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C3S Issue Brief IV

The Projections of Sovereignty- Theorising Afghanistan's Domestic and International Dynamics

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Studies**

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Issue Brief IV



About the Author



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Abstract

Since the inception of an independent Afghan nation in the early 20th century, it has largely been vulnerable to international influence. This has led to fragmentation of sovereignty overwhelmed by the ethnic diversity wherein fragility of institutions has generated contestations to authority. In order to apprehend the intrinsic subtleties of Afghanistan, this paper seeks to yield a domestic to international approach by providing an analysis of the eminence of terms like authority, sovereignty, legitimacy to the Afghan government and the Taliban. The paper would also emphasise on the Taliban's neighbourhood policy with countries like China, Iran, Pakistan and India. In place of such advances, this work shall firstly discuss the importance of legality and recognition to the Taliban vis-à-vis the Afghan government in Afghanistan. Secondly, it would try to construct a narrative of the interconnection between the domestic and the international through the understanding of the Taliban's neighbourhood policy. Lastly, it would focus on India's dilemma in its Afghan policy and the way ahead.

Introduction

The first important loss of sovereignty is within the state itself. Especially when the state is largely an external force in society, it may not require popular legitimacy but it does require internal legitimacy.'

- Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan-State Formation and Collapse in the International System*¹

The recent developments in Afghanistan have created a situation in which there are too many power midpoints mired by their self-interests- internal as well as external to the region. Apart from the lack of coherence in institutions and governance structures, the advances have failed to address the fundamental motivation behind surmounting violence in Kabul. While the recent scholarly assumptions focus more on Afghanistan being used as a platform for other countries to intervene, the genesis of complications arises from the diverging perspectives of both the Afghan government and the Taliban. Due to the policy of coercion and terror, the Taliban has become a formidable force within Afghanistan building its institutions in the areas it covers. Though not being considered a legitimate authority, a hierarchy based group like the Taliban has succeeded to gain recognition from the powers involved in the peace process.

Since the success of the peace process is dependent on all factions coming together and framing a better and a more peaceful Afghanistan, the role of the Taliban is crucial to fulfilling the aforementioned goal. In this scenario, both the domestic and international order is situated in a positive-sum game through constant diplomacy. Such a situation has posed a major obstruction to the Afghan government which was initially kept aside from the US peace process with the Taliban. Moreover countries explicitly supporting the Afghan government such as India are reluctant to play an independent role which would further help the Taliban in resurrecting itself.

This has allowed the Taliban leadership to use the peace process as an initiation of their neighbourhood policy if and when they reach the echelons of sovereign and legitimate power. However, there have been barriers lately with the United States calling off the intra-Afghan

dialogue supposed in September 2019. Although a setback, the cancellation has not spurred the Taliban to reach out to other powers like China, Russia, and Iran. The growing animosity between the United States and the latter three states has provided the Taliban a platform to fulfill its agendas and simultaneously gain recognition from others.

Meanwhile, elections in Afghanistan with as far as 17 candidates and more than 2 months of delay in results has created a crisis of legitimacy and a trust deficit within the Afghani populace. Being perceived as the frontrunners, both Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah compete to form a government since the last National Unity Government could not reconcile the two factions. Ranging from socio-economic to political, Afghanistan is witnessing the beginning of a new great game in which there would be a fight for sovereignty within a disgruntled internal structure as well as political intervention under the garb of diplomatic efforts by powers both external and in the region. In place of such advances, this paper shall firstly discuss the importance of legality and recognition to the Taliban vis-à-vis the Afghan government in Afghanistan. Secondly, it would try to construct a narrative of the interconnection between the domestic and the international through the understanding of the Taliban's neighbourhood policy. Lastly, it would focus on India's dilemma in its Afghan policy and the way ahead.

Legality and Recognition within Afghanistan

The first step for an a unit in the international system towards being considered a legal entity is gaining recognition in the nation-state order governed by sovereignty. The recognition could arise from various sources such as to what extent the state can fulfil the demands of its people i.e. provide basic goods and how it secures the territory against foreign interventions or threats in the international system. Robert H. Jackson refers to the above two tenets as-positive and negative sovereignty respectively.ⁱⁱ The failure in one domain could lead to disorder in the country, opening multiple avenues to contest the sovereign. Therefore, it is imperative to comprehend the domestic arrangements present within in order to understand the perception of recognition in the external realm.

In the attempt to define order within, the institutions and their formation should be keenly analyzed to understand the sustenance of gaps or empty spaces especially in a country like Afghanistan. Rather than the values of democracy perpetuated in the west, religion and ethnicity played a major role in Afghanistan. Both the Khalqi and Parcham ethnic groups in the 1980s fixated more on bringing the aforementioned elements into the structure of the state by filling most of the government institutions with either Islamists or Pashtuns. This led to the marginalization of other ethnicities and the collapse of the economy in Afghanistan, thereby generating upsurge amongst the other ethnic orientations.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Afghan Prime Minister/President Najibullah was deposed and the rise of warlords, who were fighting each other for supremacy gained significance. Since the Western intervention immediately stopped after the withdrawal, the support to Northern Alliance went deeply into a morass. Witnessing the vacuum, the Taliban came to prominence in 1994 and soon reached the pinnacle of power. Having received recognition by three countries- Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and U.A.E, the Taliban soon covered areas ranging from Kandahar to Kabul in 1996. Emerged as a southern

movement, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was able to control the areas under the occupation of Hazaras, Pashtuns, and Aimaks. A highly centralized scheme of governance under Mullah Mohommad Omar brutalized the society based on their strict interpretation of Shariat laws.

Due to the utmost concern about building the sovereignty project, the Taliban did not emphasize much on the sustenance of civil society. The alienation of other ethnicities such as Hazaras, Aimaks, Uzbeks, and Tajiks led to the failure of the reconciliatory framework. The absence of reconciliation, being the precondition to achieve recognition in the society, led to estrangements in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Likewise using illegitimate force based on the assumption of sovereignty rather than the proper repute of authority bereaved the society from having autonomy in the assigned sphere of decision-making. It created fear amongst the population living and the distinction between civil and political society blurred in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Simultaneously, the harbouring of Al-Qaeda by the Taliban leadership fomented angst in the West and other powers supporting the Northern Alliance. The hijacking of IC-814 flight from Kathmandu to New Delhi in 1999 was an instance of pressuring the Indian government with the help of its allies namely ISI and Al-Qaeda. This could be understood as the first initiation of the policy of coercion by the Taliban to gain recognition from other countries.

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the Taliban emerged as a student movement having no idea of governance structures and the political system. It materialized to provide an alternative method of governance based on ethnic code like *Pashtunwali* and safeguard religion from threats. The Taliban was able to effectively command hold of the provinces in which Pashtuns were dominant such as Kandahar and Nangarhar as well as rural areas where religious ideals were dominant in capacity. Instead of using the policy of reconciliation, Mullah Omar heavily was contingent upon the partially legitimate apparatus of the state. By creating a quasi-state supportive of them, Mullah Omar sought to influence the remaining Afghani people through force and violence. Al-Qaeda rapidly expanded and reached the parallels to power through being intentionally subversive to the authority of the Taliban.

While it is appropriately suggested that the Taliban received monetary aid and ammunitions from the Al-Qaeda, the lack of effective institutions in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan led to the sightless faith in a terrorist organization. When asked to extradite Osama Bin Laden in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Mullah Omar refuted the claim of his involvement in the assaults, thereby proving the entrenched role of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. This lastly led to the fall of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the initiation of the Bonn Agreement through which Hamid Karzai became the first democratically elected President of Afghanistan.

The first term of Hamid Karzai as President was considerably peaceful and Afghanistan moved towards becoming a more inclusive society respected by the world community. In its effort towards state-building, the Karzai government focused on the distribution of public goods such as education, infrastructural development, and generating jobs. This could somehow substantiate the misgivings of the past creating a better society in which rights were duly honoured. However, the uneven development and rise of various factions antithetical to the government led to a series of attacks in provinces questioning the most important primary good of the state- its security.

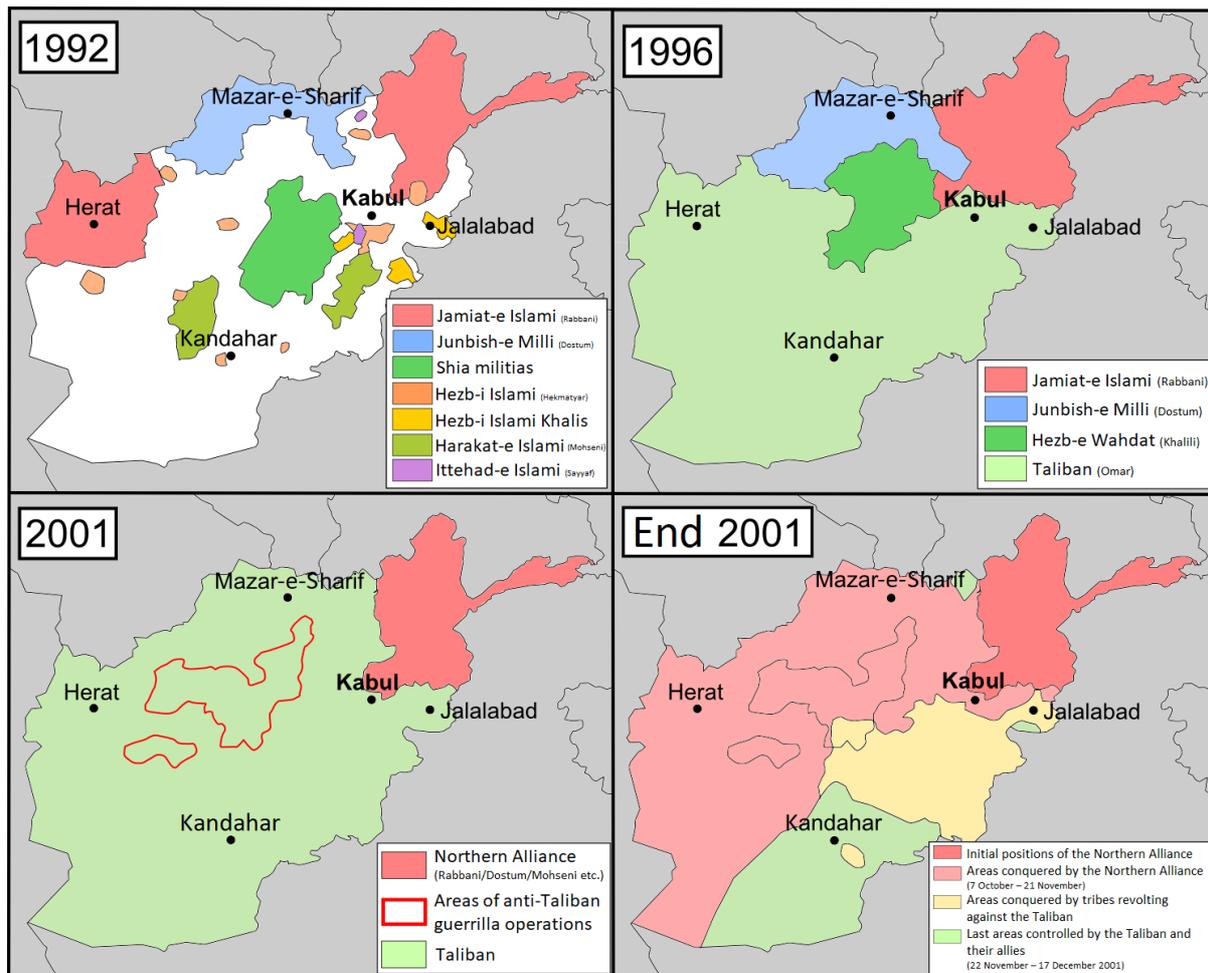


Image Courtesy: maps.com

Together with uneven development, corruption within official ranks gained the focus of attention among people in Afghanistan. Not only did the officials accepted bribes, they even worked with various other warlords dominant in one region or the other. In his attempt to redefine the trajectory of Afghanistan, President Karzai lacked in maintaining unity among the ethnic networks. This steered to the genesis of controversy surrounding the second term elections in 2009. President Karzai was accused of concentrating power by possessing the foreign ministry and intentionally keeping the cabinet fragile.

From 2009-2014, President Karzai instilled many Pashtuns in his government to earn support from the majoritarian community. Hitherto the limited unity present within the Afghan civil society and the rights it maintained did not allow the Taliban to penetrate further and occupy vacant spaces. But the cracks soon developed as more the government appeased the Pashtuns, the more vulnerable the society became to the Taliban influence. Due to the growing presence of the Taliban, President Karzai proposed a framework of reconciliation through the London Conference and Kabul Conference in 2010, though the results were abysmal.

While the Karzai government's two-term presidency was considered to be sovereign and had the mandate of the United Nations, it could not generate confidence among people despite supplying the public goods with full effect. His successor President Ashraf Ghani in 2015 had to form a National Unity Government with Dr. Abdullah Abdullah after a constant series of deliberations and negotiations. Hoping to sustain a framework of equality and peace, the

clashes between the two led to fallible governance. The three tiers of government- legislature, executive and judiciary grew into being severely dysfunctional as well as the government was unable to solve the grievances of the people.

Unable to find effective governance, the citizens, especially in rural areas in southern Afghanistan, started to rely more on community and sectional loyalties instead of the government. The tribal networks' unrelenting support to the continuation of the patronage system brought forward more challenges to the limited years of progress in Afghanistan. The disparity among ethnicities and the warlordism paved the way for another significant period of the dysfunctional Afghan state in which recognition would be severely limited by multiple power centers, and divisible sovereignty. Each warlord had his militia present in the military ranks as well. If placed together, none of the three institutions of governance- legislature, executive and the judiciary, were devoid of sectarian loyalties.

In this manner, the Afghan state though having the right to exist in the Westphalian order was unable to provide security architecture of legality within its territory- the basic element of a state-centric system. These factors led to the overt reliance of the people on the Taliban because of their capacity towards effective conflict resolution and security considerations. The Taliban also employed people, looking to escape poverty and paucity of resources.

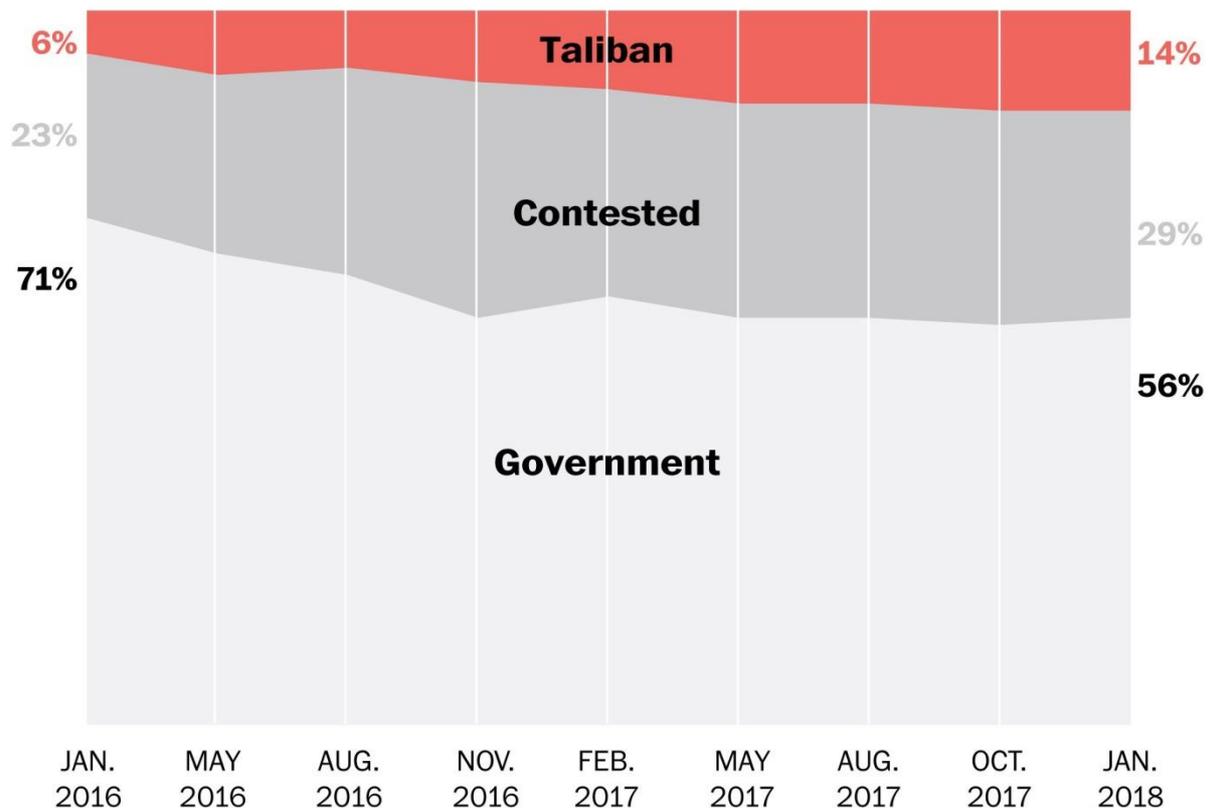
Unlike the Afghan government, the Taliban is not considered to be corrupt and ineffective. Throughout its rule during the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, corruption within the Talibani leadership has no trace. One reason why venality could not be a part of their governance was due to the centralization of power within Mullah Omar, the Amir's leadership and unaccountability to the people.

But to believe the Taliban is equivalent to its past would be a fallacy. Presently, the Taliban is divided into several factions, each contesting the might of the other. Out of the various Shuras, two are held by the Haqqani Network and the other two by the Mansur family. The Ali Shura or the Taliban Rahbari is an independent Shura though most of the power is wielded by the Quetta Shura. When in 2013, Mullah Mansur was announced as Mullah Omar's successor, the Rahbari Shura led by Mohammad Rasul conveyed his disagreement. After three years, in 2016, a drone strike in Pakistan killed Mullah Mansur, leaving Mullah Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada as the leader of the Taliban.

Despite the lack of coherence in authority, the goal of banishing the Ghani government, whom the Taliban considers less-Muslim because of the western education with his attempts to modernize the Afghan society and Islam, binds the Taliban together. President Ghani's inability to apprehend the dynamics which govern the rural areas especially the Pashtun commanding regions and the incompetence to provide horizontal justice are the two important causes behind his unpopularity. In 2017, the SIGAR report mentioned that only 59.7 per cent of Afghan districts were under the government control with 11.1 per cent held by the Taliban and 29.2 per cent being contested.

Declining government control in Afghanistan

As of Jan. 1, 14.5 percent of the country's districts were under insurgent control or influence — the highest level recorded since SIGAR began receiving such information.



Source: Defense Department

THE WASHINGTON POST

Image Courtesy: The Washington Post

With the data considerably increasing in every quarterly report, the growing clout of the Taliban within Afghanistan is being recognized by the world community. In the national elections held on September 28, 2019, 2.2million registered Afghan voters out of 9.67 million voted in 4500 polling stations. Due to the technical faults, half of the Afghan citizens were disenfranchised and couldn't vote for their chosen candidate. Although there was an increase in spasms before, the Taliban restrained itself from attacking people on the day of the election, with only 5 people killed in 78 hours. As much as President Ghani would like to believe that the Taliban was able to create an atmosphere of fear, less than 30 per cent of the turnout, highlights the failure of the Afghan government to democratically legitimize the Afghan state.

Another reason behind the low turnout could be the number of contestations- 17 candidates. Together with the debacle in 2015 elections and the present delay in results, the decay of democracy within is immeasurable. It has also led to repercussions in the perception of the international community, leading to a fewer investments in an already impoverished economy. This signifies the implications of the precarious political and security situation on

the economy, leaving the ideal of positive sovereignty, that is, providing basic goods, in a predicament. Simultaneously, the failure of positive sovereignty has undone the affirmation of negative sovereignty in Afghanistan. The constant scrimmage for authority between the Afghan government and the Taliban has led to the negation of sovereignty, thereby splitting the lawfulness of the state itself in Afghanistan. It has released vacuums for other foreign actors to intervene and shape the situation according to their interests.

Actors like China, Iran, India and the United States are constantly trying to assert themselves in Afghanistan. These developments have affected the Afghan government thus, providing the Taliban a platform through the Afghan Peace Process. Correspondingly, the domestic to international interplay has helped the Taliban to reconstruct the neighbourhood policy whereby their demand for legitimacy could be fulfilled.

But what is international recognition without territorial sovereignty and what is territorial sovereignty without legitimacy?

Taliban's Neighbourhood Policy

Due to Afghanistan's geographical proximity and rich mineral resources, the pretext to protect the state from dwindling justified interventions, even if they were at the cost of the state itself. From the Soviet invasion until the United States intervention in 2001, the trajectory of the Afghan state has not been independent unlike the countries in the west or the near east. The earlier part has concisely provided the reasons behind the failure of both positive and negative sovereignty in Afghanistan. It has led to the Taliban emerging as a vital force both within the country as well as in international relations.

Moreover, the rise of the Taliban cannot be solely attributed to domestic turmoil. Other countries such as Pakistan, Iran, the United States, India, and China have always been present and influenced the decision-making process in Kabul. Does it mean Afghanistan as a country is sovereign in degree but not in kind? Or did the governing elites use external actors in order to mitigate the contestations? Another question that arises is- why do the neighbouring countries need Afghanistan to be in a condition of quasi-enabler i.e. following a median?

Though considered to be a pariah in the past, the omissions in governance created a way forward for other countries to initiate dialogue with the Taliban. The latter was a beneficiary of the crumbling state-building framework and ineffective governance structures. Since 2017, the fragility of the Ghani government is far more noticeable partly because of Trump's announcement of pulling out the US forces from Afghanistan before 2020. This has increased the uncertainty among other countries with regard to Kabul's stability, making their involvement pertinent to the evolving situations, thereby looking at other actors apart from the legitimate government.

As a result, the Afghan peace process has commenced providing an alternative framework for the reconciliatory process. The US and the Taliban have met on ten occasions in Doha, Qatar to find a suitable way for sustainable peace once the US troops withdraw from Afghanistan. Although there have been barriers to the peace process particularly the cancellation of the Camp David Talks supposed to be held in September 2019, the Taliban acknowledges that it

has been recognised by the world community though not yet considered to be an active sovereign potency within the government.

In its bid to reach peace, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad had initially not involved the Afghan government owing to the Taliban's convenience while simultaneously briefing the government with the ongoing developments. The United States Congress also expurgated the USD 160 million as an aid to the Afghan government with the expectation of holding back another USD 60 million. Though the initial reason being provided was due to lack of transparency and accountability by the Afghan government, it could weaken the economy of Afghanistan, thereby making the Taliban resilient. Subsequently, the Taliban's policy of using force and coercion through deliberative attacks within Afghanistan highlighted the breach of the proposed ceasefire. Meanwhile, other countries were involved in simultaneously dealing with the Taliban with China, Pakistan, and Iran playing an active role since the inception of the peace process.

❖ Iran

Interestingly, Iran has recently gained interest in the Afghan peace process partly because of the regional dynamics as well as geographical proximity. Historically, Tehran and Kabul have shared amicable relations with a trivial obstruction during the Cold War period. After the death of Habibullah Khan, his successor Ghazi Amanullah Khan, the father of modern Afghanistan, visited Iran as one of his first tours post-coronation. During the Soviet invasion, Iran supported the mujahideen against Amin and subsequently Najibullah government.

In 2018, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said, "It would be impossible to have a future Afghanistan without any role of the Taliban" and a few weeks later, Iranian military took charge of the border between the two countries with exchange of visits by the Taliban and Tehran delegations. Being a bordering nation like China and Pakistan, the threat from separatists and terrorist organizations present in the region espouse the Iranian leadership to advance their interests in Afghanistan. The Pashtunistan issue is not only limited to the Af-Pak region. Certain areas of southern Iran are also inhabited by the Pashtuns, vulnerable to external influence.

Not only does Iran fear a destabilised Afghanistan, but the rising potential of ISKP in the region has also acted as an impetus to coordinate with the Taliban. Noticing the regional dynamics, Tehran wants to debilitate Saudi Arabia's influence on the Taliban (both advocate the Wahhabist doctrine). Despite the Taliban being a Sunni group and Iran- a Shia majority, the former is trying to exploit Tehran-Washington's hostile relations in order to advocate their recognition in the political spectrum. As both the Taliban and the Iranian leadership wants the US presence in Afghanistan to be diminutive, the two have more to gain from each other.

❖ China-Pakistan

Though Islamabad already had a great influence on the Taliban, the Chinese interests have increased manifold in Afghanistan. China signed the Sino-Afghanistan New Strategic and Co-Operation Partnership in 2012 and supported the trilateral dialogue between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to negotiate a settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban in 2014. Following an approach of political neutrality, Beijing has recognised the

importance of the Taliban in its Afghan policy, providing the latter with the much-needed legitimacy.

Likewise, Mullah Baradar's visit to Beijing in June 2019 was warmly welcomed by China and later in July, China along with Russia persuaded Pakistan to appeal to the Taliban to return to the Afghan peace process. China has been placed as the biggest investor in Afghanistan with USD 3.5 billion dollars since 2005. In order to safeguard the projects especially the investment in Mes Aynak Copper Mine in 2007, China needs the support of the Taliban to develop the security architecture, thereby justifying the diplomatic initiatives in Afghanistan. Other than the economic interests, Beijing is concerned about the Taliban sheltering various terrorist organizations such as ETIM and IMU which might directly cause a risk to the China Pakistan occupied Kashmir Economic Corridor project as well as the Belt and Road Initiative.

Afghanistan, on the other hand, has shared a debauched history with its neighbour, Pakistan. The genesis of the fault-lines between the two countries lies in the Durand Line carved in 1893. This has generated fear among the Pakistani leadership regarding the demand erupting for a separate Pashtunistan country, supported by the Afghan government. Similarly, Islamabad has supported the Taliban in order to suppress the demands of Pashtunistan as well as develop a strategic depth in Kabul. Owing to the Afghan Peace Process, President Trump necessitates Pakistan's military-industrial complex to find a solution to the impending crisis between various stakeholders within Afghanistan. Khalilzad briefed Imran Khan about the US-Taliban negotiations on the side-lines of the UNGA summit in New York in 2019.

The wherewithal stimulus which Islamabad exerts on the Taliban accredited by the United States and China could be the foremost instigation of the Taliban finding recognition in the world community. Presently, with the United States cancellation of peace talks, Islamabad hosted the 3rd China-Pakistan- Afghanistan talks between foreign ministers in the effort to boost economic cooperation and counter-terrorism in September 2019. Another 12 member Afghan Taliban delegation from the political office in Qatar arrived in Islamabad on October 3rd, 2019.

The prominence of exerting control on Afghanistan through the Taliban has been the core of Pakistan's Afghan policy since the maintenance of trade relations as well as preserving the unity of the Pashtun dominant areas are essential to Islamabad's economy and polity. The Taliban's recognition as a legitimate force that could stabilize Afghanistan would be imperative to the understanding of the security dynamics because the spread of jihad has had spill-over effects via Tehreek-e-Taliban in Pakistan. Although the Islamabad leadership is aware of the lack of unity within Kabul, by keeping negotiations uncluttered with the Afghan government, highlights that Pakistan is itself interested in a reconciliatory framework but with the supremacy of the Taliban.

While countries like China, Pakistan, and Iran have recognised the Taliban to be an effective force within Afghanistan, they have not yet agreed on debasing their ties with the Afghan government. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed three principles on future political arrangements- Broad representation and inclusiveness, steadfastness in counterterrorism efforts and following a foreign policy featuring peace and solution towards a stable Afghanistan. According to ACCI, trade between China and Afghanistan has crossed the mark of USD 1 billion with the latter exporting 1100 tons of talc saluk from Mazar-e-Sharif

through the Hairatan railroads in 2019 to Beijing. Iran has already become the largest trading partner in 2018 whereas Pakistan has a surplus in trade with Afghanistan. However, the amicable relations are mostly related to trade with the three governments supporting the peace process but necessitating a broader framework that could accommodate both the factions- the Taliban and the Afghan government.

But the benefits are not everlasting. Since the Taliban's bid to attain sovereignty is guided more by external rather than internal legitimation, a mere change in its international transactions could affect the power potential severely. Lately, there have been cracks developing in the Taliban and Pakistan relationship. In order to withstand the dominance of ISI and Pakistan's military; it needs India's assistance and recognition apart from other countries. The Taliban identifies India's nascent sway in the region and would want to fabricate agreeable relations in order to defend itself from the influence of Pakistan. While New Delhi promotes the 'Afghan-led Afghan-owned peace process', the changes in the international system has compelled it to follow a policy based on pragmatism rather than utopian ideals or soft power. The following section will underline the key policy formulations which India could rely upon to escalate its strategic immensity in Afghanistan.

❖ India

The first step in diplomacy between India and Afghanistan was marked by the signing of the Treaty of Friendship in 1950. Former Prime Minister Pandit Nehru throughout his tenure was more receptive to Kabul because of the underlying focus on keeping the distant neighbour away from Pakistan's impact. In the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, Afghanistan remained neutral by not supporting any country at the cost of the other. With the advent of the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971, both New Delhi and Kabul tilted towards the Soviet Union. Since Pakistan largely cooperated with the United States during the Cold War, the anti-Pakistan policy of the then Afghan PM Daoud led to better relations between India and Afghanistan. In 1982, the Prime Minister of India at the time, Indira Gandhi visited the United States after a period of 11 years to resolve the differences between the two countries on Afghanistan and the US arms sales to Pakistan.ⁱⁱⁱ

Due to the evolving relations Indo-US relations, Washington stopped coercing global institutions from cutting down financial assistance to India which led to the latter's support to the mujahideen against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But India scepticism of Pakistan's armed assistance to the mujahideen succeeded in subduing the national interests and in the final years, India shifted back to the pro-Soviet frame in Kabul.

This highlights that throughout the Soviet invasion, India's foreign policy in Afghanistan persisted in the realm of dilemma. In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion, India continued in its support to firstly Karmal and then Najibullah, thereby alienating the mujahideen further.^{iv} With the fall of the government formed by the Northern Alliance and the Taliban coming to power in 1996, India tacitly changed its stance and assisted anti-Taliban forces through political, military and moral upkeep.^v It also recognised the parallel government of the United Front led by Ahmad Shah Massoud from 1996-2001.

An Indian investment of USD 2.3 billion post 9/11 attacks in Afghanistan signified the extent to which India was involved in the country though the military support besmirched. But India has never followed an independent foreign policy in Afghanistan. Throughout the Soviet invasion, the fear of alienating the USSR dominated Indian decision-making. India writhed

predominantly in Kabul by keeping all its eggs in one basket post-1991 and after the Global War on Terrorism, Indian backing of Karzai led government established the pursuance of a democratic and consensus-building framework in Afghanistan.

The Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between India and Afghanistan in 2011, painted the departure from its traditional policy of boycotting the Afghan Taliban and the implementation of an Afghan-led reconciliation process. From supporting one faction in the past, India has lately been open to multiple-stakeholders within Afghanistan. However, New Delhi has been constantly fearful of Pakistan's influence on the Taliban. Partly the fear and partly the domestic political environment haven't allowed Indian leadership to act with pragmatism and understand the internal shifts within Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Afghanistan in 2015 and the inauguration of the Afghan Parliament aided by India signify that India has the potential to unravel the domestic political environment provided it recognises the lack of territorial sovereignty of the Ghani government. Centring too much focus on the expansion of soft power and infrastructural development will not help India to achieve its interests. Following are the policy formulations which the Indian government could magnify upon in the bid to expand the horizon of its influence:

1. ***Unlike the past, not overly relying on one front or get involved in factionalism.*** Focusing too much on sustaining a democratic framework within Afghanistan could lead to dissection in India's strategic interests. While the rights-based progress needs to be unrelenting, India has to accommodate its strategic interests within its approach in Afghanistan.
2. In order to achieve the first motif, the Indian government needs to dedicate an ***Afghanistan based think tank*** to further India's strategic interests while comprehending Afghanistan's civil society and the political system. There should be a comparative historical as well as the present data analysis of Afghanistan.
3. Considering India's representation at the unofficial level at the 'Moscow Format' led by Russia, a ***dedicated desk for Afghanistan*** needs to be created under the level of Joint Secretary.
4. ***Multi-Level policy research*** is needed keeping in sight the interests of other countries involved in Afghanistan.
5. A shortcoming of India's Afghanistan Policy is looking at Afghanistan through the lens of Pakistan. This ***Pakistan factor can be de-hyphenated*** to accommodate India's core concern and an independent orientation in Afghanistan.
6. Like the Heart of Asia summit, such ***conferences should be organized to mobilize funds for the reconstruction*** of Afghanistan. An Afghan-led and Afghan-owned stable Afghanistan is in the best interest of India and the region as a whole.
7. India-Afghanistan trade has not achieved its full potential. Augmenting trade prospects and ***removing barriers to trade*** will serve the best interests of both nations. Trade Associations visits should be promoted to understand the potential areas of vocation between the two countries i.e. exploring comparative advantage.
8. Moving beyond trade, the ***Shahid Beheshti (Chabahar port)*** is a strategic project that has to be harnessed with proactive indulgence.
9. The ***Study in India Program*** with digital collaboration and student exchange needs to be bolstered.

The Taliban identifies the essentiality of foreign trade and an open economy and has specified consent to the proposed TAPI pipeline which could help Afghanistan to endure the challenges. But India with its dropping 4.3% of GDP growth rate, will find it difficult to invest in such projects, the latest casualty being the reduction of investments in the Chabahar project from USD 60 million to USD 45 million in 2019.



*Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline
Image Courtesy: Eurasian Businesses' Briefing*

With the Taliban trying to modify its neighbourhood policy and evolving into a reliable force in Kabul, it needs India in its bid to gain legitimacy. New Delhi needs to acknowledge the fault-lines present in the political system commanded by the Afghan government while simultaneously get involved in the Afghan Peace Process and acknowledge the Taliban's active role in it. Like other countries, India does not have to overtly bestow sovereignty on the Taliban but what it could do is to recognise the effective presence of the latter and initiate diplomatic engagements without 'boots on the ground' in Afghanistan.

Although the intra-Afghan talks have been postponed indefinitely, the recent meeting between Khalilzad and the Taliban delegation in Doha signifies the prominence of the Taliban in the peace process. These improvements indicate that the interplay between negative and positive sovereignty has benefitted the Taliban rather than the Afghan government. With 14.6% of Afghanistan's districts under the Taliban control and 29.2% contested, the depleting resources of the Afghan government, and the controversial electoral process, it could be clearly seen that the Afghan government does not have territorial sovereignty in Afghanistan.

The Taliban has gained recognition by others such as Germany, Russia, the Central Asian Republics, the European Union and the other three mentioned countries. Though it is not the salutation of sovereignty as such for the Taliban, these adjustments highlight the lessening of faith in the legitimacy of the Afghan government and a way ahead towards accepting a Taliban inclusive government if the intra-Afghan reconciliatory process flourishes.

Nevertheless, the progress in the Afghan peace process signifies the partial fulfilment of the Taliban's neighbourhood policy. In 1996-2001, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was recognised by three countries and at present, the resurgence of the Taliban highlights that it has been able to fissure the sincerity of the Afghan government while simultaneously allowing other countries to cautiously intervene in Afghanistan. Though being sceptical of the US troops, the Taliban clearly apprehends the present world order in which there has been an implicit cleft between Russia-China-Iran and the United States. Having learned from the past, Talibani's leadership is not willing to overtly rely on any single country, thus initiating a discourse with others. The relationship between the Taliban and the Afghan government till now has been following a zero-sum trajectory whereas its terms with other countries are in a positive-sum game measure.

Conclusion

Applying a domestic to international approach in order to understand the processes of legitimacy and sovereignty would provide a vibrant picture of the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Since the cancellation of the peace process in September 2019, the US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad has met the Taliban in Doha recently to further the prospects of a ceasefire as well as the continuation of dialogue. The United States doesn't want to repeat the historical mistake of the 1990s and is interested to manufacture a governance model even if it is devoid of democratic ideals.

Though there is an expectation of intra-Afghan talks once a midstream is established in the peace process, the mere fact of not being able to lose the centrality of the Taliban generates the external recognition which the latter has continuously required. With domestic upheavals in Iran, the circumstances have compelled it to have cordial relations with the Taliban, thereby sustaining influence to proliferate their benefits. Furthermore, China's risk-aversion policy and its support to Pakistan have allowed Beijing to construct the narrative within the country.

India was kept on the margins during the first half of the peace process, the Modi government's reluctance to involve India into the quagmire has profited the Taliban against the Afghan government. Although the national security argument would suggest that the Taliban like before would allow Afghanistan to be used as a shelter for those organizations spreading terrorism in India, the narrative at present is completely different. The Taliban is keen on reducing its dependency on Pakistan and India needs to use it to serve the strategic purposes. As perilous it may be for the political party in power, focusing more on the future prospects will provide New Delhi with sound policy alternatives, thereby allowing it to recognise the reality at present in Afghanistan.

The delay in the 2019 Afghan elections, as well as the results, has created an atmosphere of suspicion in the progress of democracy in Afghanistan. Moreover, the failure of institutions to provide security from an increased number of the Taliban led-attacks and the lack of resources has led to questions on the Ghani Presidency. The Taliban through its politics of fear has succeeded in undermining the Afghan government and gaining external legitimacy. It has succeeded to gain relatively in terms of domestic legitimacy though external recognition has been a major impetus.

In order to understand the contestation of sovereignty in Afghanistan, one should recognise that the Afghan Taliban has evolved. Instead of directly challenging the state, it has challenged the legality of the Afghan government through filling a considerable number of attacks while sustaining the Afghan Peace Process. This indicates that Talibani leadership is willing to be a part of the reconciliatory framework in its bid to attain sovereignty. And to get hold of the latter, the Taliban has to be open to discourse in the international system because governance in a state like Afghanistan needs visible assistance both in the internal as well external realm.

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