

Dealing with Afghanistan after the US Withdrawal: Challenges and Options for Pakistan

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Introduction

The unexpected turn of events in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US forces culminated in the fall of the Afghan government to the Afghan Taliban on August 15, 2021. This was an event not many researchers and scholars had predicted. The US invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, led to the fall of the first Afghan Taliban regime in two months, and the US and its allies landed in Afghanistan to remain for the next two decades. Three consecutive US administrations managed to deal with Afghanistan during those years; it was always known that the US forces had to leave Afghanistan eventually. The US government spent more than \$500 billion in Afghanistan, on both the war effort against the Taliban and on nation-building. The US and its allies were adamant to build an Afghan National Army and other institutions required for an economically viable and thriving nation.

On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban proved a resilient Islamist movement, making the Afghan War (2001-2021) the longest-running conflict in American history. The Afghan Taliban turned out to be adept in asymmetric warfare and took full advantage of the rough and rugged terrain of Afghanistan, benefiting from the support of certain sections of the Afghan population. Since its outset, the War was brutal, and it was difficult for the US and newly recruited and trained Afghan National Defense Forces (ANDF) to contain the Afghan Taliban in rural areas where they ruled large swaths of territory. The election of the Biden administration in January 2021 solidified the inevitability of American withdrawal, as the Democrats pledged to deliver on Trump's Afghan exit. Earlier, the Trump administration had designated Zalmay Khalilzad as the US Special Envoy for leading the peace talks with the Afghan Taliban. With Qatar's mediation, on February 29, 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a peace deal that laid out a timetable for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Taliban agreed to reduce violence against Afghan and foreign forces and to prevent al-Qaida, Islamic State, and other Islamist militants from recruiting and staging attacks using Afghan territory. The US agreed to a complete

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troop withdrawal in 14 months and to facilitate the release of 5,000 Afghan Taliban detainees held in government prisons.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in July 2021 resulted in the fall of Kabul within a month and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Since the Afghan Taliban are a reality to be reckoned with, Pakistan must calculate policy options for a sound relationship premised on mutual trust and regional security. As the situation in Kabul remains tenuous, national stakeholders must monitor ongoing developments and take calibrated measures to secure Pakistan's interests in the region. This essay outlines and analyzes challenges for Pakistan attending the aftermath of the Afghan withdrawal while proposing tentative avenues for ameliorative action by the state. As per the peace accord commitment, the Biden administration decided to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan by July 2021. Before this agreement, the US had been assisting the Afghan government with combat support as part of 'Operation Resolute Support,' an advisory and training operation that succeeded Operation Enduring Freedom in 2014. The withdrawal initiated a spike in Afghan Taliban attacks across Afghanistan, in blatant violation of the peace accord. The increase in violence especially attacks targeting military installations of the Afghan government, severely demoralized state troops. The pullback by these forces allowed the Taliban to gain control of operational bases, cities, and, eventually, entire provinces before overrunning the capital on August 15. The Afghan Taliban regime announced the new interim government by the second week of September.

Challenges for Pakistan

The fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban militia prompted a spate of both internal and external challenges for Pakistan. The Pakistani state was prepared to field an exodus of Afghan refugees in the event of a civil war between the Afghan Taliban fighters and the Kabul regime. Following Ghani's exit from Afghanistan on the eve of the Kabul takeover, the expected fighting did not occur. Nevertheless, key challenges remain as the Afghanistan of today is no longer the same as Afghanistan ruled over by the Taliban during their first regime, i.e. 1996-2001. It is now a country of 45 million people with a core youth demographic, a percentage of which has been educated in the 15,000 schools opened during the last 20 years. The potential for civil unrest remains, with grave implications for key sectors underlying Pakistan's national security.

Economic and Food Security

Pakistan is already experiencing serious economic turmoil, with double-digit inflation, an unprecedented increase in energy prices, and a rapidly worsening current account deficit. In this context, the smuggling of food items and other goods to Afghanistan has significantly increased since September 2021, as Afghanistan's dilapidated economy continues to deteriorate under Taliban rule. Trade between the two countries soared after the takeover but remained in Pakistan's favor, with trucks carrying cement, sugar, flour, cooking oil, salt, bananas, and other commodities from Pakistan to Afghanistan increasing from 100 to 400 per day. Trade stood at \$754 million (Sajid, 2021), but it is now likely to increase because of the immense demand for Pakistani goods and food items in Afghanistan amidst a looming food crisis.

The former Federal Finance Minister, Mr Shaukat Tarin, stated that the Pakistani Rupee is falling against the US dollar because of a daily flight of \$15 million from Pakistan to Afghanistan ("Over \$15m per day cash going to

Afghanistan”, 2021). Mr Tarin stressed the need to trade with Afghanistan in the Pakistani Rupee to maintain Pakistan’s depleting foreign exchange reserves (Aslam, 2021). Given the cessation of aid-based revenue and the American seizure of \$9.5 billion in Afghan foreign exchange reserves, the new regime is struggling to tackle both domestic and international payments. In light of this, the smuggling of food items is expected to increase, which would, in turn, prompt further inflation in Pakistan and a shortage of food items in certain parts of the country. The two states must cooperate over food security in the short term to expand long-term economic linkages.

According to a recent estimate by the UN World Food Program (WFP), the number of people on the verge of famine in Afghanistan stands at three million (“UN food agency”, 2021). If left unaddressed, an immediate consequence for Pakistan would be a mounting influx of Afghan refugees. In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan hosted approximately 3.5 million refugees, of which roughly 1.4 million remain in the country. Pakistani authorities have calculated that an expected arrival of additional 700,000 refugees would constitute a burden of \$2.2 bn (“Afghans Flee to Pakistan”, 2021) on the national exchequer.

According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), around 28,000 Afghans have already arrived in Pakistan after the Taliban takeover (Joles, 2021). The situation in Afghanistan is mercurial and constitutes both challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. On the economic front, strenuous measures are required to support a falling Afghan currency and a collapsing economy. Domestic economic woes leave Pakistan hard-pressed to handle the fallout from a full-blown collapse, particularly in light of attendant humanitarian costs. A key concern remains the impact of refugee flows on an increasingly tenuous internal security landscape. Pakistan is in no position to entertain another wave of Afghan refugees amassing at a characteristically porous border and crossing-over into two of the states’ poorest provinces.

Terrorism

The issues arising from such an influx may be seen from the lens of both traditional (terrorism) and human security (food/economic). The former relates to the action of militant outfits, i.e. the TTP and IS-K, with IS-K shifting its center of operations from Afghanistan to adjacent Pakistani urban spaces in an attempt to circumvent attacks by the Afghan Taliban. Concerning the TTP, the Afghan Taliban have so far demonstrated palpable reluctance in curbing and controlling the outfit’s operations. It is pertinent to mention that during the last 20 years of the TTP’s existence, the Afghan Taliban have never outright condemned the group and their terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

Immediately after taking over, the Taliban authorities released around 700 Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) prisoners from Afghan jails. Among their number was Molvi Faqir Mohammad, ranked second in TTP high command (“Taliban releases TTP’s Maulvi Faqir Mohammad”, 2021). He was arrested by the National Directorate of Security (NDS) in 2012 while crossing into Afghanistan. Other top TTP terrorists released by the Afghan Taliban included Waqas Mehsud, Hamza Mehsud, Zaraqawi Mehsud, Baitullah Mehsud, Qari Hameedullah Mehsud, Hameed Mehsud, and Mazhar Mehsud. The Afghan Taliban have released more than 2,300 prisoners from Afghan prisons in Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad.

Further, the Afghan Taliban have not taken concrete action to contain and control TTP militants operating from Afghan territories, especially in the south-

eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Paktia, and Paktika. Regarding their role in facilitating talks between Pakistan and the TTP, it is unclear whether the Afghan Taliban would push the TTP to sign a peace accord with the Pakistani state. Considering this, it may be argued that Pakistan will eventually have to take a hands-on approach to tackle the TTP and associated groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). An additional consideration for traditional security is the impact of the Taliban victory emboldening the radicalized and extremist individuals and groups operating within Pakistan. The Taliban's victory also redefines the ties between increasingly assertive religious groups and the Pakistani state.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Two immediate challenges in addressing the fallout of the American withdrawal concern stabilizing an economy in free fall and addressing the attendant impact on food and economic security. For two decades, the Afghan economy was bankrolled by the US and its western allies. Following the Taliban takeover, aid-based revenue has dried up, and the US has frozen vital foreign exchange reserves while isolating the new regime. The situation carries grave risks for Pakistan and demands an urgent and coordinated response by all major federal government departments and the state's security apparatus. The following recommendations list avenues for further academic and policy intervention:

- Calculating the potential of the Afghan economy with a focus on sectors such as agriculture and human resource training
- Firmly controlling borders to tackle smuggling
- Engaging the Afghan Taliban to cooperate with Pakistani security forces to curb the terrorist designs of TTP and IS-K.

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