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*A Fleeting Calm: Afghanistan under the Taliban*



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There is a sense of calm that has descended on Afghanistan in the aftermath of the chaos that followed the political desertion by the erstwhile Ashraf Ghani government and the Taliban takeover. However, the seeming political and strategic equanimity over Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August this year has papered over the larger complexities specific not just to the country but the whole region. The political and military collapse of Kabul signaled three things: the American strategic fatigue with ‘forever wars’ was overbearing for Washington; the political, constitutional, democratic and economic gains made over the last two decades did not have deep roots inside the Afghan society; and finally, the imposition of

one political system, over the other may not be an easy project even for the most power countries of the world.

Afghanistan today stands at the crossroads of a migrant rush, an impending humanitarian crisis, an indecisive political dispensation, a bleak economy, a crumbling health system and overall, an internationally unrecognised status. The fact that the Taliban has prioritised the de-freezing

of international aid funds, which are currently under sanctions, over their political recognition and international stature reflects the kind of financial brinkmanship that Kabul today faces. The United Nations has predicted that the Afghan economy could contract by 20% within a year, delivering a fiscal blow to the country which will be difficult to recover from. From a political standpoint, Afghanistan remains in the lurch with little consensus over the cabinet formation, role of members and inclusion of representatives from other groups. There may have been a perception of a moderate Taliban in Afghanistan in comparison to the group's role between 1996 and 2001, when they ruled Afghanistan. However, facts point to contrary evidence. On most counts, including the international demand for an inclusive government, society and education system, the present Taliban dispensation in Kabul has failed to inspire confidence. Furthermore, internationally, there is a scramble to save the people of Afghanistan, especially young children who are dying of hunger and lack of medical attention; its women and its minorities who have been repressed the most under the brutal Taliban regime. As such, the return of Taliban in Afghanistan completed a political loop of the Taliban leadership which had ended under military mobilisation and presence which had ended.

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan has left a strategic vacuum in the country for which there is a race to fill among world's great and middle powers. The ensuing competition between great and middle powers in Afghanistan and the broader region is likely to have its own set of complications for South Asia. The US' troop withdrawal from Afghanistan may have significantly dented the US' currency as an enforceable power globally, however, it does not mean a loss of strategic leverage in Asia. The strategic compulsions of the US in Asia, including in the Indo-Pacific, is likely to ensure America's continued competitive engagement with the region. The US remains formidably present in Asia, both in terms of strategic geography and military wherewithal. However, its penchant to use such force in the future may stand tested, even as Washington's reliance on offshore balancing and embrace of multilateralism are likely to grow. This is likely to increase the burden of expectations on the US' partners and friends in the region. The rapidly diminishing capability and resources gap and rising competition of China with the US have already forced the US Senate to pass the \$250 billion China competition Bill, called the US Innovation and Competition Act. Besides, China has looked at Afghanistan as an opportunity for long, especially for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As the US is likely to remain outside the set of countries seeking to gain early influence in Afghanistan, the regional competitive mix emerging out of the new political cohort comprising China, Russia, Turkey, Pakistan and Qatar will provide a new gauge for future US

role in the region. Seeking to maintain an edge, America's focus on providing alternatives to investment, infrastructure and connectivity may increase, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

An additional challenge that lurks over Afghanistan and may impact the whole region could be the shadow of yet another great power rivalry, using proxies. Particularly, the region could see the emergence of two power axes competing for strategic rivalry, with the US and its friends/allies on one side and China-Russia along with other set of countries on the other, significantly changing the strategic landscape in South Asia. Different interests of regional countries in South Asia too, particularly the binaries of India-Pakistan and India-China, could add to the emerging competitive mix in the region, embroiling engagement, investments and relationships. One example, in this regard, is the possibility that the Chinese BRI could be extended to Afghanistan in the near future, geographically crisscrossing with other projects in the region like the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Another, is the pursuit of connectivity projects like the trilateral project between Iran, India and Afghanistan which seeks to build the critical Chabahar-Zahedan-Kabul corridor. These relatively distant problems are coupled with the possibility of some direct threats for most South Asian countries in the form of growth in instability and the possibility of rise in terrorism.

### **India's Concerns and Interests**

The Taliban's dramatic takeover of Afghanistan has caused deep concern in New Delhi. India worries that Afghanistan may turn into a hub for transnational terrorism once again, becoming a base from which Pakistan could leverage its deep influence with the Taliban to target India's security interests. New Delhi is also concerned that China, which is already looking into extending infrastructure funding to Afghanistan, might exploit its inroads with the Taliban to draw the country closer into its orbit. While this has caused some concerns in New Delhi, there is also an assessment that India may lose leverage on Afghanistan, especially in the midst of the international scramble for negotiating peace and ensuring a stable political order in Afghanistan. As such, there have been some attempts by India to restore its connection with Afghanistan politically as well as with the people of Afghanistan. Among some important steps towards these, India has called a National Security Advisors (NSA) meet of from South, West and Central Asia. Going forward, the meeting could cull out important consensus regarding Afghanistan.

In another step, India has accelerated its Middle East diplomacy. India's participation in talks with the United States, Israel, and the UAE fuelled speculation that a "new Quad" may be taking shape in South-West Asia. From India's perspective the new Quad meeting is an attempt to find new grounds in the West Asian region specially in the aftermath of the fall of Kabul in the hands of the Taliban.

Today, Afghanistan unfortunately represents a different world system than the one that exists on the outside. It is going to be extremely difficult to pare the two worlds vis-à-vis Afghanistan for international actors, given the contradictions between them at various levels. In the end, the return of Afghanistan to the Afghans may not have served the desired purpose and will continue to pose challenges to the whole world.