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# Taliban in Power and the Strategic Environment in South Asia

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**ABSTRACT:** Following the withdrawal of the United States (US) from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover of the war-torn country, many questions are being posed on the future of American power and its image as a security guarantor. Like in the past, many have relished singing swan songs of American primacy in global affairs. However, as the US attempts to reorient its South Asia policy in the midst of a growing US-China great power competition in the larger Indo-Pacific region, it is imperative to make a sober assessment of how the US' approach to South Asia will pan out in the near future. More specifically, minus its large-scale involvement in Afghanistan, it will be important to analyse Washington's approach to working with New Delhi and Islamabad.

Given the historical antecedents of American retreat from and return to South Asian geopolitics, what does the current withdrawal and the US strategic compulsions in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China, portend for the stronger undercurrents as well as the more immediate features of US role in South Asia? Based on an understanding of the linkages between the withdrawal from Afghanistan and broader US foreign policy trends, an assessment of what could guide the shape of things to come, as far Washington's engagement with New Delhi and Islamabad are concerned.

**KEYWORDS:** Taliban, power, strategic, south Asia, environment, foreign, future, war

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Taliban were removed from power in Afghanistan by US-led forces in 2001, but the group has seized control of the country once again following a rapid offensive.

The capital, Kabul, was the last major city to fall to the offensive that began months ago but accelerated as the hardline Islamists gained control of territories.

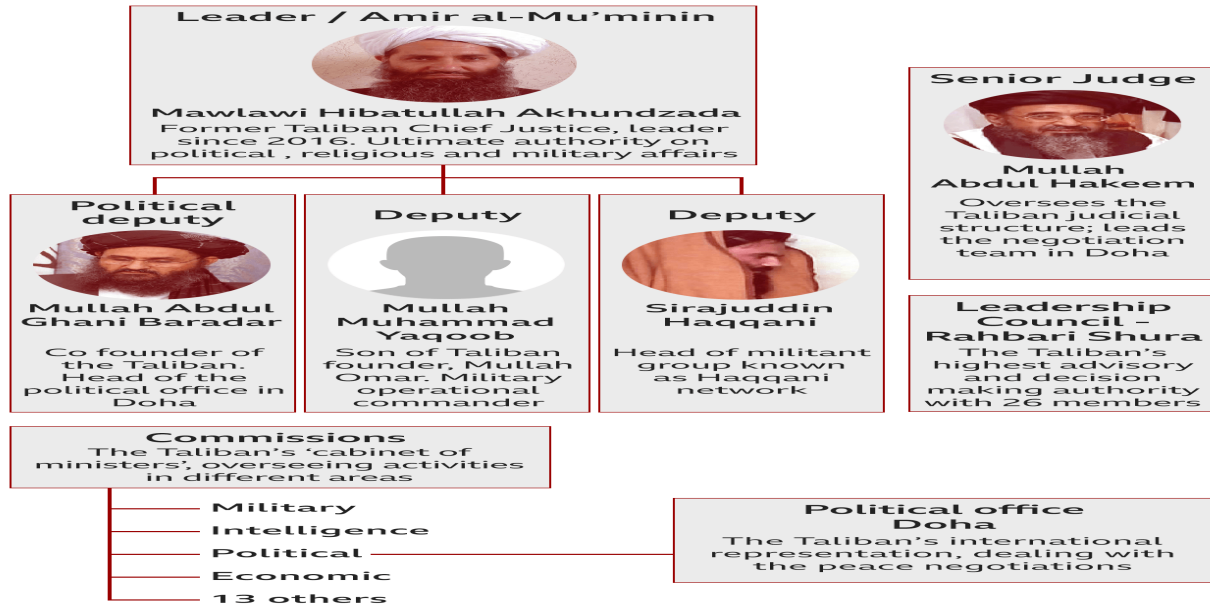
The group entered direct talks with the US back in 2018, and in February 2020 the two sides struck a peace deal that committed the US to withdrawal and the Taliban to preventing attacks on US forces. Other promises included not allowing al-Qaeda or other militants to operate in areas it controlled and proceeding with national peace talks.

But in the year that followed, the Taliban continued to target Afghan security forces and civilians, advancing rapidly across the country.[1,2]

The Taliban, or "students" in the Pashto language, emerged in the early 1990s in northern Pakistan following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. It is believed that the predominantly Pashtun movement first appeared in religious seminaries - mostly paid for by money from Saudi Arabia - which preached a hardline form of Sunni Islam. The promise made by the Taliban - in Pashtun areas straddling Pakistan and Afghanistan - was to restore peace and security and enforce their own austere version of Sharia, or Islamic law, once in power.



**Taliban leadership structure**



From south-western Afghanistan, the Taliban quickly extended their influence. In September 1995 they captured the province of Herat, bordering Iran, and exactly one year later they captured the Afghan capital, Kabul, overthrowing the regime of President Burhanuddin Rabbani - one of the founding fathers of the Afghan mujahideen that resisted the Soviet occupation. By 1998, the Taliban were in control of almost 90% of Afghanistan.

Afghans, weary of the mujahideen's excesses and infighting after the Soviets were driven out, generally welcomed the Taliban when they first appeared on the scene. Their early popularity was largely due to their success in stamping out corruption, curbing lawlessness and making the roads and the areas under their control safe for commerce to flourish.[3,4]

But the Taliban also introduced or supported punishments in line with their strict interpretation of Sharia law - such as public executions of convicted murderers and adulterers, and amputations for those found guilty of theft. Men were required to grow beards and women had to wear the all-covering burka.



The Taliban also banned television, music and cinema, and disapproved of girls aged 10 and over going to school. They were accused of various human rights and cultural abuses. One notorious example was in 2001, when the Taliban went ahead with the destruction of the famous Bamiyan Buddha statues in central Afghanistan, despite international outrage. Pakistan has repeatedly denied that it was the architect of the Taliban enterprise, but there is little doubt that many Afghans who initially joined the movement were educated in madrassas (religious schools) in Pakistan.

Pakistan was also one of only three countries, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which recognised the Taliban when they were in power in Afghanistan. It was also the last country to break diplomatic ties with the group.

At one point, the Taliban threatened to destabilise Pakistan from areas they controlled in the north-west. One of the most high-profile and internationally condemned of all Pakistani Taliban attacks took place in October 2012, when schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai was shot on her way home in the town of Mingora.[5,6]

A major military offensive two years later following the Peshawar school massacre greatly reduced the group's influence in Pakistan though. At least three key figures of the Pakistani Taliban had been killed in US drone strikes in 2013, including the group's leader, Hakimullah Mehsud.

### III. DISCUSSION

Hopes of a negotiated peace were raised in 2013, when the Taliban announced plans to open an office in Qatar. But mistrust on all sides remained high and the violence went on.



In August 2015, the Taliban admitted they had covered up Mullah Omar's death - reportedly of health problems at a hospital in Pakistan - for more than two years. The following month, the group said it had put aside weeks of infighting and rallied around a new leader in the form of Mullah Mansour, who had been the deputy of Mullah Omar.

At around the same time, the Taliban seized control of a provincial capital for the first time since their defeat in 2001, taking control of the strategically important city of Kunduz.

Mullah Mansour was killed in a US drone strike in May 2016 and replaced by his deputy Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, who remains in control of the group.

In the year following the US-Taliban peace deal of February 2020 - which was the culmination of a long spell of direct talks - the Taliban appeared to shift their tactics from complex attacks in cities and on military outposts to a wave of targeted assassinations that terrorised Afghan civilians.

The targets - journalists, judges, peace activists, women in positions of power - suggested that the Taliban had not changed their extremist ideology, only their strategy.[7,8]

Having outlasted a superpower through two decades of war, the Taliban began seizing vast swathes of territory, before once again toppling a government in Kabul in the wake of a foreign power withdrawing.



They swept across Afghanistan in just 10 days, taking their first provincial capital on 6 August . By 15 August, they were at the gates of Kabul.

Their lightning advance prompted tens of thousands of people to flee their homes, many arriving in the Afghan capital, others heading for neighbouring countries.

The Taliban's return to rule brings an end to almost 20 years of a US-led coalition's presence in the country.



The Taliban's blisteringly fast takeover of Afghanistan has stunned security and diplomacy experts worldwide. Days after the fall of Kabul, nations are hurriedly evacuating their diplomats and citizens, leaving behind two decades of work and investments.

The Taliban's rout is likely to cause a significant shift in the geopolitics of South Asia, and it could be particularly testing for India, given the country's historically tense relations and border disputes with Pakistan and China - both are expected to play a crucial role in Afghanistan's future.

Pakistan shares a porous border with Afghanistan and has long been an active player in its northern neighbour's affairs. Now China is showing an interest in playing a bigger role in Afghanistan. Foreign minister Wang Yi's meeting with senior Taliban leaders last month shows Beijing doesn't want to be a silent player anymore.

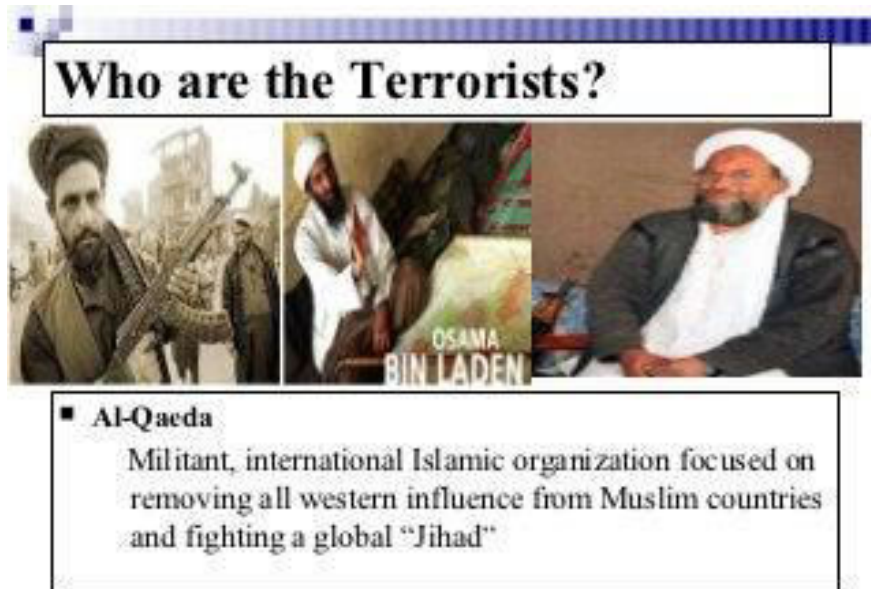
This potential geopolitical realignment could "change things upside down", said Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, India's former ambassador to Afghanistan and Syria.

Afghanistan was a loose alliance between the democratic government in Kabul, the West and other democracies like India. But the world is likely to see Pakistan, Russia, Iran and China coming together to play the next chapter of the Great Game.

- A flight out of Kabul on a fateful day
- Will the Taliban take Afghanistan back to the past?
- Ten days that shook Afghanistan[9,10]

Some in India see this as a loss for Delhi and a big win for Pakistan. But former Indian diplomat Jitendra Nath Misra said that was too simplistic a view, because the Pakistan-led Taliban has never recognised the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, creating discomfort for Islamabad.

"Pakistan would want to get the Taliban to accept the border and this will be a top priority," he said.



But it's also true that the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan gives Pakistan strategic depth against India. Islamabad has gotten what it always wanted, said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Wilson Center think-tank in Washington - a government in Afghanistan that it can easily influence.

"Pakistani officials may show this off as India's loss, but then there are bigger strategic goals for Pakistan," Mr Kugelman said. "It really sees itself as the biggest regional winner at the moment."

#### IV. RESULTS

Experts say Pakistan was not happy with the growing ties between the US and India, or former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani's lukewarm relations with Islamabad. The country's struggling economy also made it feel vulnerable. Now Islamabad has reasons to believe that it's the winner because its "all-weather" friendship with China will be useful in Afghanistan. Moreover, Beijing is not shy of showing its might anymore. "China can and will play the game now according to its own rules," Mr Misra said.

China also has economic interests in Afghanistan, which can help fulfil its ever-growing need for minerals, but more importantly it can pressure the Taliban to ban the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which it blames for unrest in its Muslim-dominated Xinjian province, to operate on Afghan soil.[11]

Mr Mukhopadhaya said China and Pakistan "would ride piggyback on each other in Afghanistan". But he added that Beijing should be cautious and not fall into any trap like other world powers in the past.

Russia and Iran also seem to be on the same trajectory - neither has evacuated its embassy, and both nations' diplomats are still working in Kabul.

So, what can India do now? The country was never as big a player in Afghanistan as Pakistan, the US or Russia. But Delhi has always been involved in promoting security and cultural ties. Thousands of Afghans are in India for education, work or medical treatment.



Mr Misra says there are no good options for Delhi. "There are bad and then there are worse options," he said. The biggest challenge India will face is whether to recognise the Taliban government or not. The decision will get tough, especially if Moscow and Beijing decide to acknowledge the Taliban government in some form. Experts say Islamabad is likely to officially accept the Taliban government, as it did in 1999. India's best option at the moment seems to keep a channel of communication open with the Taliban. But it will be an uneasy relationship, considering the history between the Taliban and Delhi. The Taliban gave a safe passage to the hijackers of an Indian Airlines plane in 1999 - an incident that remains etched in the collective memory of Indians. And Delhi has always kept close ties with the Northern Alliance - a group of Afghan warlords that fought the Taliban between 1996 and 1999.[12]

## V. CONCLUSION

With the Taliban in the heart of Kabul, India may now wish to put the past to one side in order to safeguard its own interests, and to ensure the region remains stable. There are concerns that militant groups like the Jaish-e-Mohammad Lashkar-e-Taiba will be galvanised by the Taliban's success and plan and execute attacks against India. Amalendu Misra, a professor of politics at Lancaster University and the author of a book on Afghanistan, says it's a diplomatic tightrope India will have to walk. And it may need a strategy to ensure that the contested region of Kashmir doesn't become the next rallying point for the mujahideen. While experts say India needs to keep talking to the Taliban, it will have to decide how much it may want to get involved in any anti-Taliban groupings. The West is likely to form a united front to keep pressure on the Taliban. British PM Boris Johnson has already called for a joint response to the Taliban government. Then there are other possibilities, like the Northern Alliance regrouping later, or Afghanistan becoming another place for a fight for supremacy between the US-led West and a joint group of China, Russia and Pakistan. So there are no easy options for India, but its decisions will have consequences on regional peace and global geopolitics.[13]

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