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RELIGIOUS, PEACE, POVERTY, POWER AND TERRORISM CHALLENGES IN AFGHANISTAN - 2022

*Dilawar Khan¹, Dr. Khuda Bakhsh², Dr. Badshah Rehman³,
Dr. Mahboob Ullah⁴, Farzana Ashraf⁵*

¹PhD Scholar - Department of International Relations Preston
University Karachi, Pakistan

²Assistant Professor - Department of Education GC University Faisalabad

³Assistant Professor - Department of Islamic Studies University of
Malakand Chakdara Dir Lower

⁴Assistant Professor – Management Sciences Abasyn
University, Peshawar

⁵PhD Scholar - Department of International Relations Preston University
Karachi, Pakistan

Email: 4mahboobmails@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

President Joe Biden declared in April 2021 that US troops would be out of Afghanistan by September 2021. Despite ongoing peace discussions with the Afghan government, the Taliban increased attacks on Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) camps and outposts, rapidly seizing additional land. The US military has escalated troop withdrawals since May 2021. The US has completed roughly 95 percent of its departure by the end of July 2021, leaving only 650 troops to protect the US embassy in Kabul.

The Taliban maintained their onslaught in the summer of 2021, threatening government-controlled metropolitan areas and seizing many border crossings. The Taliban launched direct attacks on various cities in early August, including Kandahar in the south and Herat in the west. The Taliban took control of the

capital of southern Nimruz Province on August 6, 2021, making it the first provincial capital to fall. Following it, provincial capitals began to fall one by one. Within days, the Taliban had taken control of over ten additional cities, including Mazar-i-Sharif in the north and Jalalabad in the east, leaving Kabul as the only major city under government control (Global Conflict Tracker, February, 17, 2022).

Taliban fighters stormed the Afghan capital on August 15, 2021, forcing Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to flee the country and the Afghan government to collapse. The Taliban stated later that day that they had invaded the presidential palace, taken control of the city, and were setting up checkpoints to ensure security (Global Conflict Tracker, September, 17, 2021).

Religious Challenges

The Taliban have returned to power in Afghanistan twenty years after their ouster by U.S. troops, sparking concerns that they will impose harsh rule, neglect to provide basic services, and abuse human rights. Despite their military victory, it is unclear whether the Taliban would be able to impose their ultra-conservative religious ideas on Afghans in the long run.

Following the Taliban's takeover of power in Afghanistan, the country was renamed the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," a moniker that has been in use since the fundamentalist group ruled the country from 1996 to 2001. The name Islamic Emirate hints at the type of control the Taliban aim to impose on the country: religious rule (DW, Spring, 2022).

The Taliban's founders realised that if they didn't keep their primary pledge, their movement would go away. Since then, the Taliban's Islamism has allowed the organisation to expand into a new ideological and business entity. The Taliban's ideology became increasingly popularised as a social and political mission to reconstruct Afghan society by restoring "authentic" Islam. Meanwhile, the Taliban's own doctrinal versions have been accommodated through commercialisation. To accomplish so, the new rulers are embarking on an organised march on three important fronts to establish their control (Ahamd. J, January, 26, 2022).

In Afghanistan's daily lives and social customs, religion has traditionally played a significant part. Afghanistan appeared to be on the road to Islamization even under the mujahideen leaders: alcohol sales were prohibited, and women were pressured to cover their heads in public and wear in traditional Muslim garb. However, as the Taliban implemented its Islamic law in regions under their authority, considerably more rigorous procedures were enacted. The Taliban was criticised both at home and abroad for failing to develop a national administrative system as a result of these and other measures. In the absence of viable alternatives, the majority of Afghans appeared to accept Taliban demands in exchange for a more orderly society (Britannica, February, 15, 2022)

Internal Challenges in Afghanistan

Afghanistan was a center of connectivity of culture, goods and ideology both for Europe and South Asia. It was certainly weakened during the colonial period, and in modern times the four decades of conflict has belittled Kabul's status. For Afghanistan to be economically viable, it shall need to regain its status as a nucleus. Numerous, large-scale communication projects are in various degrees of progress in an effort to make Afghanistan a channel amid different countries in Central Asia and South Asia to boost security and sustainable peace in the region, particularly in Kabul (Brown, 2014a).

Afghanistan has continuously faced the challenges of terrorism, rampant with corruption, women rights, human rights, health facilities, education, weak governance, question of Sharia powers between Afghan government and the Taliban and political fragmentation. Afghan National Unity government is incapacitated as the Taliban increase insurgency with the other warlord's support. In this context from 2017 to date the West has urged the national unity government to provide support to the Afghan peace negotiation process and take measures to improve the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan (Brown, 2014b). According to Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction there are eight challenges for the Afghan government which needs to be tackled. The first challenge for the fragile Afghan national unity government is to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table and resolve the conflicts among the various warlord's and the government. But the efforts of Afghan government and the United States for restoration of peace in Kabul are still futile. U.S efforts to restore peace in country have not shown results and the challenges are extremely difficult and cannot be resolved immediately (Europe aid, 2014, Dec 11).

The second and enduring challenge for the Afghan government is rampant corruption. The United States and other donor countries have continued to transfer billions of dollars into the war-torn country without an anti-corruption strategy in the county. In 2010 nineteen people stole nearly \$1 billion from the largest private bank in Kabul (The Bank of Kabul), (SIGAR Quarterly Report 4/30 on Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2014, Apr 30). Moreover, the Afghan National Police and public institutions are largely involved in corruption which has affected the Afghan economy and the country is incapable to face domestic challenges like terrorism and restructuring of institutions.

The third challenge is smuggling of narcotics in Afghanistan's remote areas. Approximately 15% of Afghan GDP is coming from the opium industry. If United States withdraws, Kabul will be using this poppy cultivation as a source of income for the country and its economic growth. According to SIGAR report the United States has spent more than \$7.6 billion to squeeze the Kabul opium trade, but it's stronger than ever. The west has concerns to root out the poppy cultivation in the country but it still lurks as a problem and farming of opium is not under control (The Guardian, 2017, Mar 14).

The fourth dilemma is the government's inability to fund itself because the Afghan domestic revenue is less than 40% of the total budget. Revenue% for the quarter ending 31 Aug 2019 was \$10.660 a figure that unlikely to change

soon. Kabul' does not have the capacity i.e., financial, technical, managerial or otherwise to support, maintain and execute much of what has been build or established during more than a decade of global assistance. Mr John F. Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction says in his report that leaves the global donors to fill the gap (Sopko, 2017a).

Fifth can be understood as Mr. Spoko states that, 'the dilemma of Afghanistan is that the war and reconstruction is not properly managed and training of armed forces does not always engage the insurgents' groups aggressively'. He further asserts that situation in Kabul will worsen in the near future if U.S does not find a political solution of the Afghan dilemma (Sopko, 2017b).

The sixth and the leading issue of the Afghan National Unity government is that the Afghan security forces remain weak and do not face the threat of Taliban groups in certain areas. The United States has spent more than \$61 billion on the Afghan National Security Forces, but many of the Afghan soldiers cannot read or write. The U.S administration has spent \$200 million on a training and literacy agreement but, no one appears to know the overall literacy rate of the Afghan National Security Forces (TOLO News, 2018, May 25).

The seventh issue of Afghan government is that Afghan representatives cannot manage United States aid to Afghanistan. For many years most U.S sponsorship to Kabul came in the form of grants and contracts but Afghan authorities did not have much control over how the funds will be spent in different areas of the country. Since 2010 the United States has tried to channelize more funds through the Afghan Unity government, however massive corruption, inadequate oversight and lack of capability leave Kabul's leadership cannot manage the cash going forward to Afghanistan (James, 2018).

The eighth dilemma of the Afghanistan is its poverty. United States' Centre for Strategic and International Studies show that Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries on the globe, and one of the least developed. The report further adds that various past estimates of progress, including many official estimates issued by the American government have proved to be grossly over optimistic or wrong. This makes some key issues hard to address now, a large amount of the reporting on development of women rights, medical services, education is unsure at best and probably sharply exaggerated for political reasons in Kabul (Anthony H, 2019).

The ninth and final challenge is demographic pressure and the youth bulge. The Afghan population growth and a resulting level of strain on the economy and stability loom on disaster levels. The American Census Bureau estimates that the Afghan populace has risen from 8.2 million in 1950 to 15.0 million in 1980, 22.5 million in 2000, and 35.8 million in 2019 and it is predicted that this population level may rise to 45.7 million in 2030 and 63.8 million in 2050, which is alarming for the Afghan economy (SIGAR Quarterly Report, 2019, Oct 30).

Challenges of Peace, Poverty, Power and Terrorism in Afghanistan

The Afghan National Unity government is weakened by the splinter politics of the country because the Taliban uprising expands all over the region and other anarchic groups have strengthened their foothold which creates problems for the fragile unit government. The growing rebellion and worse political transition are exaggerated the future of Afghanistan (International Crisis Group, 2017, Apr 30).

In 2014 the global community struggled to prevent Afghanistan from falling into turmoil during the contested 2014 presidential election. The National Unity government is overwhelmed with internal disagreements and dysfunction that weakens the Afghan National Defense and Afghan Security Forces to counter the revolt countrywide. The Kabul authorities are flimsy to tackle major economic, governance and humanitarian issues, military and civilian casualties as well as the numbers of conflict displaced and those in need of immediate humanitarian assistance continue to grow in the country.

After the transition of Afghan security forces in 2014 the Afghan National Security Forces have been combating rising rebellions on numerous fronts. On 1 Feb 2017 the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction forward a report that 57.2% of 375 districts were under the Afghan government control and the rest under the Taliban and other fighting groups. The Special Inspector General claimed that 6785 Afghan soldiers were killed and around 11,777 wounded from Jan 2016 to Nov 2016, major losses at a time when Afghan Security Forces are struggling with personal preservation. The Taliban fighters inflicted huge losses to the Afghan National Army on 21 Apr 2016 when they attacked an Afghan Army base in the northern Balk province, murdering over one hundred military personnel and injuring many more. That year the Afghan Army Chief and Defense Minister both resigned from the service (SIGAR, Quarterly Report for Reconstruction of Afghanistan, 2017, Apr 30).

The United States of America wants to prevent the losses of more areas to the Taliban factions, especially during the spring offensive to condense the control of the Afghan government on the territory. Therefore, the U.S military observers know that if the forces are not increased in the country the Taliban would control the areas without any threat. Therefore, the U.S military leadership request to increase forces in Afghanistan to potentially and morally support the Afghan National Army. This way it also complies with the Warsaw summit contents which were made at NATOs in 8 Jul 2016 to train, assist and advise the Afghan Security forces and provide them annual funding of up to \$4.5 billion until 2020 (NATO report on Afghanistan, 2019, Mar 5).

The United States also wants to tack security situation and for this it will require, addressing expanding domestic disagreements and political partnership that fill all levels of the security machinery and apparatus that have destabilized Afghan National Security Forces' command and control structures. Security lapses have curbed the intra-governmental divisions likewise, and impeded execution of

reforms to maintain the effects of nepotism, corruption and factionalism in the Afghan National Army and Police (Bruce, 2006).

Due to the war on terror the regional security situation in the areas has worsened and Afghanistan's neighbours are worried about the unstable scenario of Kabul. The U.S is not controlling the remote areas of the country and Taliban fighters freely roam these provinces and continue their activities in these remote areas of the country. The cross-border issues amongst the neighbours of Afghanistan are day by day increasing because Afghanistan does not have the capacity to close their porous borders with their immediate neighbours like Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan China and Russia. Due these leaky borders Afghanistan has suffered huge losses and tremendous security hazards for the fragile Afghan government because Kabul depends on foreign funding and cannot afford to bear its expenses, individually (Aziz Amin, 2016; Ullah, 2020).

There are additional impediments in the regional security segment of Kabul, because closed ties amongst New Delhi and Afghanistan have deteriorated the security scenario in the region. Pakistan is concerned over India's close work in Kabul. The tug of war between the two countries continues and the Afghan authorities enjoy such situations. The Afghan National Unity government received \$1 billion and MI-25 combat helicopters in aid from India, to easily counter Islamabad's influence in Kabul (Maass, 2015).

United Nations allegedly claim that Iran has been suspected for providing military hardware to various Taliban groups in many areas of Afghanistan, a vital role played by the United States to counter Iran and Russian nexus to stop supporting Taliban factions in Afghanistan. According to some senior U.S military officials, Iran and specially Russia are providing military support, and proposing to lead a new peace process which could further complicate Afghanistan's regional security dynamics (Idrees, 2017).

Due to regional security and the rough internal scenario of Kabul, no international led negotiations will work unless there is an accord between Afghans, both those opposing and backing the Afghan authorities to pursue a peace talk rather than prolong conflict in Afghanistan. In this context, the European Union and its member states should continue their financial and technical assistance to Afghan-led peace and reconciliation process in its future, European-Union strategy for Afghanistan (US Fact Sheet, States Departments, 2019, Oct 22).

Now, United States wants to settle a political strategy, while the Trump administration's policy towards Afghanistan remains a work in progress, there is a clear indication it will continue its presence in Kabul and likely increase its military support from western countries. The U.S currently wants to address the question of the best format and composition of the Afghan peace process. The quadrilateral negotiation team which comprises of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and U.S has been dormant since the killing of Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor in May 2016, because Taliban have been mourning their leader's death.

In the present peace negotiations, between U.S and Taliban, Russia made a vital offer to settle prolonged issues, but America declined Russian invitation to participate in the peace process, concerned that Moscow's outreach to the Taliban leadership including some military assistance to Taliban fighters, could endanger United States' stabilization efforts and jeopardized the lives of the American armed forces in Afghanistan. In the current war on terror, Pakistan has played a vital role because peace and prosperity in Afghanistan brings the same to Islamabad. Pakistan has the key to peace in Kabul. Without the support of Pakistan; Afghanistan cannot develop any peace negotiations. Pakistan Army and security forces bravely face the threats of terrorist in Pakistan as well as in areas across the Durand line. For the sake of peace Pakistan Army has launched various operations in the remote, federally administrated areas and across the border to eliminate terrorists and bring peace in the region, especially in Afghanistan (ARY News, 2017, Feb 23).

The closed cooperation of Pakistan Army with Afghan authorities has resolved some security issues on the Pak - Afghan border area. However, Kabul suffers many issues, such as humanitarian problem in Afghanistan, which is one of the most prolonged crises in the world. The United States intervention in Oct 2001, displaced over 646,698 persons, creating a mega problem for the weak Afghan government, and sending off refugees in Pakistan and Iran. Afghan unity government has controlled the humanitarian issue neither in the past nor will it in the future because the government is totally reliant on foreign aids and narcotics smuggling in the country, which has branded Afghanistan as global opium providers (Human Right Reports on Humanitarian issues in Afghanistan, 2019, Jun 30).

Kabul in the Modern Politics of South Asia

The disintegration of Soviet Union led to dramatic changes in the international strategic environment, the Warsaw Pact unraveled, the Soviet Union itself Balkanized into various states and the Cold War finished between the Capitalist and the Communist. Most of the western commentators on these developments focus on the reduced military threat and the independence of Ukraine, Byelorussia and the states in the Caucuses. Some westerners knew much about Central Asia and even followed the halting steps of the Central Asian states toward political and greater economic sovereignty (David, 2016a).

However, the decade of the 1990s was relatively peaceful in military terms, the first decade of the 21st Century was a real cauldron of turmoil, as the world adjusted to surging Chinese capabilities in Central Asia as well as in Afghanistan (David, 2016; Ullah, 2020).

The geo-strategic significance of Afghanistan is very vital for the western world, the Central Asians states, South Asian states and Middle East. Afghanistan is a landlocked country; it is edging by Pakistan in the south, Iran in the west, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan in the north and China in the far northeast. The Afghan geographic entity now known as Afghanistan has a very long history, and has been an antique central point of the Silk Road and exodus. It is an important geostrategic location, linking East and West Asia or

the Middle East. Due to geostrategic importance the land has been a target of different invaders as well as a source from which local powers invaded neighboring regions to form their own kingdoms. Ahmed Shah Durrani was the first to create the Durrani Empire in 1747, which is considered the inception of modern Afghanistan (Library of Congress Studies on Afghanistan, 1997).

The geostrategic significance of Afghanistan is very crucial for the global community and in this context in the late 19th century Afghanistan became a buffer state in the great game which was played between the Russian Empire and the British Empire. Due to its strategic importance the land of Afghanistan became the focal point of severe rivalry amid Britain and Tsarist Russia. On May 6, 1919 the third Anglo - Afghan war was started and due to this war, the country regained independence from the UK over its foreign affairs. During the conflict, the war-weary British gave up their control over Afghan foreign affairs by signing the Treaty of Rawalpindi in Aug 1919 (Chesney Mc, 1993). After regaining independence from United Kingdom, Afghanistan celebrated 19th August as their Independence Day. Nevertheless, Afghanistan remained significant in the contemporary politics of South Asia. This country remained at the center stage of global politics as a theater in the cold war era of super powers and acted as a frontline state to United States of America for channeling its material, financial and military supplies to the Mujahedeen. In late 1970s Afghanistan experienced constant civil war, interrupted by foreign occupations in the forms of the 1979 Soviet Union offensive and the 9 September 2001 U.S.-led invasion that toppled the Taliban regime in Kabul. Afghanistan has assumed significance in the contemporary politics of South Asia due to its potential to influence the societies and politics in its bordering countries (UK Essay Press, 2017, Jul 7).

The geo-strategic significance of Afghanistan was not ignored during World War - II. In this war the British colonial rule, in the subcontinent, was distorted and Soviet Union emerged as a super power. United States led the western bloc and Soviet Union led the eastern communist bloc. When the British departed from Indian Subcontinent, Afghanistan lost its significance and the western bloc found a concrete ally in Pakistan to ultimately counter the Soviet Union expansion towards Kabul. Conversely, the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 brought the country once again to the limelight and the strategic significance of Afghanistan in the contemporary politics of South Asia was altered dramatically with intervention of extra regional powers. The geo-strategic significance of Afghanistan in the above quoted background cannot be overlooked and it gained further significance with the disintegration of Soviet Union, in fact the country has emerged as a new hub for global terrorism and extremism (The World Financial Review, 2016, Feb 4).

After the withdrawal of last troops of Soviet Union from Afghanistan, on 15th February 1989, the country once again tainted the geostrategic significance and geopolitical importance in the area. The resultant power vacuum, struggle for domination amongst Mujahideen commanders, the fragile government of King Najibullah at Kabul and the United States' ceased support to Pakistan, were to a large extent responsible for the state of affairs in Kabul. Combined with an indifferent global society; it formed a sure-shot technique for disaster.

Kabul, surrounded by so many nuclear states, along with their personal rivalries, puts it in a difficult scenario with its neighbours as well other powers that want to get a foothold in the region to extend their influence in the area and the subcontinent as well (Harrison, 1995).

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States supported Mujahidin who took control of Kabul. In that time, instead continuing the support for the buffer state, the United States consequently withdrew from the region which caused a power vacuum in the country and allowed sectarian interests (Taliban) to seize control of the country. As Kabul had been abandoned by both the West and Russia, the Taliban had no interest in acting as buffer state and pursued their own agenda. Afghanistan apart from being the land bridge to Central Asia, also became a home to the fundamentalist ranging from the various fighting groups from Kashmir to (China) Uighur separatists and provided a suitable launch pad for such activities in Central Asia. It was unfortunate that Afghanistan, due to its core geo-strategic, geo-political and historical location further complicated the situation for the land lock country (Kalinovsky, 2011a).

After Soviet withdrawal and United States lack of interest in the country, the power vacuum created Mujahideen first and later on Taliban. The Taliban were initially welcomed by the common population since they promised an end to the existing chaos in the country. However, the ensuing mission for power and their change in stance from having no political goal, to a flat refusal for power sharing pushed the country into another period of instability. Afghanistan till 2001 can therefore be portrayed as having been a legally undivided territory of disjointed power. It was, when the Taliban hosted Al-Qaeda and its leadership, then the concern of the Central Asian states turned into reality (Kalinovsky, 2011b).

The geo-strategic significance of Afghanistan has compelled the international community, as well as the neighboring states of Afghanistan to get involved in the politics of the country for their own vested interests. However, the geography of the country is wild and remote from the center of the authority which creates problems due to cross border movement of various militant groups in the country like the strengthening of Al-Qaeda, The Chechen rebels, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Uighur separatists and the Taliban further compounded the security situation in the region. According to the United States these groups bombed US embassies in Kabul in 1998. However, it was the Sep 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre which roused the global community and forced them to deal with the threat posed by the Taliban and its allies (Assaf, 2008).

Presently the geo-strategic and geopolitical significance of Afghanistan has been twice increased because of the global war on terror which was launched by United States of America and its allies. The presence of American troops in Kabul provides USA an opportunity to retain monopoly and keep a check on the nuclear states in the region, like China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and India: a job it has already commenced as is obvious from the stress on Pakistan and the Iran (Ullah, 2020; Vance, 2017).

At present the United States wants to prepare exit strategy but U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan could create a political vacuity in the country which America fears would most likely be filled by Iran, Russia and India. Consequently, President Donald Trump's administration is avoiding a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. Additionally, Afghan President Dr. Ashraf Ghani has also urged the western powers to remain present in Kabul to fund the weak institutions for the sake of the innocent Afghans. However, it looks impossible due to struggle for power between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdulla, the heads of state, who can't find common grounds to agree on (Rashid, 2012).

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