scenarios in geostrategic environment and arrive at policy recommendations for Pakistan.

**Interests of Major Players in Afghanistan**

Under this section, the paper attempts to lay out the key interests of the major players in view of the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Based on these interests, this paper maps out the possible scenarios and then suggest policy recommendations for Pakistan.

**China's Interests in Afghanistan**

A narrow strip of land to the northeast of Chitral, Pakistan, known as Wakhan Corridor links China with Afghanistan. Apart from that both the countries have no shared border. China, over the years have established its position as a dominant global power. As a result of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, China is seen as a potential gainer, who will try to fill the vacuum created in Afghanistan. China in fact, has already started taking the lead role in Afghanistan as it has announced initial aid of 200 million Yuan to the Taliban regime, including food and the vaccines.

China’s Afghan policy is driven by two major factors, first being its economic interests where it eyes the untapped natural resources of Afghanistan as well as the market which is looking for investors and traders. On the other hand, China feels threatened by East Turkistan Islamic

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50 Sheng Yeng, “China to provide emergency aid of 200m yuan, including food, 3 million vaccines to Afghanistan”, *Global Times*, 8 September 2021, [https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1233754.shtml](https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1233754.shtml) (September 14, 2021).

Movement (ETIM), which it fears might reappear from Afghanistan under Taliban to create instability in Xingjian.\(^{52}\) Moreover, China and Pakistan’s Afghan policy seem to be coherent as both the states have taken joint steps post US withdrawal, for instances, ambassadors of China and Pakistan met in Kabul, that followed the aid to Afghan people by both China and Pakistan.\(^{53}\)

China would try to capitalize on the US defeat in Afghanistan as much as it can, this adds up to Chinese advantage in many ways. US withdrawal from Afghanistan makes China a sole major power in the region. The US had containment plans for China but its withdrawal from Afghanistan is an abdication of those containment plans. China and Pakistan, today appear to be the major gainers from the US withdrawal, for the very apparent reasons. It is perceived that both the US and India have become losers which gives China and Pakistan an added advantage, which both states would be able to cash on.

**India’s Interests in Afghanistan**

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has cleared the ground for the formation of the “Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan.” New Delhi is now in a difficult strategic position as a result of this power transition. It will put India under considerable pressure since its rivals, both Pakistan and China, could gain from this opportunity. Besides, the victory of political-Islam in Afghanistan rings danger bells for India as it has a sizeable restive Muslim minority being persecuted by the BJP rule in India.

The prospect of worldwide and regional “Islamic-terrorism” is the first implication of the Taliban's control, which is one of the several concerns for India. Militant organizations such as the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) have the capacity to recruit radicalized Muslims in India. One such example happened when IS-K carried out an attack on a gurudwara (house of worship) in Kabul, with one of the four attackers being from Kerala, India. Similarly, the presence of terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan may threaten Indian military forces' counter-insurgency operations in

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Kashmir to some extent. This adds to Indian security concerns that the development of new terrorist safe havens may empower terrorist organizations in the disputed region.

India’s interest in Afghanistan is not limited to countering terrorism; it also focuses on trade between the two nations and would certainly try to dilute Pakistan’s influence, if not try to restart its terror attacks through Afghanistan against Pakistan. Trade between India and Afghanistan has grown in the previous two decades, paving the possibility for the reconstruction of new routes. New Delhi, which was actively interested in the creation of the Chabahar Port in Iran, considers a stable Afghanistan to be a critical element for trade since an unstable Afghanistan poses a danger to regional connectivity initiatives. Afghanistan is an important link between India and the Central Asian region. As a result, a regime change in Kabul is likely to have an immediate impact on India’s grand ambitions, if not in the long run.

New Delhi is also concerned about China’s apparent willingness to collaborate with the Taliban. With the Taliban in authority, China is systematically building and maintaining diplomatic footprints in Afghanistan. This concern of India is justified in part because China appears to be antagonistic towards India due to serious territorial disputes while maintaining excellent relations with its traditional adversary, Pakistan. China’s vast financial resources allow it to limit Indian influence in Afghanistan and keep her at distance.

**Iran’s Interests in Afghanistan**

Iran, one of Afghanistan’s immediate neighbors to the west, has high stakes in Afghanistan. Geopolitics has become one of the prominent factors in Iran’s relations with Afghanistan, while religion and nationalism were also used in support of their foreign policy as a source of building local networks of influence. Basically, Iran’s Afghan policy is driven by its main interests which are religious, sectarian, ethno-cultural as well as economic in nature.

Keeping in mind the re-emergence of Taliban and eventual withdrawal of US from Afghanistan, Iran established limited relations with the Taliban, despite its previous enmity with the Taliban. Iran’s relations with the Taliban were also driven by their mutual interest in withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and their concerns regarding the Khorasan Province affiliate of the

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Islamic State (ISKP), an ideological enemy of both Iran and Taliban.\textsuperscript{55} Furthermore, Iranian IRGC in their bid to win over Taliban, had also been involved in providing weapons to them. In 2009, Iran-made small arms and explosives were discovered from Taliban, while a large cache of Iranian-made explosives were also discovered in Farah Province, bordering Iran.\textsuperscript{56}

Things looked quite favorable for both Iran and Taliban in building up a new relationship until recently, when the valley of Panjshir fell to the Taliban. Iran reacted with displeasure on the Taliban’s control of the last left province of Afghanistan. Iran also showed concerns of alleged foreign intervention in the Panjshir battle, pointing towards Pakistan.\textsuperscript{57} This shows both frustration and hesitancy on part of Iran in choosing sides in Afghanistan. Even after the fall of Kabul, Iran kept its embassy and consulate open in Kabul and Herat, but it closed its consulates in Mazar-I-Sharif, Kandahar and Jalalabad.\textsuperscript{58} This clearly shows Iranian confusion and reluctance in completely supporting the new Afghan government. Iran is finding ways to enhance relationship with the Taliban which would help both theocratic regimes at least on the economic front. However, both might still see each other as a threat to their versions of Islam and greater geo-strategic goals.

**Pakistan - a Responsible Stakeholder**

The US introduced and adopted the concept of preemptive war, whereby it holds the right to destroy any challenge before it becomes a threat to its security.\textsuperscript{59} This approach was manifested

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid
when the US attacked Afghanistan in 2001 perceiving it as a threat to its security. No moral questions were asked, and no moral obligations were taken into consideration. The infamous approach of, “You are with us or against us”⁶⁰ was drawn for the rest of the world especially regional stakeholders such as Pakistan, which were left with little choice.

Resultantly, Pakistan became one of the major non-NATO allies of the United States for which it paid heavily. More than 80,000 precious human lives were lost and about US $100 billion monetary losses were suffered by Pakistan for the US war, imposed on it.⁶¹ However, the US never appeared to be satisfied with Pakistan, it fell into the propaganda by the Indian authorities and their disinformation campaign which was busted recently by the Europe based NGO - Dis Info Lab.⁶²

US ultimately started to scapegoat Pakistan for the losses which it faced in Afghanistan.⁶³ Instead of honoring the sacrifices and losses which Pakistan suffered in the US “war on terror” as an ally of the US, the US decided to leave Afghanistan haphazardly while giving a cold shoulder to one of the biggest victims of this war. In fact, as one of the immediate neighbors of Afghanistan, Pakistan was left to deal with many unforeseen repercussions for the region. The war may have ended for the US, as claimed by them, but the crisis still persists for Pakistan.

Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan are multifaceted. A stable Afghanistan is in the interest of Pakistan, through which it can access the markets in Central Asia and can provide them access to “warm waters” via Gwadar seaport, which can be a win-win situation for Pakistan, Afghanistan as well as the landlocked Central Asian Republics. However, if peace and stability can be achieved under the new Taliban regime is a question that needs to be answered. Afghanistan also has close socio-cultural links with Pakistan. Afghanistan’s majority population comprises of Pashtun ethnic group and Pakistan also has a larger chunk of Pashtun population living in its territory which creates a socio-cultural bond between the people of both the states.64 Apart from the Pashtuns, Hzaarars and Baloch also have sizeable population in both the countries, which increases the socio-cultural bond of both the states.65 The Map - 01 shows the ethnic spread both in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pakistan’s strategic interests are also linked with Afghanistan’s stability. In the 20 years long war, Afghanistan was used as a hotbed of proxies against Pakistan.66 From TTP to ISIS(K), and the separatists, ethno-nationalist Baloch groups, all were breeding and flourishing in Afghanistan under the nose of US, NATO and the then Afghan government. India was accused to be the one who was funding and handling all those proxies to destabilize Pakistan.67 However, the recent takeover of Kabul by the Taliban has forced many of Pakistan’s enemies to withdraw from Afghanistan. India, the chief conspirator, has vacated its embassy and consulates from Afghanistan, which certainly is a sigh of relief for Pakistan.68

Pakistan today, seems to be quite clear about its approach in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister Imran Khan in his statement reacted to the Taliban takeover by saying that “The Afghans have

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broken the chains of slavery.” Pakistan, sees the Taliban takeover as a welcome change, which can prove favorable for Pakistan, in comparison to the previous pro-Indian governments. Pakistan, however, wants to keep the balance and has urged for the inclusive government in Afghanistan which involves all the ethnicities and stakeholders. US might have ditched Pakistan while on way out of Afghanistan, and that too after making it pay heavily for the so called “war on terror”, but Pakistan still stands tall by leading the evacuation efforts in Afghanistan. Many western troops and diplomats were transited and facilitated by Pakistan on their way out of Afghanistan. Not only this, Pakistan is also leading, along with China, in providing aid to the people of Afghanistan, who have almost been abandoned by the rest of the world, after dragging them centuries back.

Prime Minister Imran Khan in his interview to CNN mentioned that ‘Pakistan does not want to make the mistakes of past by choosing sides. Therefore, Pakistan invited the leaders from Northern Alliance including the brothers of late Ahmed Shah Masood and ensured them that irrespective of the history of their relationship, now Pakistan stands for the inclusiveness of all the ethnic groups in Afghanistan without picking up sides.’ This however, did not materialize when Afghan Taliban announced an interim government exclusively based on Taliban leadership and mostly the Pashtun ethnic group, with the exception of only two members. In addition, there was no women participation in the Afghan cabinet. This, the leadership of the Northern Alliance considers as a breach of the promise which the Prime Minister Imran Khan had made to them, as one of the Northern Alliance leaders, Dr. Latif Pedram tweeted in anger which he deleted later on.

Pakistan-US relationship on the other hand continue to remain cold. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken recently made a statement, that US would asses relationship with Pakistan over Afghanistan’s future. This statement was not welcomed by Pakistan, which the Prime Minister

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73 Imran Khan interview to CNN, Becky Anderson, dated September 15, 2021.

termed as “completely ignorant” of the facts and ground realities. He also commented on Pakistan-US relationship during the Afghan War by calling it “terrible”. Prime Minister Imran Khan stressed that US should adopt Pakistan-centric relationship with Pakistan instead of using it as a hired gun to achieve its goals in Afghanistan or anywhere else for that matter.

**Russia's Interests in Afghanistan**

Russia has been wary of the US/NATO presence in Afghanistan, which is too close to her sphere of influence. Moscow has no desire to get involved on the ground in Afghanistan again, that much is evident, given the tragic experiences of previous participation in Afghanistan. Moscow has stepped up diplomatic efforts to reach an amicable political arrangement in Afghanistan that promotes balance. The Afghan government and the Taliban have met in Russia for talks. It also expanded its relations with Pashtuns in Afghanistan, rather than the Uzbeks and Tajiks with whom it had previously dealt which is considered as part of its efforts to assure the group's continued existence. Russia has also engaged in intensive negotiations with other significant players, including China, Pakistan, and the US. Such talks for the formation of an inclusive Afghan government are still going on between Russia and the interim Taliban government to which Russia claims that it is in sync with the US, China, Pakistan on such imperative. Pakistan is particularly important and has long played a role in Afghan politics, which is why Moscow has increased its contacts with Islamabad, with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov coming in April this year for the first time in nearly a decade.

Regardless of Russia's closer links with the Taliban, Moscow is being pragmatic for the time being, studying trends and not yet removing the Taliban from its terror list. Although, Russia has no goal to recognize the Taliban, its goal is to engage with them in order to reach specific agreements, and accords in Afghanistan along international frontiers.

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Russia will have a limited direct participation in both arming and financing Taliban regime, but it will remain a big neighboring influence in the ongoing challenges in Afghanistan, with no desire for a concrete direct presence. Moscow tends to view the Taliban as less concerning, deeming the group's goals to be primarily focused on regaining their lost power and control within Afghanistan.

While the US withdrawal from Afghanistan provides opportunities for Russia, it also exposes Russia to uncertainty and risks. The most crucial advantage for Russia is that it can now easily demonstrate its military capabilities in Central Asia, bolstering her claims to be a defender of neighboring nations against the Afghan menace and positioning herself as a prominent player on the Eurasian chessboard. With several nations, Russia has alliance obligations under the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As a result, her top priorities in Afghanistan include regional security and preventing any spillover of insecurity and extremism from Afghanistan to protect the borders of her important Central Asian allies Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as preventing terrorists and political Islam from crossing into her own country.

Afghanistan's ongoing instability also threatens Russia with large-scale refugee inflows into the Central Asian countries, adding to tensions and pressures in neighboring nations. Moscow's top goal is preventing drugs from leaving Afghanistan and entering Russian markets. Moscow is also concerned about Islamist extremist forces operating in eastern and northern Afghanistan, as well as ISIS. Russia's expanding relations with the Taliban thrive, reducing the threat presented by other Islamist extremist forces, which is in Russia's best interests. Russia has secured Taliban’s guarantees that Afghanistan would not pose a threat to her regional friends and that they will be able to continue working together.

**US interests in Afghanistan**

American president George W. Bush announced the war against terror as a campaign that will not end “until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated”. Also telling Americans not to expect a single battle, but “a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen”. He vowed to pursue terrorists as well as the nations that provided aid or safe havens to
terrorism. He went on to declare that a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan was in America’s strategic and moral interest and set the ambitious goal of helping the people of Afghanistan succeed in it, no matter how long it took.

The Obama administration, however, unveiled a new strategy for the conflict. Their vital national security interest was to address the current and future security threats from extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. For this purpose, the core goal of the US was “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan”. The supporting objectives towards the main goal included: “removing al-Qaeda’s sanctuaries, effective democratic government control in Pakistan, and a self-reliant Afghanistan that would enable the withdrawal of combat forces while sustaining the commitment of political and economic development”.

The new strategy, surprisingly, termed the possible threat of extremists obtaining fissile material – “too real”. Bruce Riedel, head of the Obama’s said policy review-team, described the Taliban militants in Pakistan as being ‘intoxicated by the idea of a jihadist takeover in Pakistan’. However, the idea of a jihadist takeover was seen as delusional given the size, equipment, command and fighting capabilities of Pakistan Army and the unlikelihood that Pakistan’s intelligence agencies would transfer nuclear weapons to Taliban. Expanding the above canvas, the main interests of the US could be prioritized as; preventing terrorist attacks on US and use of Afghan soil for the purpose; a stable government in Afghanistan that is not hostile towards the US; and that Afghanistan is not dominated by an outside hegemonic power, in such a way, that jeopardizes America’s ability to pursue the full range of its geostrategic and geo-economics interests in Afghanistan and the region”.

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actual interests. However, if it is seen in that context, it could be said that US succeeded in degrading the organization and influence of al-Qaeda. As put by President Biden, in his announcement of troops withdrawal by September 11, 2021, that “We were attacked. We went to war with clear goals. We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead, and al Qaeda is degraded in Afghanistan. And it is time to end the forever war.”

Another US interest was its reputation as a country that could be relied upon. In this regard, US pledges and reputation saw an exemplary blow in the shape of the dramatic collapse of Afghan government and abandonment of former allies amid Taliban advances without a peaceful settlement, despite earlier US pledges to support a democratic Afghanistan “as long as it takes”. This, however, makes it difficult for US to overtly cooperate with Taliban, if they did not honor their commitments about women and human rights, freedom of speech and an inclusive government. Since, if not emphasized, it may further tarnish the already compromised reputation of US. However, US would not abdicate its efforts to contain China with no presence of military within Afghanistan and keep its presence through other means in Afghanistan.

**Possible Scenarios**

In the post US withdrawal developing and evolving situation in Afghanistan, following possible scenarios can be foresighted in view of the past patterns and interests of key players in the emerging geopolitical environment.

**Filling the Power Vacuum in Afghanistan**

Internationally, one of the major outcomes of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is the power vacuum that it has created in Afghanistan. As to who will fill the vacuum, is yet to be seen. China and Russia are supposedly the powers that would try to replace US, along with regional powers like Pakistan and Iran, who would try to capitalize as much as they can. However, among all these scenarios, one major threat that looms around is the re-emergence of terror outfits from the Afghan soil, which can prove to be deadlier for the region and the world overall.

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Seeing through the realpolitik lens, this can be a new US game to put this region into chaos through sanctions and other tacit hybrid war tactics which it could not do being present in Afghanistan. The unstable Afghanistan means unstable region. The instability in Afghanistan would have its impact on three of its direct neighbors Pakistan, Iran and China who are supposedly in the anti-US block. India is a major US ally in its China containment policy, which has forced distances between Pakistan and the west. Therefore, Pakistan while facing the brunt of instability in Afghanistan actually goes in the favor of US and its allies. Iran’s hostility towards the west is no hidden secret and China is considered as a direct rival. So, the region with these three major stakeholders will have to face the consequences of US folly or cunningness whatever one may call it.

The question of an external power dominating Afghanistan in a manner that jeopardizes US interests, will be determined by future developments. Besides the US, only a big power which can dominate Afghanistan in such a way is either Russia or China. However, if Taliban opt to group with one power against the interests of the other, they will jeopardize any prospects of stability in the region. Resultantly, Afghanistan will become hotbed of regional and global power competition. Even the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is seen as a shift of US focus towards China. If such a situation develops between US and China in Afghanistan, Pakistan might be blamed not only for the US failures, but also as a threat to the US interests. Pakistan has also expressed concern on being used as a scapegoat in the scenario. In the past, too, some hostile quarters recommended inclusion of Pakistan in the US State Department’s list of state-sponsors of terrorism, on such pretexts. Very recently, again, such demands were raised to sanction Pakistan in this regard. Certain actors have already started campaigning against Pakistan.

**Civil War in Afghanistan**

A civil war might erupt in Afghanistan, because the minority ethnic groups in Afghanistan do not see Afghan Taliban favorably. The Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and other minor ethnic groups are

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mostly hostile towards Taliban and if the worsening economic conditions in Afghanistan make it difficult for the Taliban regime to govern, a civil war is likely to erupt in Afghanistan, which can have impacts on overall region. This seems to be very likely, because at the moment, Afghan Taliban’s biggest challenge is the frozen financial reserves which US is not ready to release and this has led to a governance crisis for them.

**Terrorism and Religious Extremism**

In opposition to the Taliban, the transnational terrorist group, the Islamic State or Daesh, which emerged in Iraq and Syria and gained space amid weakening of al Qaeda, seems more focused towards destabilizing the Muslim countries it is operating in. The group has been so controversial that the former Afghan president Hamid Karzai blamed the US for aiding ISIS, calling it a “US tool”. IS not only pose threat to the government of Taliban but also to its neighboring countries including Pakistan.

The question of stability in future Afghanistan depends upon the direction towards which the Taliban head for. If Taliban maintain their future government setup in line with the recently introduced, non-inclusive and ethnically non-representative, interim government, the prospects of instability and conflict will increase, particularly in the north of Afghanistan. While ISIS already remains a challenge for the Taliban, they might not be able to counter a multi-front, widespread insurgency.

**CPEC and BRI**

US withdrawal, if handled smartly, can have certain positive consequences as well. One of them can be the active trade by the Central Asian States who can reach out to CPEC and BRI through Afghanistan, making it a hub of trade through different regions.

**Amnesty for TTP**

The release of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan’s (TTP) militants from Afghanistan’s jails after the fall of Kabul poses a serious threat to Pakistan. There is a strong probability that they may cross into Pakistani territory and cause disruption and carnage. Thousands of Pakistanis have died because

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of bombing assaults by Islamist fanatics in the previous two decades in Pakistan. Islamabad should be cautious of the situation and deal with it aggressively.

There is a talk of giving total amnesty to the entire TTP outfit by the government of Pakistan. This idea came in as the TTP personnel were released from Afghanistan’s prisons, in the wake of Taliban’s takeover of Kabul on 15th of August 2021. However, TTP does not sound repenting at all and immediately mocked the offer of amnesty rejecting it totally. If TTP returns to Pakistan and is not handled by an iron hand, it is likely to restart its bloodbath in the name of Islam, encouraged by the victory of Taliban. Resuming terror activities by TTP is the worst scenario staring Pakistan squarely.

**Implications for Pakistan**

Being an immediate neighbor of Afghanistan, all the possible aforementioned scenarios would have implications for Pakistan. This paper highlights some of those implications, which are expected after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul and US withdrawal from Afghanistan:

**Refugee Influx**

A major refugee crisis is looming over Pakistan, already hosting about 1.5 million registered refugees and possibly similar number of unregistered. Three generations of Afghan refugees have grown up in Pakistan. That makes Pakistan the biggest host of Afghan refugees. However, the current Afghan crisis is expected to draw more refugees out of Afghanistan because both the security and economic condition in Afghanistan do not appear promising at the moment. The people of Afghanistan have socio-cultural links with people of Pakistan. The Pashtuns and Hazaras have their ethnic community in Pakistan and find Pakistan a lot closer to their way of lives therefore, they would prefer coming to Pakistan instead of any other neighboring country.

Refugee influx can bring about another crisis of identity in Balochistan. Baloch are enjoying a minor edge on ethnic-count over the Pashtun population. The new influx of Pashtun refugees will surely outnumber the Baloch by the Pashtuns, making them a minority. This is likely to create socio-political problems within the province.
The Economic Factor
The US, while leaving Afghanistan has frozen the assets of Afghan Central Bank. This is a step towards creating an economic crisis that would have an impact on the region. No capital means no civic facilities, no imports and a food crisis to say the least, which can ultimately result in chaos in the public. Shortage of food and other daily needs can result in over reliance on the neighbors and Pakistan can be directly affected. The vacuum created in Afghanistan by the US withdrawal is likely to be filled by China. Chinese presence and economic activities in Afghanistan would directly help Pakistan because of their cooperation in BRI and CPEC projects. Pakistan can ultimately become a transit trade hub for the Central Asian states and Russia, which have been longing for access to “warm waters” for trade and Pakistan can be their safest bet under the evolving circumstances. This can be a real economic booster for the dwindling economy of Pakistan.

Proxy Wars
The withdrawal of US from Afghanistan has also forced the withdrawal of over ambitious and toxic Indian presence in Afghanistan. This is certainly a breather for Pakistan, which faced Indian sponsored terrorism from the northwestern border for so long now. Indian removal from Afghanistan would lessen the extent of proxy wars that it was waging through Afghanistan. That, is one of the positive impacts that the withdrawal of US from Afghanistan would bring.

TTP and the Indian Factor
The question is, are we celebrating it all too early? Since the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, Pakistan has faced numerous attacks on the bordering check posts from the TTP. Will Afghan Taliban go hard against the TTP is a moot question. However, the recent attacks from Afghanistan’s soil have not been condemned by Taliban regime nor any action taken to prevent such aggression. Ashraf Ghani’s pro Indian regime was openly supporting Indian adventurism and now the Afghan Taliban’s sympathy for the TTP can prove deadly as well. This needs to be cautiously managed.

The outgoing Indians from Afghanistan would try to create anarchy within Pakistan, including series of terror attacks, especially on the high-value targets. This can have serious implications on the hard-earned peace in the country. Since its failure in Afghanistan, India would try to reinforce
its energies through the proxies against Pakistan. It would pollute the minds of the masses through
the fifth-generation warfare, which has become an effective tool in the contemporary scenario.
One such example could be seen in the recent cancellation of New Zealand and England’s Cricket
team’s tour to Pakistan. Hours before the toss for the first match, a false threat was conveyed to
New Zealand, which they considered credible enough and pulled out of the series, scheduled in
Pakistan after 18 years. Such hybrid-war tactics have adverse effects for Pakistan.

**The Iranian Factor**

Very volatile neighbors surround Pakistan and Iran is one of them. US withdrawal from
Afghanistan can have direct implications for Pakistan’s relationship with Iran. Iran is ideologically
against the Taliban and had supported Northern Alliance against them in the past. Pakistan
however, enjoys good relations with Afghan Taliban. This becomes a direct conflict of interest for
both the states. Iran recently blamed Pakistan for the Panjshir offensive by Taliban against
Northern Alliance, which Pakistan has denied. However, both Iran and Pakistan have tried to
soften up differences by showing friendly gestures towards Taliban and Northern Alliance
respectively.

**Sub-nationalist Movements**

Baloch and Pashtun militant sub-nationalists who were engaged by India via Afghanistan are also
left stranded after the US withdrawal. They would either return to settle in Pakistan or would come
back to strike Pakistan in whatever capacity they can. There are rumors that most of the Baloch
militants have already trickled back into Pakistan through Balochistan and are spread in the
southern areas, staying with their families. If they stay peaceful, even their presence will not be
felt. However, those ideologically motivated are expected to continue violence/terror within
Balochistan and ought to be handled without being complacent. They are a threat to Pakistan owing
to their ideologies and mindsets. Pakistan must keep that in sight as well.

**Religious Extremism**

With the extremists Taliban in power in Afghanistan, Afghanistan can once again turn into a
hotbed for the terror outfits. TTP, ISIS (K), and ethno-nationalists can become a threat to hard-
earned peace in Pakistan. Not just that, but the local religious extremists in Pakistan can draw
inspiration and reemerge to create chaos and anarchy. One such incident has been witnessed, the
Imam of Lal Masjid, Islamabad, in a recent footage on social media was seen giving threats to the police directly. Such incidents can have serious implications for Pakistan.

**The Kashmir Cause**

The nearly inactive Kashmiri mujahedeen’s struggle in Kashmir can resurge in the aftermath of Taliban takeover of Kabul. Afghan Taliban are from the ancestors of Jihad in Kashmir and their strengthening can actually revive that Jihad in Kashmir which would have direct implications for Pakistan. On a positive side, Pakistan can punish India through unconventional warfare by Kashmiri freedom fighters. On the other hand, there are chances that India will try to get Pakistan rebranded as terror sponsoring state, being a defense-ally of the US now and diplomatically strengthened.

**Policy Recommendations**

In view of the evolving situation in Afghanistan, relevant policy recommendations are as follows:

a. Afghanistan, being a landlocked country, has historically been dependent on two of its neighbors, Iran and Pakistan for most of the trade and economic activities. Both Iran and Pakistan provide it access to the sea. Iran in the recent past capitalized mostly on Northern Alliance-centric government of Afghanistan to boost its trade with Afghanistan. However, Iran’s recent verbal clashes with the Taliban after the Panjshir battle has reduced its diplomatic influence compared to Pakistan. Pakistan enjoys friendlier relation with Taliban. Besides, Pakistan is allied with China’s BRI through CPEC and can put Afghanistan on board too. Therefore, it is recommended that Pakistan must cash on the changing dynamics in Afghanistan and grab the space before anyone else latches on to it. Pakistan and Central Asian Republics (CARs) can increase their trade via Afghanistan and CARs can ultimately become a part of BRI via CPEC. The region overall can gain stability from this increased economic activity and prosperity can be the future, which should be the ultimate goal.

b. Legitimacy and recognition are a few major steps that the Taliban are waiting for the international community to accord. Pakistan should tread this path carefully as it can bring about adverse consequences. Pakistan must continue to engage with them on different issues but de jure, recognition must only come when any of the major powers recognize Taliban regime. On the other hand, if the Taliban take some meaningful measures in the interest of
Pakistan on some of the longstanding issues. For instance, Pakistan can bargain with Afghanistan for no-tolerance policy against the enemies of Pakistan.

c. Pakistan has recently lent out helping hand to the west in evacuations from Afghanistan while the west continues to see Pakistan with same suspicion and degrading eyes. Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey-listing, tougher IMF conditions and the recent abrupt departure of New Zealand Cricket team from Pakistan are some of the examples of west’s high handedness with Pakistan. Pakistan becomes good and workable when the west, especially US need it in crisis, otherwise it continues to remain in their bad books. Pakistan must bargain any future help to the west/US protecting its own national interest.

d. Pakistan must stand for a balanced government in Kabul. It should be inclusive of women and all the ethnicities. Pakistan in the recent past made considerable gains among the notables of Northern Alliance, this recent takeover by Taliban must not reverse those gains. Pakistan has so far pushed for and supported an inclusive government in Kabul, which takes in all the ethnic groups. However, so far, the interim government is far from that reality. Pakistan must take all the stakeholders in Afghanistan together to avoid any conflict and civil war in Afghanistan, which ultimately is in Pakistan’s own greater interest.

e. Pakistan must stand prepared to face the fallout of Indian withdrawal from Afghanistan. The segments that India supported in Afghanistan are left stranded and can vent out their frustration in series of terror attacks in Pakistan. Indian pull out from Afghanistan will be good in the end but can have immediate adverse effects for which Pakistan must be prepared. Pakistan has two options, either to give general amnesty to all of them who worked against the state of Pakistan or to take them on. In the light of the evolving environment, it is suggested that Pakistan should avoid both and instead initiate legal trials against all such individuals and let the law take its course.

f. Pakistan must avoid over reliance on China in the context of the evolving Afghan situation and it must avoid going all out against the western states / the US. Keeping a balance is the need of the hour. China might be the emerging global power but US still controls most of the world affairs overtly and covertly and Pakistan needs legitimacy from the west especially under the current economic situation which would take years for Pakistan to be back on its feet. Until then Pakistan cannot afford and must not go for any confrontation for any third state. It must pursue its own national interests carefully and diplomatically.
g. War tactics have changed largely in recent times. Narratives play an important role in the contemporary world. However, Pakistan lacks in narrative building. Pakistan was at the forefronts in evacuation of western diplomats and forces, but it received a meagre recognition for such heroic efforts. On the other hand, India continues to build false narratives via its fake news network, which was busted recently by the European Union. Pakistan is still a villain in the eyes of many westerners especially the nonprofessionals despite it suffering the loss of countless precious lives and suffering heavy economic losses. Pakistan must increase its counter propaganda machinery and act smartly in presenting its own narrative through modern means especially electronic and social media. Fake news should not only be countered but the source also penalized, especially if it is coming from someone within Pakistan. There should be proper checks on every collaborator of anti-state activity in this environment of the fifth-generation warfare.

h. One of the looming crises that Pakistan should be prepared to manage is the possibility of influx of large number of Afghan refugees. Pakistan should still lobby for peace within Afghanistan so that the Afghans do not feel the need of ending up as refugees. Those Afghans who are involved in anti-Pakistan activities should be carefully filtered out of the refugees that Pakistan may have to host, if and when. All the Afghan refugees should be kept under close watch and Pakistan must ask UNHCR to help to host the Afghan refugees.

i. One may argue that closing Pakistan's western border, which extends 2,670-kilometers, is the greatest solution for preventing the TTP infiltration, but this would certainly result in Pakistan missing its strategic place in Afghanistan, since it would enrage the Taliban government. Pakistan and Afghanistan have a cultural and religious link, sealing the border would certainly inflame nationalist and religious feelings across the border. The tribes living astride the border need to be accommodated by keeping gates and access through the fence. Islamabad’s one-sided closure of the western border contradicts its stated support for Afghanistan. The best option for Islamabad would be to reach an agreement with the Afghan Taliban to deliver militants preparing strikes against Pakistan, or at the very least to expel them from their shared border, where Pakistani troops have been highly vigilant for the past few months.

j. Several factors should be kept in view if the administration is truly considering an amnesty. To begin with, an amnesty should be limited to a few individuals rather than the entire
organization, as a general amnesty is a risky idea. Low-ranking cadres, for example, who have been misled and agree to lay down their weapons and live according to the rule of the land, may be eligible for amnesty. They need to be de-radicalized and be trained in skills in order to play a gainful part in society. However, even these people would have to be monitored by the government, as evidence from de-radicalization program of other nation’s shows that even rehabilitated extremists frequently revert to violence.

**Conclusion**

In the post US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan once again is standing at the crossroads of history where the choices it may make will be game changing for the people of Pakistan in particular and of the region in general. From the analysis in this part of the paper, and in view of the unfolding situation in Afghanistan post US withdrawal, the global power dynamics and Indian hostility do not give Pakistan much space to get directly involved in Afghanistan’s internal matters. As Pakistan itself is a developing nation with many challenges and hostilities hence it needs a stable and friendly Afghanistan for securing and promoting its own interests. Therefore, for a win-win solution, Pakistan should firstly keep its international diplomatic efforts alive for the sake of foreign acceptance and support for the new government in Afghanistan by the global community. Secondly, Pakistan should also make efforts towards Taliban to make an inclusive government. Thirdly, Pakistan should adopt a very balanced approach in courting the great powers such as the US, Russia and China and should give prime importance to its own national interests while making alliances with these states. It will help Pakistan as well as the region to prosper in peace. Pathways to peace and stability would be possible through a balanced approach in Afghanistan by all the stakeholders.
Part III

Afghanistan After US Withdrawal - Possible Scenarios and Policy
Recommendations for Pakistan

Abstract

Afghanistan’s evolving situation is too fluid to make any sound predictions for global and regional dynamics in political, economic and regional security. The scenarios are yet to emerge inside Afghanistan, which would then influence the regional countries and world powers. The uncertainty inside and around Afghanistan defies making any sound predictions pertaining to socio-political, geo-economic and strategic scenarios for Afghanistan and the regional powers. This part of the paper presents possible scenarios after Taliban takeover and implications for the CPEC and Pakistan. The paper divides the possible scenarios tentatively in four likely scenes. The first section explains the dimensions of political set-ups emerging out from the vacuum created by the US withdrawal. The second scenario describes the impact of the economic problems after the takeover of the Taliban. The third scenario dilates on the security situation internally and its repercussions on CPEC and Pakistan. The last part covers likely scenarios confined to socio-cultural aspects of Afghanistan’s evolving situation followed by key conclusions and recommendations.

Background

Afghanistan’s evolving situation is too fluid to predict global and regional dynamics in politics, economy, and regional security. The scenarios within Afghanistan are yet to congeal. Once stabilized they would draw response from the regional countries and world powers. The US withdrawal does not seem to be a complete evacuation of the US interests from Afghanistan. The uncertainty prevails inside and around Afghanistan. However, Pakistan remains central in any emerging scenario.

Afghanistan is the prime focus of global powers due to its geo-strategic location. The history of Afghanistan is replete with wars and violence, including the recent foreign occupation from the last four decades since December 1979. It started with the Soviet Union’s invasion of

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Afghanistan with the intention to spread Marxist-Leninist ideology. That invasion was contested by the emergence of Mujahedeen. They used Guerilla warfare tactics to counter the Soviet invasion with the support of different regional and global powers. With the help of funding and arms by the US and direct support of Pakistan, the Mujahedeen succeeded in overthrowing the Soviet-backed communist government after the withdrawal of the Soviet Armed Forces.\textsuperscript{90}

A power vacuum was created in Afghanistan after the Soviet disintegration. The Taliban emerged because of the anarchy and slowly filled this power vacuum and took control of Kabul in 1996. The Taliban established a government under the Islamic Sharia law, albeit distorted by tribal culture. Their government, controlling nearly 90\% of the territory was formally recognized by only three countries, Pakistan was one of them.\textsuperscript{91} In 1999, both Taliban and al-Qaeda were declared terrorist groups by a resolution from the UN Security Council. After the 9/11 attacks in New York, the US duly supported by the NATO, attacked Afghanistan and unleashed a so-called ‘Global War on Terror’.\textsuperscript{92} Despite installing successive puppet regimes in Kabul, the US could not subdue insurgency by Taliban in Afghanistan. Finally, admitting its failure, it vacated Afghanistan withdrawing all troops. The US and its allies’ invasion and rule over Afghanistan has now become history.\textsuperscript{93}

The Taliban have once again emerged as the most powerful group in Afghanistan. The Doha Agreement\textsuperscript{94} was a turning point for the Afghan Taliban to emerge as a political entity. On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took control of the whole country. The unexpected and unforeseen military dominance over the Afghan national army was a major political and military victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{95} Coming into power, the Taliban made some positive gestures suggesting that they will not follow the past practices. In their first media appearance, they offered


amnesty to their opponents and tolerance to religious minorities. Taliban promised to form an inclusive form of government but still hold exclusive power in their hands. There are reports that executions, forced disappearances, and detention of various persons who had worked for the US and the Afghan government.\(^{96}\)

The acceptability from the public will define the Taliban future. Governance, on the other hand, is a major issue. The Taliban are good at fighting guerilla war, they lack technocratic skills to run institutions of the state. The well-educated and skilled people have already fled the country from the fear of execution.\(^{97}\) Freedom of media, women and minorities’ rights will be another test for the Taliban regime.\(^{98}\)

Being on the list of the world’s poorest countries, 75% of public spending has been coming through grants. After freezing the $9.5 billion of Afghan Central Bank assets by the US and suspension of funds from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will likely have devastating impacts on the economy. The presence of Al-Qaeda and IS Khurasan will be another dynamic to watch.\(^{99}\) Pakistan will be directly affected by these emerging threats and challenges. Pakistan, already holding millions of Afghan refugees will have additional problems if a new wave of refugees’ arrival.

This part highlights probable scenarios after the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan, implications for the CPEC and Pakistan. The first section explains the political and security vacuum created by the US withdrawal. The second section evaluates likely economic problems. The third section deals with the security situation internally and its repercussions on CPEC and Pakistan. Finally, policy guidelines are recommended for the policymakers.


**Political / Security Vacuum**

After the physical withdrawal of US forces and Taliban takeover, a political/security vacuum is most likely to emerge in the coming few months. If the political/security voids are not adequately addressed, the undesirable elements could fill this vacuum. This will influence Afghanistan and Pakistan but will also have global ramifications. Different Islamic regional and global militant groups have welcomed and appreciated the Taliban take over. Some of the groups have shown their willingness to align themselves with the Taliban government. The Taliban have influence over different warlords, the Haqqani network, TTP and al-Qaeda. However, IS-K will be a threat to the Taliban government. They may take the position to claim the power, territory, and economic activity from the Taliban. This will create chaos and deteriorate the security of Afghanistan, indeed, the entire region.

**Chances of Regional and Global Terrorism**

The Kabul airport attacks on 26 August 2021 have warned the world that a terrorism threat in Afghanistan still exists. The attacks claimed by IS-K have challenged the Taliban's ability to maintain security and peace. The local and regional groups will exploit the instability and security of the country and are likely to re-establish themselves. These groups have links and roots in the neighboring countries and fight within the states based on sectarian, political and ethnic lines. The victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan has given confidence and ideological strength to other Islamist groups. TTP will gain momentum from the victory of the Taliban and is likely to carry out terrorist attacks in Pakistan. The Taliban in Afghanistan have never confronted or renounced the TTP and vice versa. It is not wrong to say that TTP is an offshoot of the Afghan Taliban. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is likely to emerge as a threat to Central Asia. The chances of the East Turkistan Independence Movement (ETIM) is also likely to affect the security situation of China. The ETIM may find safe havens and training camps in Afghanistan in a short period. On the sectarian basis, Iran may confront difficulties in containing sectarian threats that may occur in the coming few months.

Al-Qaeda has evolved at the grass root levels in different parts of the world. They have made regional networks in different African and Middle Eastern countries. The appearance of Ayman-
Al-Zawahiri on social media this month has raised serious concerns. Al-Qaeda is working and operating in almost fifteen provinces of Afghanistan. The 2020 Doha Agreement states that the Taliban will not support or provide support to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. However, the Taliban have ignored al-Qaeda’s’ presence in the country. IS-K and other militant groups are still active in Afghanistan and in many other countries. Their presence in Afghanistan reflects that transnational terrorism may emerge in the coming few months.

**Kalashnikov Culture, Re-emerging**

After taking control of almost all of Afghanistan, the Taliban have captured arms and ammunition from ANDSF and local warlords including military aircraft and armored vehicles. This will further enhance their strength. There is a chance that other militant groups may also acquire some of these weapons and smuggle them to other neighboring countries. If civil war erupts, it will further deteriorate the political/security situation in Afghanistan and the region.

**Release of Terrorists**

Coming into power, the Taliban have released the all the terrorist suspects from the prisons of Qandahar, Pul-e- Charkhi, Bagram Base and Kunduz. Nearly 30,000 prisoners were housed in various jails of the country till 2018. The top leaders and most wanted terrorists belonging to different groups like al-Qaeda, TTP, ISIS, ETIM, IMU, drug traffickers and criminals were also released. This alarming situation is likely to create chaos and instability. The release of highly trained and most wanted terrorists will further deteriorate the evolving situation. These prisoners can join different militant groups, which will further affect the political/security situation in the country.

**Political Scenarios**

The evolving situation in Afghanistan is still filled with uncertainty. Taliban, after coming into power, showed positive gestures towards the public and the world. The Taliban’s promises to form an inclusive government has not been honoured. According to Joseph Nye “there is no single future
until it happens”. There is no way to make a fair prediction about the emerging scenarios in Afghanistan. Achieving near term stability in Afghanistan and ensuring its long-term sustainability are a chicken-and-egg challenge.

**Recognition of Taliban Regime**

When a regime change occurs in a state, it is necessary that it be recognized by other states. The Taliban are facing the dilemma that their regime will not be recognised in quick time. After announcing their interim setup, the Taliban did not indicate how long this setup would last and under what constitutional framework it would function. Former Afghan diplomats and anti-Taliban factions have asked other countries not to recognise the Taliban government. Recognition means international legal benefits, including diplomatic immunities and access to the Afghanistan assets in the US. Pakistan has called for an inclusive government to strengthen national integration and stability in the war-torn country. Despite the promises of sharing power with other political leaders, minorities, and women, the Taliban formed an exclusive government of senior members of the Islamist movement. After the Taliban take over, the US and other western countries have closed down their embassies in Kabul. While Pakistan, China, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Central Asian Republics have retained their diplomatic presence. The maintaining of the embassy however, does not mean recognition of the government. Other than recognition from the world, acceptance within the country from the masses will be a hard nut to crack. The previous government failed to provide the fundamental human rights in security, economic, and politics that led to its debacle. People were frustrated and wanted change in the structure, but that does not reflect their love for the Taliban. If they continued the same atrocities as they did in the past, they are not likely to gain acceptability within the country. There is a clear division of perceptions among the masses in urban and rural areas of the country. In urban areas, people have a negative image of the Taliban, having fear and hate towards them, while in rural areas, they have a positive and strong support. This division will further intensify if they fail to provide fundamental rights to the masses.

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Governance

“Governance is the system by which entities are directed and controlled”.101 Good governance needs to implement justice, uphold the rule of law, accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness in the decision-making process. The state needs a constitution to maintain the rule of law and provide the basic rights to its citizens. Governance will be another nightmare for the Taliban government. From their past performance, one can perceive that they lack governance-skills. Taliban are good when it comes to fighting but governance requires knowledge of administration and skills and efficiency. The law-and-order situation will be a test in determining the efficiency and effectiveness of the Taliban rule. In the past, a local Amir would settle matters of justice on the streets instead of trials in courts. The institutional failure was the leading cause of the fall of Ashraf Ghani’s government. The institutional failure directly translates into government failure. The Taliban will have to face this institutional crisis in the coming few months. The Taliban also lack technocratic skills to govern the institutions. The brain drain from the country will have a devastating impact the Taliban will face shortly. If they follow the same suit of brutality in governing the country, they would face strict actions and sanctions from the world.

Human Rights

According to the universal human rights declaration, every individual has the right to life, freedom from slavery and servitude, right of recognition, freedom of opinion, right of education, freedom of religion, right to work, and right to property.102 In their past tenure, the Taliban committed serious kinds of atrocities and violations of human rights against the Afghan nationals, including women, children, journalists, political rivals, and minorities. The biggest challenge the Taliban will face in the coming few months will be to protect human rights. After their first-ever media appearance, they assured the world of giving amnesty to all those who had worked for the previous governments or the US. The uncertainty however, is still prevailing. Those who have worked with the government earlier, NATO, and foreign countries are at risk and door to door campaigns have reportedly been started in search of them. After assurances from the Taliban government that

woman rights will be respected, the skepticism persists. Many incidents have been observed that are alarming regarding women rights. During a talk show, one of the cabinet members called women a ‘reproduction machine, unconscious being, and non-sense’. Minorities have been subject to persecution and discrimination in Afghanistan from different groups. All the minorities in the country are in constant fear and try to hide their religious affiliations. There are reports that the Taliban are torturing and attacking the Shia minority group. Many reports suggest that the Taliban regime will remain brutal as that of the past and with human rights as the most important victim.

**Economic Scenarios**

The sudden and unexpected takeover of Afghanistan brings yet another shock to the long-suffering Afghan people and the country’s fragile economy. Already plagued by insecurity, COVID-19, corruption, government over-centralization and mismanagement, declining revenues and drought, the Afghan economy will now face a host of challenges in the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover and the international community denying aid and assistance. As the new Afghan government takes shape, the actions of the Taliban and the international community's response could greatly exacerbate or modestly alleviate the current economic and humanitarian crises.

Afghanistan's US$ 9.5 reserves held outside Afghanistan remain blocked. Similarly, FATF has warned its 139 members to stop and freeze Taliban assets. IMF also have stopped loans and financial aids to the Taliban government. Unemployment is rising as various national and international agencies have stopped working. This may have devastating results on the inflation and sabotage of the national currency, which would lead to various humanitarian crises, including food shortages as the main concern.

**Economic Dependency on Foreign Aid**

Afghanistan economy is fragile and has been aid-dependent. Economic aspects become more precarious as the future financial aid from the rich countries and financial institutions is under uncertainty. According to the World Bank, a nation is considered aid-dependent when at least 10 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) comes from foreign aid. However, over the last 20 years, 40 percent of Afghanistan's GDP came from international aid. 103 On top of foreign aid, another 4% of Afghanistan's GDP was made up of remittances. This meant that it was one of the

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world’s most dependent on aid and remittances country in the world. Even with billions of dollars in foreign aid, Afghanistan’s economy struggled, with growth failing to keep pace with the steady increase in population. The abrupt stoppage of this aid will have serious implications for the neighboring countries. Pakistan’s border may face a rise in smuggling, leading to shortage of food and other consumable goods. A summary of foreign aid received by Afghanistan (as recorded by World Bank)\(^\text{104}\) between 2002 and 2019 is given in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Official development assistance and aid received (World Bank)</th>
<th>Billions of US$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001-2005</td>
<td>7.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2010</td>
<td>25.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2015</td>
<td>23.509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>3.812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>3.792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>4.284</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Unstable Financial Institutions**

Imbalanced institutions have been detrimental to democracy, political stability, and civil-military trust. If they function properly, some balance stabilizes democracy, politics, and economic well-being and harmonizes civil-military relationships. When the financial institutions suddenly crash, the economy also collapses. The financial institutions of Afghanistan are facing the same situation. The Taliban have taken over the government without any military resistance, but are now facing an economy on the brink of collapse. Huge masses of people are seen in lines around the banks to withdraw their savings. Banks have no cash available, or limited cash is provided. Such emerging scenarios have increased the unrest among the people.

**Brain Drain and Lack of Skilled Labor**

One of the significant problems of economic set back in Afghanistan is the brain drain. Skilled workers flew out of the country, fearing replay of the Taliban regime of the 1990s. When the last

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US troops vacated Afghanistan, they took 100,000 people with them; some were highly educated and skilled workers. This process continues, and many of the workers are queuing-in to fly away as soon as possible. The Taliban ought to stop or reduce this brain drain by providing social protection and security to the people.

**Unemployment Issues**
The Taliban’s takeover has given rise to unemployment and poverty. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs, including the Afghan National Army. Many of the government employees have not been paid for months. Hundreds of thousands of government employees, security personnel, people working in aid agencies and media outlets are now without work and pay. Freezing the Afghan reserves has further led to severe inflation all over the country. National institutions are on the verge of collapse as thousands of professionals have left the country. Many humanitarian organizations have stopped working and their employees gone out of the country, burdening national employment security.

**Food and Humanitarian Crises**
The smuggling of food items from Pakistan are likely to increase thus causing shortages in various bordering areas of Pakistan, especially in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The UN has warned that more than 97% of the Afghanistan population would sink under the poverty line by 2022. The drought and famine are rising to new heights, and the World Food Program (WFP) informed that, Afghanistan would run out of food in major cities in a few months, pushing 14 million people to the brink of starvation. Afghanistan already had the second-highest level of food insecurity globally, high rates of poverty and a health system “at breaking point” due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Taliban takeover has exacerbated the multiple crises that already existed.

**Implications for CPEC and Pakistan Under Each Scenario**
Pakistan shares the longest border with Afghanistan. The emerging socio-economic environment have serious implications for Pakistan. This section highlights the possible implications arising out of the takeover by the Taliban. The study has considered three scenarios; the first scenario addresses the political implications, the second considers the security implications, and the third considers economic implications.
Security Scenario

Despite the assurances given by the Taliban to Pakistan that their land will not be used against Pakistan, the incidents of terrorism and extremism are rising day by day. Pakistan may face another wave of terrorism in the coming months as the TTP head Mufti Noor Wali announced his allegiance to the Afghan Taliban. The attacks from TTP have increased since beginning of 2021, and it could further increase in the coming months. The CPEC projects have slowed down because of the terrorist attacks from TTP. The TTP has claimed responsibility for 32 attacks from August until now which is very alarming for Pakistan and CPEC. Recently, the President of Pakistan and the Foreign Minister offered amnesty to the TTP members, subject to their surrendering, stopping terrorist activities and accepting the constitution of Pakistan. TTP ridiculed the offer, rejected the conditional amnesty and said that they would continue their struggle to implement Sharia in Pakistan. The release of trained terrorists that includes TTP members is alarming for Pakistan. Maulvi Faqir Muhammad, the TTP deputy chief, was also released from prison in Afghanistan. Talking to a gathering in Afghanistan, he stated that ‘the enforcement of Sharia in Afghanistan is a road map towards the implementation of Sharia in Pakistan.’ He also reiterated his commitment to ‘jihad’. The weapons left over from the cold war were smuggled to Pakistan during the 80s, giving birth to weapon culture. The Kalashnikov was available in almost every part of the country and the selling of arms had become the most prominent business in those days. The Taliban have taken over the huge quantity of leftover arms and ammunition left behind by the US. The weapons smuggling to Pakistan is likely to start all over again. M4 full-automatic assault rifle is available in the markets of Quetta and Peshawar at low prices. Various militant groups like TTP, BLA and others operating in Pakistan can purchase these weapons easily.

Political Scenario

During the 90s, Pakistan was the first to recognize the then Taliban regime. Pakistan was blamed consistently for supporting the Taliban due to this recognition. Should Pakistan recognize the Taliban regime at this stage, the anti-Pakistan elements will use it as a propaganda tool against Pakistan. This decision might also hinder the economic assistance from different international organizations to Pakistan. It will build a stronger anti-Pakistan narrative through different media outlets, and sanctions might be imposed through different means. The human rights violation in Afghanistan will directly affect Pakistan. These violations are likely to lead to a refugee crisis. Pakistan might again be burdened by afresh refugee influx. Pakistan has hosted the biggest number
of refugees since the 1980s. Some of them have returned to their country, but there are still registered 1.4 million refugees residing in Pakistan. Unregistered refugees are also in large numbers. As of now, a large number possibly in thousands, has already fled from Afghanistan and reached Pakistan. Pakistan has officially closed its borders but due to porous borders, bribery-cultural and ethnic affinities, it is impossible to stop the Afghan refugees from entering the country.

**Economic Scenario**

This study highlights the possible economic difficulties in Afghanistan, which would have serious implications for Pakistan. The uncertain situation and food crisis in Afghanistan is likely to create a refugee influx, detrimental to Pakistan’s national resources. The increase in demand for food commodities in Afghanistan and refugees may tend to raise food prices, besides giving rise to food smuggling to Afghanistan.

In the garb of refugees, probability of terrorist entering Pakistan cannot be overruled. It will pose a fresh challenge to the security agencies for peaceful completion of CPEC. Yet another visible growing trend is the rising demand of dollars by Afghans in Pakistan planning to immigrate to Europe. This has raised the price of dollar in Pakistan weakening Pakistani rupee.

**Major Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

The evolving, unpredictable situation in Afghanistan in areas of regional security, politics and economy will have implications for CPEC and Pakistan. The physical withdrawal of the US troops does not guarantee a complete abdication of the US interests and involvement in Afghanistan. The internal security in Afghanistan is not yet stable. Overall peace and development process in Afghanistan is still elusive. This also poses threat of regional instability and insurgencies in neighboring countries. The lack of external sources of funding, mass unemployment and end of war economy have all resulted into extreme poverty. The slowing down if not postponing altogether development of CPEC is being threatened by Afghanistan’s situation. Pakistan’s security is also threatened should an influx of insurgents and a second wave of Afghan refugees starts arriving in Pakistan. The following recommendations are therefore made:

a. The assurances given to Pakistan from the Taliban that their land ‘will not be used against Pakistan’ is to pull the wool over the eyes. TTA and TTP are the opposite sides of the same coin, and TTP is an offshoot of TTA. Considering this into account, Pakistan must take serious steps to deal with the Taliban government. The increase in the terrorists’ attacks in Pakistan claimed by TTP are of serious concern, and a proper security mechanism must be adopted to
control the influx of terrorists into Pakistan. Islamabad and Kabul should have a joint intelligence sharing mechanism and proper border management to avoid terrorist threats. If this issue is not adequately addressed, it may deteriorate relations between Taliban’s Afghanistan and Pakistan.

b. Pakistan should control the flow of arms and ammunition from Afghanistan. Another wave of Kalashnikov-culture is making its way. Various militant groups in Pakistan can then easily acquire these weapons, as in the past. A stringent surveillance system in the shape of satellite monitoring, metal detectors, sniffing dogs, and trained persons must be deployed on border checkpoints. The Taliban regime must be asked to stop the flow of weapons into Pakistan.

c. The prison-release of trained terrorists, including TTP deputy chief Maulvi Faqir Muhammad is a serious potential security threat to Pakistan. This issue should be raised with the Taliban government.

d. Pakistan should not be in a hurry to recognize the Taliban government, as was done in the past. All countries are withholding recognition of the Taliban government. Pakistan must follow the same line.

e. Pakistan must keep itself ready for managing another wave of refugees which might happen in the coming few months. All the fresh refugees must be registered and limited to the camps. A contingency plan to handle this eventuality must be prepared to obviate any mismanagement. A Biometric system should be installed within the possible camps for the appropriate movement of refugees.

f. Pakistan should try to assist in governance in Afghanistan if asked, by providing professional and technical support. Pakistan’s professionals, technical, and skilled people can help Afghanistan in institutions building. Such a move will not only benefit Afghanistan, but also help Pakistan neutralize the anti-Pakistani narrative in Afghanistan.

g. Afghanistan still needs foreign aid to coup up with the prevailing humanitarian crises. Pakistan should offer to provide food and health items to neutralize its devastative effects. Pakistan should attempt to convince the US and its allies and members of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to provide humanitarian and financial assistance to the new regime in Kabul.
h. State Bank of Pakistan should also consider helping the Bank of Afghanistan in the current state of crisis, unless stopped by the US sanctions on Afghanistan. Pakistan should provide loans to Afghanistan on easy instalments and less interest rates.

i. Pakistan’s mining and textile sector may find this as an opportunity to strengthen its footprints in Afghanistan. However, better security environment is required for this initiative.

j. Pakistan should make efforts to prevent any food and humanitarian crisis emerging in Afghanistan. The Food Department and National Disaster Management Authority be directed to manage the humanitarian crisis in case of an influx of refugees into Pakistan.
Part IV

Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

Preamble

Afghanistan’s evolving situation pertaining to domestic peace, politics within Afghanistan and beyond, economy, regional security and vital interests of major global powers were studied in the preceding pages using open sources, social media, historic behaviors, vital interests of major powers and common perceptions prevailing in Quetta/Balochistan. All of these factors have implications for the geopolitical rivals, the US, China, Russia and the region but they have most direct impact on Pakistan. In the absence of better information, having no excess to the mindsets of the Taliban regime, no details of the inevitable cloak and dagger game peculiar to Afghanistan which must be in progress, and extent to which major powers would involve themselves in Afghanistan, this study meets partial requirement of the Research Theme.

The policies recommended for the Government of Pakistan are expected to remain relevant for next 2-3 months but would require reconsideration and adjustments to accommodate the fast evolving/changing political and geostrategic environment during January 2022. In this Part-IV of the Study, a distilled summary of policy recommendations is submitted, as follows:

**Recognizing Taliban Government - No Haste Policy**

At the foreign policy level, Pakistan should follow a No-Haste policy. No haste may be made in recognizing the Afghanistan’s newly formed regime. Before recognizing the political leadership and establishing diplomatic ties, Pakistan must try to hammer out mutually agreed policy with regional stakeholders especially China, Russia, Iran and the CARs. It will be unwise to part ways with the regional powers and follow the dictates of the US. However, all efforts must be made to keep a balance and not turn US into an adversary.

Legitimacy and recognition are two major first steps that Taliban are waiting for the international community to take. Pakistan must continue to engage with Taliban on different issues but de jure recognition must come only when any of the major powers recognize Taliban regime. Or Taliban take some difficult practical measures which are in vital interests of Pakistan on some of the long outstanding issues. For instance, Pakistan can bargain the recognition of Taliban regime by them announcing No-tolerance policy against the enemies of Pakistan such as the TTP.
In the meanwhile, Pakistan along with other key stakeholders should continue to urge the international community to lift the economic sanctions on Afghanistan and indeed, provide enough financial / humanitarian aid to obviate Afghanistan slipping back into anarchy.

Pakistan should propose a regional arrangement predominantly dedicated to Afghanistan’s social re-construction and re-integration. China, Russia and Pakistan could play vital role on this policy imperative. China’s probable acceptance and diplomatic ties with Afghanistan would also strengthen the relations between the three countries ensuring stable socio-political environment in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has been historically dependent on Iran and Pakistan for most of the trade and economic activities. Both Iran and Pakistan provide it access to the sea. In the recent past, Iran depended on the Northern-Alliance centric government to boost its trade with Afghanistan. However, Iran’s recent verbal clashes with the Taliban after the Panjshir battle have created friction with the Taliban. Pakistan enjoys friendlier relation with Taliban and can be great help in connectivity through China’s BRI and CPEC. Pakistan should cash on the emerging environment in Afghanistan and acquire major rights for trade/commerce. Pakistan and CARs should attempt to increase their trade via Afghanistan and CARs can ultimately become a part of BRI via CPEC. The increased economic activity and prosperity can be the future, which should be the ultimate goal.

**Approach of Diplomacy with Afghanistan**

State-level diplomacy should be at low-key level and as far as possible, covert. This is needed internationally as well as for not giving an impression to the Afghans that Pakistan is trying to run Afghanistan. An inclusive political leadership must be tactfully recommended to the Taliban regime.

**Approach of Diplomacy with the Major Powers**

Pakistan must follow a balanced and negotiating soft approach towards the US now. It should attempt to play the third party role in bringing the US and the newly formed Taliban regime on table to serve mutual interests.
Pakistan must avoid over reliance on China in the context of evolving Afghan situation and it must also avoid going against the US/western states. Keeping a balance is the need of the hour. China is indeed, the emerging global power, but the US still controls most of the world affairs overtly and/or covertly. Pakistan needs support from the west, especially the US for economic reasons at least. Pakistan must not go for confrontation with any third state. It must pursue its own national interests politically and diplomatically.

**Preparations for Possible Major Influx of Afghan Refugees**

Pakistan must prepare to manage a possible major influx of Afghan refugees. A regulatory body for refugee management to include areas of camps, registration, in-out flux, limitations and necessary assistance ensuring their return, needs to be formed now. A national policy which discourages prospective refugees with a time frame must be decided. The UNHCR should also be taken onboard and prepared for this possibility to provide timely assistance. Pakistan should lobby for peace in Afghanistan so that the Afghans do not feel the need for ending up as refugees. Those Afghans who were/are involved in anti-Pakistan activities should be carefully filtered out of the refugees, should an influx occur.

**Border Management with Afghanistan - Security**

The existing measures of border management should be strengthened to obviate unknown ingress of Afghans in Pakistan. The release of various highly trained terrorists, including TTP deputy chief Maulvi Faqir Muhammad is a serious security threat to Pakistan. Pakistan should raise this issue with the Taliban government as the Taliban had already assured that their land would not be used against any country.

Pakistan must not appear impatient to offer amnesty to TTP. Pathan tribal mindset respects power and coercive ability of the adversary but looks at offers of unsolicited-amnesty as weakness. The TTP jihadist, Takfiri ideology will certainly pose serious threats to national security and even unity of Pakistan. The TTP’s latest attacks in Pakistan do not allow any offer of amnesty at all. Indeed, they should be handled with an iron hand, a language which tribal mindset understands and no amnesty, not even conditional, be offered.

Pakistan’s 2,670-kilometer-long western border with Afghanistan is mostly fenced but remains porous due to several crossing places and compromise by those ensuring its defense for several reasons. The border must be managed to restrict militant/terrorist’s infiltration into Pakistani
territory, however, it has its own repercussions which need to be taken into account and accordingly handled. Pakistan and Afghanistan have religious and socio-cultural links, which are likely to create serious resentment on both sides of the border. Total closure of the border is neither possible nor desirable. Besides, closing the border would diminish Pakistan’s strategic position in Afghanistan, as well as it will weaken Pakistan’s often-repeated support for Afghanistan. Pakistan should create several entry points from Afghanistan, allow registered Afghans to enter thus discouraging unauthorized ingress. Pakistan also must negotiate with the Taliban to hand over or at least confine the TTP militants and to ensure that Afghanistan never provides safe havens to any terrorist groups in future.

Pakistan should prevent or at least restrict the flow of arms and ammunition in the country. These weapons can be supplied easily to various militant groups inside Pakistan, as seen in the past. Proper surveillance systems in the shape of satellite monitoring, metal detectors, sniffing dogs and trained persons must be deployed on border checkpoints. Pakistan should take the issue of arms and ammunition supplies with the Taliban government to stop the possible flow towards Pakistan.

**Countering Adverse Narratives**

Concept of War has changed to a large extent in recent times. Narratives play an important role in the contemporary world to create hatred, disunity, conflicts, despondency and capitulation. Pakistan lacks in narrative building. Major efforts are required at narrative building to counter adverse propaganda against Pakistan by its adversaries. Pakistan must increase its counter propaganda machinery and act smartly in presenting its own narrative through modern means, especially electronic and social media. Fake news should not only be countered but also penalized especially if it is coming from someone within Pakistan. There must be proper checks on every collaborator of anti-state activity in this fifth-generation warfare.

Narrative building can be through direct and/or indirect means. Direct means involve institutional role to inculcate systematically the narrative that to assist Afghanistan nation-building means peace and security for Pakistan. Positive propaganda, counter propaganda and selective dissemination of information through social and print media are the indirect means of narrative building. Both means need to be employed for Pakistan as well as Afghanistan to create amity on both sides.
Bargaining Approach with the US/West Rather Than Outright Submission

Pakistan has recently lent out helping-hand to the west in evacuations from Afghanistan while the west continues to see Pakistan with suspicion and degrading eyes. FATF grey-listing, tougher IMF conditions and the recent abrupt departure of New Zealand Cricket team from Pakistan are some of the examples of high headedness towards Pakistan. When needed, Pakistan becomes good otherwise, it continues to remain in their bad books. Pakistan must bargain any future help to the US/west ensuring her national interest.

Institution Building and Politically Balanced Government in Afghanistan

Pakistan must stand for a politically balanced government in Kabul. It should be inclusive of all the ethnicities and be gender balanced. Pakistan in the recent past made considerable gains among the notables of Northern Alliance. The takeover by Taliban must not reverse those gains in any case. Pakistan has so far pushed for and supported an inclusive government in Kabul, which takes in all the ethnic groups. Taliban must involve all the stakeholders in Afghanistan to avoid conflict and civil war in Afghanistan. This is in Pakistan’s own greater interest.

Pakistan must play its part in the governance process in Afghanistan by providing professional and technical support in almost every domain to Afghanistan, if invited by Afghanistan. Pakistan's professionals, technical, and skilled people can help Afghanistan in institutions building. Such a move will not only benefit Afghanistan, but also help Pakistan neutralize the anti-Pakistani narrative in Afghanistan.

State Bank of Pakistan may be directed to help the Central Bank of Afghanistan in the current state of crisis, if not restricted by the US sanctions on Afghanistan. It should help Afghan financial institutions in the shape of a professional exchange program, money exchange mechanism and organizing training sessions for Afghan nationals. Pakistan should provide loans to Afghanistan on easy installments and low interest rates. Pakistan’s currency is freely used in Afghanistan; therefore, loan can also be in Pakistani currency.

With the uplift of institutions, there will be more chances of employment opportunities for the people of Afghanistan. Therefore, for generating employment opportunities, the Taliban should be encouraged to allow foreign nations, except India, to complete pending developmental projects.
Pakistan’s mining, textile sector and business community should be encouraged to mark their footprints in Afghanistan.

**Humanitarian Assistance**

Afghanistan badly needs foreign aid to cope up with the economic state and prevailing humanitarian crises. Pakistan should provide food and medical support to whatever extent it can. Close collaboration between the Food Department and National Disaster Management Authority can be established to manage the humanitarian crisis in the making. To assure a peaceful Afghanistan and the region, Pakistan should try to convince the US, its allies and members of SCO to provide humanitarian and financial assistance to the people of Afghanistan, even if the Taliban regime is yet to be recognized.

**Conclusion**

With the end of long-standing war of US in Afghanistan and Taliban’s unexpected rapid seizure of Kabul, a political vacuum has been created. The shock of this sudden transition and unhappy memories of previous Taliban rule has made all stakeholder to defer recognition of Taliban’s regime. At the same time, the US and the regional countries are trying to establish an order, which does not jeopardize their respective interests. The US withdrawal has resulted in the US foreign policy shift, as it seems to have decided to employ different measure to keep its influence in Afghanistan and contain China elsewhere. The US is now oriented against China in the Indo-Pacific region through a new military alliance. The future of Taliban regime has serious implications for regional as well as global politics. The US and China competition has intensified which necessitates a balanced approach from Pakistan. Pakistan once again is standing at the crossroads of history where its approach towards Afghanistan and the region as well as the US has to be adjusted in time to preserve its own vital national interests. The geopolitical aspirations of major powers and India’s hostility do not allow Pakistan much space to get directly involved in Afghanistan’s internal matters. To ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan is in Pakistan’s national interest and it should make efforts to stabilize Afghanistan within the limits of its power potential.