



New Developments in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan



Reading Time: 9 Minutes

About IPR

Institute for Policy Reforms is an independent and non-partisan think tank established under Section 42 of the Companies Ordinance. IPR places premium on practical solutions. Its mission is to work for stability and prosperity of Pakistan and for global peace and security. IPR operations are supported by guarantees from the corporate sector.

This report is a summary of an online discussion held by IPR on 28 August 2021. The speakers were:

- *Lt. General Ishfaq Nadeem, former Chief of General Staff, Pakistan Army*
- *Ambassador Riaz Mohammad Khan, former Foreign Secretary, Pakistan*
- *Dr. Anatol Lieven, Senior Fellow, Quincy Institute, Washington DC*

Chair Mr. Humayun Akhtar Khan, CEO and Chair IPR

View the webinar: <https://youtu.be/n9KCSi2x3Bk>

Board of Directors

Mr. Humayun Akhtar Khan,
Chairman & CEO

Mr. Akbar Khan

Haroon Akhtar Khan

Dr. Khalida Ghaus

Mr. Ghazi Akhtar Khan

Mr. Ashraf M. Hayat, Executive
Director, Company Secretary

Board of Advisors

Dr. Atta-ur-Rehman

Mr. Abdullah Yousaf

Lt. Gen (R) Sikander Afzal

Mr. Syed Yawar Ali

Mr. Tasneem Noorani

Mr. Tariq Parvez

Dr. Manzoor Ahmad

Mr. Tariq Malik

Dr. Iqrar Ahmad Khan

Mr. Salman Raja

Mr. Ashfaq Yousuf Tola

Ms. Roshan Bharucha

Mr. Hussain Haroon

Dr. Abid Suleri

4-Shami Road, Lahore Cantt,
Pakistan

UAN: 111-123-586

<https://ipr.org.pk>  
<https://www.facebook.com/ipr.org.pk>
https://twitter.com/IPR_Pakistan

Copyright: No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Institute for Policy Reforms

Humayun Akhtar Khan

- Afghanistan's recent troubles began 40 years ago when in 1973 former Afghan Prime Minister, Mohammed Daoud Khan led a coup against King Zahir Shah. The country has been in tumult since.
- Challenges:
 - Pakistan is very concerned by the present situation in Afghanistan as it directly affects us. The whole world is watching if there will be an agreed governing arrangement in Afghanistan and how soon the country stabilizes.
 - There is every danger that terrorist organisations would threaten stability.
 - The Taliban must realise that the Afghan society has changed over the last 20 years. There has been physical and social development in Afghanistan, in the areas of health, IT, education, which has changed the lives of large parts of the Afghan population
 - We must see what the reaction of some regional countries is to NATO withdrawal. Afghanistan needs their cooperation. It will definitely need connectivity and help from the rest of the world. The Taliban understand this reality.
- Yet, it is not all gloom and doom:
 - So far, they have said the right things with the promise of not governing with the same rigidity and severity as they did up to 2001. And they have largely delivered.
- The real question is how would all this affect Pakistan?
 - The neighbourhood and the world is concerned if the Taliban can prevent Afghanistan from being used as a terror base.
 - Foremost for Pakistan are concerns about the TTP.

Riaz Mohammad Khan

- We have to pay tribute to the Taliban, who have accomplished something very remarkable with extraordinary valour, wit and faith. It is unfair to describe them as mere proxies of Pakistan.
- Yet, Afghanistan is still work in progress. We hope this is not a false dawn and that they follow the example of Vietnam, which today is one of the main US ally in East Asia.
- The focus should be on what course Afghanistan takes now.
 - Indications are that the Taliban have changed and have learned from the past.
 - They have been remarkably disciplined so far.
 - Statements from President Biden are also guarded, without directly attacking the Taliban
 - Even after the Kabul airport attack, US and Taliban have cooperated
 - Yet, there is no ignoring opinions and concerns of world press, human rights and women's groups.
- The first and biggest challenge for Afghanistan is to avoid a civil war.
- Neighbouring states, especially Pakistan must give space to the Taliban to work things out. Pakistan must refrain from volunteering advice to the Taliban, though it should help with building stability there, without distracting the new government by pushing to seek a role for themselves.
- Secondly, discreet bilateral and multilateral diplomacy should make all efforts to avert return of civil war to Afghanistan.
- Immediately Afghans need all sorts of humanitarian assistance. UN and all others must ensure that there are no food shortages or a refugee crises
- Pakistan has a history of relations with Afghanistan, and we have many issues related to trust and other matters. But this is not the time to burden the new government with issues.

- The TTP issue is very important, we should reach out to the new government only if it becomes pressing and urgent
- Trade and development, including CPEC and North and South trade corridors are important, but as the next important step. Afghanistan's great economic and corridor potential will follow in due course after stability.
- Pakistan must not repeat the mistake of thinking that Afghanistan is an extension of Pakistan. It must build relations with Afghanistan as it would with any other country, by relying on well-established norms.
- Pakistan cannot escape the realization that India is also a regional player. It cannot be wished away.
- Pakistan must rethink its regional role after present uncertainties are settled. It must review its perceived preference for support of one faction in Afghanistan and now move to view the economic opportunities that could occur from a stable Afghanistan and region.

Dr Anatol Lieven

- Taliban has shown extreme resolve and courage against huge odds. These factors also give them legitimacy. Western reporting in the last 20 years, and especially during US withdrawal, has been shockingly inept.
- There is a good chance that the Taliban will establish a stable government in Afghanistan, though there is still great danger of civil war and chaos
- Pakistan must not pressure Afghanistan on issues important to it. As a regional player, Pakistan must help shape regional consensus
- Knowing Afghan politics and its divisions, it is too optimistic to hope that the Afghans would work things out, if left to themselves.

- For one, Taliban must not let terrorism originate from its soil. Every major world country expects the Taliban to act against ISIS. That is the minimum they can do to earn support from the West and China. That shouldn't mean handing over members of Al-Qaeda and others, but they must take overt measures.
- Pakistan must note that many members of ISIS-K are Pakistanis.
- Domestically, the Taliban must act to:
 - Avoid civil war
 - Allow a degree of cultural freedom, with right-of-education for women.
 - Also, to build a functioning modern state, Taliban must guarantee some freedom and rights to its citizens, to retain and attract technocrats, some of whom are fleeing the country.
 - The Taliban should engage in talks with former members of the government, including Ismael Khan.
 - Ensure respect for minority rights, especially for the important Shia and Hazara population
 - Afghanistan must be wary of Saudi aid or incentives. A Saudi role would be certain to bring about sectarian riots and force Iran to support any armed resistance that this may lead to, as happened in the 1990s.
- The future of the opposition government formed by former VP Amrullah Saleh is questionable. Just as the Taliban and Afghanistan are not the same as they were in 2001, the Panjshiri leadership too has changed. Panjshiris do not show the same fighting spirit as before.
- India has been taken by surprise and is yet to develop a response:
 - It has not so far not announced talks with Taliban. RAW has close relations with the NDS and some in India want to help Amrullah Saleh, a past NDS head.
 - India should adopt a cautious line with Afghanistan and not simply back the opposition.

- But if India sees Afghanistan become a base for terrorist operations against it, it will support the opposition
- Regarding economic development of Afghanistan:
 - It depends on **(a)** maintaining peace, **(b)** repressing ISIS by practicing pragmatism, though not necessarily moderation
 - Waves of Afghan refugees into Pakistan could create havens for militants
 - Resisting Indian and other regional influence would allow Afghanistan to not become a battleground for regional rivalry, including Saudi-Iran rivalry
 - Chinese investment and international aid will be critical for Afghanistan to have a stable economy
- Pakistan has a very strong interest in Afghanistan becoming prosperous and a place for foreign and Chinese investment. If Afghanistan receives Chinese investment, it will tie Pakistan and Afghanistan closely together.
- There is a certain legacy in Pakistan for promoting anti-Iranian paranoia, stoked by Saudi money. This would not only be viewed negatively in Tehran but also in Beijing, given the close ties between Iran and China
- As horrible as ISIS-K is, its presence does lead to international cooperation because of ISIS-K's links to groups hostile to every regional state and the West
- If Taliban succeed to suppress the heroin trade in Afghanistan, as they did in 2001, they will help hugely the international community, including Pakistan, Russia and Iran. But to do that, they would require money.
- Pakistan must do all it can to generate international aid to help the Taliban suppress heroin trade, that would greatly help Afghanistan gain respect as a member of the international trading community.

Lt. General Ishfaq Nadeem

- In the last 20 years, US was often warned that Afghanistan has been a graveyard of empires. USA is now the latest empire to be added to that list. Unlike the past when Britain and the then USSR were defeated, this time the Western media is demonizing the Taliban, sometimes justly but often unfairly.
- At the time of the East India Company in 1841, the Afghan Taliban rebelled and called for jihad. Religion was not significant then. A century later, it became important, both in the defeat of the Soviets and now in the case of USA.
- Another notable difference is that no one in the West is saying that the Afghans defeated the West. They hold an inhumane radicalized group responsible for the West's defeat. Of course, this isn't true. In support of this perception appalling scenes are being shown to inject fear. A small percentage is fleeing Afghanistan, but a large number are staying in the country. Some of those fleeing consider this an opportunity to settle outside Afghanistan.
- Majority of the Afghan refugees who came to Pakistan in the 1980s, have stayed on and refused to return.
- Despite the West's 20 years of economic, military and diplomatic presence, there is a lack of understanding of Afghan culture among them. Taliban's success is perceived or projected to be representative of Islam at large.
- There's a marked difference between this and the previous Afghan wars.
- We are back to square one. Unlike at the time of the Soviet defeat, there are no celebrations, only a feeling of despondency and anger in the West.
- For the Taliban to defeat USA and take back control of Afghanistan was the easier bit. The difficult part of governing starts now.
- The Taliban are good at fighting but not equally adept at strategic governance. Surviving would not be easy considering all the challenges.
- This time the Taliban would likely be not as radicalized as before, though they will not

compromise on principles, because they cannot distance themselves too much from their propagated version of religion. If they were to do so, they risk splintering within their ranks.

- To some extent, splintering is likely to happen, though its degree is hard to predict. This is the likely outcome because of Taliban's decision to have a broad-based government, which some among its own ranks may challenge.
- There is a fear that some countries would exploit such differences and even encourage them. While these attempts serve the short-term interests of such states, it would be disastrous for the region's security and its long-term interests. Any loss of control of territory by the Taliban could be exploited by terrorist groups against certain countries.
- It is critical for India to soon reconcile with facts on the ground. Otherwise, the Pakistan-India proxy war could potentially start on Afghan soil.
- Also, it is in the interest of all countries to encourage and help the Taliban towards the formation of a broad-based, inclusive, and relatively moderate government. This is best achieved by engaging the Taliban. Countries must also assure them of help and recognition, if the Taliban sincerely pursue building an inclusive government with representation of all ethnicities and of women.
- Taliban would also need a lot of help for effective governance, post formation. If the Taliban and the international community act wisely, there would be relative stability in Afghanistan and the Taliban tenure would be long-term.
- China, Russia, Turkey and others are likely to be more proactive in engaging and helping the Taliban. USA will have to follow suit by compulsion if not by choice.
- People who are deriding the USA and blaming them for all of the military hardware that has gone into the Taliban's hands must know that if the intra-Afghan dialogue succeeded, all equipment would go to the Taliban in a broad-based government as well.
- Taliban would do well not to disband the Afghan army in its present form. The same army should be strengthened and made into a better army. Taliban would be well advised to not repeat the mistakes Mr. Bremer committed with the Iraqi army. That policy was disastrous then and it will be disastrous now.

- The Taliban need to improve their image in the West, which I believe they are doing already.
- One of the ways is to persuade Afghan refugees in Pakistan to return to their country. Pakistan would be more than willing to cooperate.
- China will have a dominant role to play in Afghanistan in the years to come in the form of economic and military aid. However, the greater the Chinese investment, the more vulnerable China would be to forces inimical to the progress of Afghanistan
- The Taliban won't, in my opinion, seek immediate foreign military help but it is possible they would receive some foreign military advisors, including from China. Pakistan would also be willing to help but would like to keep the signature light, especially in the beginning.
- Now, the Taliban suddenly find themselves in a position of having to prevent violence, i.e., by ISIS. This is ironic considering that they have been involved in violence over the past two decades. They will possibly realise that it is easier to conduct bombings than to prevent them.
- As a weak landlocked country, Afghanistan was dependent on us for many reasons. And if the Afghan people do not view Pakistan as a friend, it is for Pakistan to introspect why this is so and learn from it.
- In fact, Pakistan must review its relations with all neighbours including India. Improved Pakistan-India relations will help Afghanistan.

Comments

General Talat Masood, Mr. Hussain Naqi, Senator Farhatullah Babar, Mr. Tariq Ikram, Dr. Syed Rizvi, Mr. Ansar Shamsi, Mr. Fazle Tiwana, and Ambassador Riaz Khokhar

- If Taliban leaders move towards moderation, could that lead to a split within the movement, or would the directive be accepted as a command from the leadership?
- Would the Afghan Army stay as a professional force? Who will pay for it? Would Taliban fighters see them as a parallel force as a replacement?
- The first priority in Afghanistan is the formation of a government acceptable to all. This needs a Pakistan-India understanding on Afghanistan
- Pakistan is largely viewed as having supported one faction in Afghanistan at the expense of others. Pakistani decision makers cannot deny this fact. This means that future generations in Afghanistan are likely to believe that Pakistan is their enemy and that it brought misfortune on them.
- Even in Yemen, where Houthis are gaining strength, a Pakistani army general is heading the Islamic Military Alliance. Here too the Houthis and Yemenis see Pakistan behind their misfortune.
- Pakistan must be careful about whom it supports. To appease and legitimize the Taliban during its negotiations, USA lifted sanctions on the ETIM in November 2020. China expressed serious reservations. Pakistan remained quiet. There is a fear now that the Taliban, Daesh and other militants would eventually try to destabilize China. If that were to happen, Pakistan will be in serious trouble. In the coming years, would Afghanistan consider Pakistan a friend or its foremost enemy?
- There is a likelihood of the Taliban being used against China in a renewed Cold War and against China to subvert CPEC.
- Pakistan and the world community must assist Afghanistan in avoiding an economic crisis and in its development. Pakistan could play a role as consensus builder.

Closing comments by Mr. Humayun Akhtar Khan

- The extended Troika of US, Russia, China and Pakistan must reorient its goal and play a critical role to help Afghanistan avoid an economic crisis to sustain lives and livelihood and as a next step to build a platform for future development.
- Afghanistan must cooperate with all countries, including US and the West, India as well as its neighbours. There is need for building mutual credibility.
- It is in Afghan interest to build peace in the region and not allow its territory to be used against other countries.
- Usually, a parallel is drawn between Vietnam's victory and the Taliban triumph. Though Vietnam generated a whole movement against US presence there. In the case of Afghanistan, there is very little interest in the matter and this whole episode of withdrawal of US troops could be forgotten before too long.
- The world has taken the Taliban as a homogenous monolith, though its members too have varied and diverse views. One of the challenges for the Taliban leadership is to prevent its more extreme members from joining terror organizations.
- The world must help the new administration eliminate heroin production and trade, just as the Taliban did before.