

# AFGHANISTAN 2.0: DEVELOPMENTS, IMPLICATIONS & POLICY OPTIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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*“There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen.”*  
Vladimir Lenin

### Introduction

August 2021 will long be remembered in world history because during this month the mightiest world power ended its longest and most expensive military campaign against one of the world’s poorest countries, after negotiating a peaceful withdrawal with a non-state actor, whose key members it once held as prisoners. The lightening rise of Afghan Taliban, the swift collapse of Ashraf Ghani’s government and the hurried exodus of the western military and international organizations have shocked the world. But the most critical question that Afghan Taliban now face and the world is now concerned about is that after capturing Kabul, whether the rapid territorial gains by Afghan Taliban can be translated into political stability, yield diplomatic recognition and lead towards good governance, despite waning western commitment and cautious reactions by rising China and resurgent Russia. These multi-dimensional global, regional and domestic developments related to Afghanistan will have profound and long-term implications for Pakistan, which have been analyzed in this paper, that also offers a few timely policy recommendations to address these complex challenges.

### Skeptical International Environment

Pakistan is leading the diplomatic effort to encourage the international community to remain engaged with Afghanistan despite changing political realities there. Nonetheless, the international environment is generally skeptical towards Afghan Taliban’s rise to power in Afghanistan whereas some concerns have also been raised within Pakistan regarding its implications for national security, foreign policy and socio-economic health of the country. This is due to the fact that Afghan Taliban’s lightening military advances and territorial gains are yet to be translated into political stability and a new Afghan government has still not been

formed, whose inclusive political character and subsequent diplomatic recognition by the international community may also take some time. Moreover, even if a few States choose to recognize a government led by Afghan Taliban, it is unlikely to happen without specific and verifiable international conditions and Afghan Taliban’s commitments regarding security, human and women rights, level and scale of violence and type and nature of their political system.

### Polarized Debate within the United States

President Joe Biden’s decision to pull the US troops out of Afghanistan is a wise but politically costly one because it reflects his

firm conviction that Ashraf Ghani's government, despite his personal loyalty towards Washington and exceptional US economic and military assistance, was neither effective nor enjoyed the popular support or legitimacy over Afghanistan. After Afghan Taliban's swift take-over of Kabul, the recent debate within the US on Afghanistan has become sharply polarized due to the rising Republican criticism against Biden Administration, despite the fact that Doha Accord with Afghan Taliban was signed by the Trump Administration.

The Republicans, both liberal and conservative US media and think tanks have criticized Biden Administration for a poorly managed military withdrawal, damaging US international image and denting the trust of American allies, international organizations and human rights activists in Washington's ability to stand by its allies around the world for liberal ideals, human rights and democracy.

The Russia and Chinese media has also criticized the US policy of military intervention while the British media, albeit critical of the hasty US military withdrawal, has attempted to signal tolerance of Afghan Taliban's rise to power as a political reality through media interview by its military leadership. This indicates that London desires to keep its future options open and might even consider a different future policy towards Afghanistan, despite being a key US military ally.

Interestingly, the Indian diplomats, media, think tanks, experts and their US-based allies initially described Afghan Taliban's rise as Pakistan's victory and criticized New Delhi's excessive reliance and trust only on the US for protecting Indian interests within Afghanistan. However, in order to complicate Afghan Taliban's international

acceptability and legitimacy, there is a greater focus on Afghan women rights in the Western media, epitomized by top international icons like Nobel laureate Malala Yousufzai and Angelina Jolie.

### **Withdrawal of Western Financial Support for Afghanistan**

The international financial support extensively available to the Ashraf Ghani's government, primarily due to US influence over international financial institutions and former Afghan leadership's proximity to Washington, has been immediately and completely withdrawn. This has further reduced Afghan Taliban's ability to quickly form a stable government and efficiently run the existing departments ranging from finance, commerce, trade, health, education, development and foreign office and also timely pay salaries to thousands of employees working in these government departments. Alternatively, removing thousands of employees appointed during the past twenty years in all the Afghan govt department and replacing them with pro-Taliban employees will not be practical or easy, even if it is desired by the Afghan Taliban.

However, the recent indications that Chinese might consider offering the new Afghan government economic assistance and even extending CPEC to Afghanistan, offer some ray of hope for Afghan Taliban to manage the looming economic crisis. In addition, the recent Turkish-Qatari arrangement to jointly manage Kabul airport is a positive development which will help ensure that Afghanistan remains connected to the outside world and international community.

### The Ideological Dilemma: An Inclusive Political Arrangement

Accommodating staunch ideological and political opponents in any future power-sharing arrangement will pose a great challenge to Afghan Taliban's ideological foundations, religious narrative, loyalty and unity of their own rank and file. Therefore, such a political compromise could become a potential source of rift between their own ranks as it could be interpreted by their staunch followers as compromising on their ideology.

Moreover, although Ashraf Ghani and Amrullah Saleh no longer enjoy the western support or popular legitimacy, but the distant possibility of the emergence of a government in exile, supported by the western powers like the US, UK & France and tolerated by Russia and China, cannot be completely ruled out, particularly if Afghan Taliban either fail to build a stable and inclusive government or try to impose an exclusive govt through the use of force.

The recent UNSC meeting was held under Indian presidency, in which Pakistan was not allowed to participate where the Afghan Ambassador of the Ashraf Ghani Administration represented Afghanistan and it was not objected to be either China or Russia, despite their unilateral positive signals towards Afghan Taliban.

In addition, the leaders of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) have urged the UN, UNSC and G20 to pursue a coordinated approach towards Afghanistan. This implies that even Central Asian republics, neighboring Afghanistan could take a stance similar to Moscow and other major powers towards recognizing future Afghan government.

### Critical Role of Regional Countries

The role of the Northern and Western neighbors of Afghanistan will be crucial in determining whether a politically stable government led by Afghan Taliban is acceptable to these countries or will these countries individually or mutually decide to support their ideological and ethnic proxies and communities within Afghanistan to militarily contest Afghan Taliban's rule. The latter scenario could potentially lead to an enduring civil war within Afghanistan and endanger the large regional connectivity projects such as BRI and CPEC.

In this regard, the Russian role in influencing its former Central Asian republics will be critical, depending upon whether Moscow decides to formally accept Afghan Taliban as the new rulers of Afghanistan, in return for Afghan Taliban's commitment to deny and contest Daish' presence and role within Afghan territory in future and prevent them from using Afghan territory to influence and attack the Russian sphere of influence within Central Asia.

Nonetheless, Pakistan considers the reduced Indian influence and role within Afghanistan as a geopolitically and geo-strategically favorable development. The hurried exodus of the Indian diplomats, intelligence agents and officials immediately after Afghan Taliban's take-over indicates that New Delhi's understands that its influence and intelligence role was only possible with the consent of Ashraf Ghani's government and support of NDS and Afghan National Security Forces.

It is expected that the rise of Afghan Taliban will lead to a reduced Indian ability to use Afghan territory and wage a proxy

war against Pakistan by supporting TTP, BLA, BLF and Daesh and reduce Pakistan's long-term internal security challenges. However, some remnants of NDS and Afghan National Security Force could still seek external help and try to collaborate with terrorist organizations such as Daish, TTP, BLA and BLF in order to continue their anti-Pakistan activities from Afghan territory. Therefore, Islamabad's dominant security concern and main expectation from the new Afghan government will be that it can verifiably ensure that Afghanistan's territory is not used by anyone against Pakistan.

### The Challenge of Governance

Afghan Taliban's ability to swiftly form a stable and functional government structure based on international recognition along with substantive and timely external economic assistance will significantly depend upon whether they can timely attract substantive economic assistance, foreign investment and ensure socio-economic development. This will also enable them to legitimize their rule, address the fears of different communities and concerns of the international community, regarding their ideology, way of life and style of governance.

Moreover, since the Ashraf Ghani administration was practically a Western proxy, therefore, the new Afghan government which is not inclined to immediately appease the western powers in terms of its future policies, is likely to receive reluctant recognition and little if any economic assistance immediately. Furthermore, Afghan Taliban's ability to establish a stable and enduring political system and good governance will determine whether even Afghan neighbors and global powers interested in reduced

Western influence over Afghanistan, like Russia and China, are willing to recognize, support and sponsor their rule.

### Eliminating or Managing the Opposition: Political versus Military Option

Afghan Taliban swiftly gained control over most border crossing points with the neighboring countries as part of a brilliant strategy aimed at militarily, logistically and economically isolating and strangulating Ashraf Ghani's administration, which mainly exercised control and following in the few urban population centers. However, the recent reports of clashes in the Panjshir valley and the gradual emergence and consolidation of resistance forces under Ahmad Shah Masoud's son, could prolong the challenges for Afghan Taliban, particularly if he receives external support. This also indicates that the possible risk of a limited and enduring future civil war cannot be completely ruled out. Moreover, greater use of force by Afghan Taliban to quickly eliminate their ideological and ethnic opponents could further complicate their ability to gain domestic political legitimacy and achieve international diplomatic recognition, particularly from the neighboring countries.

Moreover, governing Afghanistan will depend upon Afghan Taliban's ability to convince thousands of educated and skilled Afghans that their lives, futures, families and careers will be secure under the new administration, irrespective of their ideological or ethnic differences. Demonstration of political and cultural tolerance will incrementally also augment Afghan Taliban's ability to seek diplomatic recognition from neighboring countries who support these non-Pushtun communities, attract external assistance,

invite foreign investment and pursue socio-economic stability.

### Implications for Pakistan

Initially, some ethno-nationalist and ultra-liberal elements have expressed their disappointment towards the US for ending its material support for Ashraf Ghani's administration and its quick collapse. They have felt let down by their international supporters and sponsors but a new narrative is being gradually shaped that attempts to directly blame the swift rise of Afghan Taliban, rapid Indo-US exodus and their international embarrassment on Pakistan and its security institutions.

Afghan Taliban's rise to power poses the risk of increasing the ideological polarization between the religious and liberal elements within the country which could further intensify the conflicting political pressures on the federal government. The Afghan Taliban's take-over of Kabul has been welcomed by Pakistan's religious parties which have demanded that Pakistan takes the lead in formally recognizing Afghan Taliban. In contrast, liberal commentators are showing growing concern at its likely impact on Pakistani psycho-social dynamics, social fabric and the potential risk of growing radicalization.

More importantly, elements sympathetic to Afghan Taliban or sharing its ideology and world view are likely to feel more inspired and emboldened and could attempt increasing and expanding their activities within Pakistan, which could eventually pose greater challenges to Pakistan's political stability and internal security. The recent release of TTP leadership such as Moulvi Faqir Muhammed from prison in Afghanistan

could give TTP a further boost. Therefore, addressing the threat of Daish would require greater collaboration between Pakistan and the new Afghan government and security institutions of both countries. In addition, Islamabad could seek specific assurances from the new Afghan government that it will not interfere or support any elements or parties within Pakistan either ideologically, politically or materially.

Unilateral diplomatic recognition of Afghan Taliban's government, particularly in the absence of US formal recognition, could potentially lead to a more intense international hybrid warfare against Pakistan. This could be based on a stronger anti-Pakistan narrative via international media and think tanks, greater economic coercion via stricter FATF review and tougher conditions by the Western-dominated world financial institutions like IMF, World Bank and Asian Development Bank. Moreover, unilateral diplomatic recognition of Afghan Taliban could make Western economic assistance politically more costly for Pakistan.

This scenario creates a diplomatic imperative for Pakistan to formally recognize the new Afghan government in collaboration with a few other countries, such as China, Russia, Qatar, Iran and Turkey. This will help reduce the political and diplomatic cost of recognizing a government of an actor that has just humbled the dominant superpower in human history after its longest and costliest military campaign.

### Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

In view of the skeptical international environment, challenges of forming an inclusive political government, limited

prospects of Western economic assistance, daunting administrative and governance related challenges, the role of regional and particularly the neighboring countries would be crucial in managing the current humanitarian crisis, promoting Afghan political reconciliation, preventing a civil war and helping the Afghan nation gradually build a stable and viable nation-state.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi's recent diplomatic initiative to visit the neighboring countries of Afghanistan was very crucial because it represented Islamabad's high-level attempt aimed at timely encouraging all the neighbors of Afghanistan to engage with the Taliban-led new Afghan government and use their respective leverage over different Afghan factions to support the political reconciliation process. This diplomatic initiative must be intellectually reinforced by think tanks and media by engaging with regional counterparts to promote the same agenda.

Second, Pakistan, in collaboration with regional countries should lead a regional humanitarian initiative for helping the Afghan nation, by providing credit facility, food, medicines etc. This will also help improve new Afghan administration's ability to manage the deepening humanitarian and economic crisis and reduce the risk of large scale Afghan migration towards Pakistan, due to lack of adequate facilities in their own country.

Third, Pakistan can consider suggesting to all the neighboring countries of Afghanistan to offer a joint arms control commitment not to supply or allow more arms and ammunition to be supplied from their territories or airspace to any faction within Afghanistan in future because this

will further fuel conflict and instability in the country and the region, which will be harmful to the individual and mutual interests of all the neighbors of Afghanistan.

Fourth, Pakistan should consider recognizing Afghan Taliban government in consultation with the Troika Plus (UNSC permanent members particularly US, China and Russia), key players like Qatar along with neighbors like Iran, in order to ensure that unilaterally recognizing Afghan Taliban does not internationally isolate Pakistan or lead to greater Western economic coercion against Pakistan. The decision by Central Asian countries to recognize the new Afghan government is likely to be influenced by Moscow, Ankara and Tehran. However, delayed recognition of the new Afghan government by Pakistan could also create future stresses between Islamabad and the new administration in Kabul.

Fifth, the Afghan Taliban's commitment to ensure that Afghan territory will not be used against its neighbors particularly Pakistan is critical for Pakistan's internal security. However, it will be not very easy to practically or immediately implement by Afghan Taliban for ideological reasons. Therefore, this security commitment must be based on an elaborate and real-time joint intelligence sharing mechanism and cooperative border security arrangement, developed in consultation with the new Afghan government, to ensure each border violation is sternly and timely dealt with by Kabul. This is necessary because due to ethnic, social, geographical and ideological factors, Afghan Taliban's will and ability to control and eliminate TTP, Daish, BLA and BLF still needs to be proven. Otherwise, this could create an expectation gap between Islamabad and Kabul and potentially become a future point of friction.

Sixth, in case the Afghan civil war expands or escalates, Pakistan must timely develop a comprehensive plan and take adequate administrative arrangements to restrict and efficiently manage the possible influx of Afghan refugees and the security, health, economic and social implications of their arrival. The refugee management plan must be developed in consultation with relevant international organizations such as the United Nations, UN High Commission for Refugees, World Food Programme, World Health Organization and International Committee of Red Crescent etc. The upcoming SCO summit in Tajikistan due to be held on 16-17 September could also offer a timely and useful opportunity for high-level consultations regarding Afghan security, humanitarian relief, refugee management, stability and socio-economic development.

Seventh, after the US military withdrawal, although the US hostility towards Afghan Taliban is likely to reduce but Pakistan's main geopolitical leverage over Washington could also be reduced. This could lead to much greater US interest in an India-dominated South Asia policy, leading to Washington's more significant diplomatic support towards New Delhi's permanent membership of the UN Security Council and Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), more substantive technological assistance, frequent multi-domain military and intelligence cooperation and expanding inter-operability.

This requires a timely and comprehensive inter-service and inter-agency strategic review of Pakistan's regional security paradigm based on counter-balancing the looming strategic instability by exploring similar cooperation with China and Russia in tandem with diplomatic engagements with Washington to ensure that the US

declining interest towards Pakistan does not lead to greater coercion and hostility.

Eighth, Pakistan must consider raising deepening Indian interest, commitment and role in the US 'Indo-Pacific' strategy and Quad formation at the upcoming SCO summit because New Delhi cannot be expected to remain simultaneously committed to both the 'Eurasian geoeconomics-based continental vision of Asian Century' as well as the Western-led geo-political grand-strategy aimed at containing and contesting it, at the same time.

Ninth, India will have a geopolitical interest in distancing the US from Pakistan and deepening the anti-Pakistan sentiment within Washington political elite, policy circles, think tanks and media which Pakistani diplomats, scholars, diaspora and media will have to contest far more effectively and consistently in the foreseeable future.

Tenth, Pakistan should encourage greater bilateral cooperation in trade, commerce, education, media and think tanks with Afghanistan. This will also reinforce Pakistan's current policy of increasing its export revenue and expanding export markets.

Eleventh, Pakistan should also launch greater soft power initiatives via media and think tank collaborations to repair the negative public perception created by Indian and Afghan social, print and electronic media and think tanks regarding Pakistan during the past two decades.





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