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AFGHANISTAN

IN FOCUS

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Editor's Introduction

For the vast majority of our readers, the events in Afghanistan have been shocking and extremely chaotic. Culminating in the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government; the resurgence of the Taliban, after 20 years, marks a troubling new beginning for Afghanistan. Understanding how the country has gotten to this point is by no means simple: it is in part due to the complex web of interactions between a multitude of state and non-state actors working together and against each other within the country. The key objective of our collection of articles is to cut through the traditional noise of mainstream news and offer a deeper analysis on stories pertinent to our writers. In doing so, we have produced this Special Edition of *The St Andrews Economist*, by bringing together past and present analysis, to better understand what the future holds for Afghanistan.

Introducing the special edition is Editor in Chief, Lucy Wright, whose historical overview in *A Fractured Past, A Fearful Future* focuses primarily on understanding how key historical events within the country have led Afghanistan towards a second Taliban occupation and rule. Undoubtedly, a critical actor in this regard has been the US, whose funding of mujahadeen fighters and subsequent occupation within the country since 2001 has shaped the country massively, for better or worse. Shona McCallum challenges this perspective in her article *How to dig an Imperial War Grave*, critiquing the extent that economic aid and military support has been beneficial in stabilising and helping the country.

In turn, Dhruv Shah considers the impeding financial challenges facing the Taliban upon governing Afghanistan in his article, *The Collapse of the Taliban*. He notes that while

much of the Taliban's takeover within the country is dependent on lucrative sources of income, the militant group now face the hard task of governing the country in the face of sanctions and frozen assets. This is most certainly a tactic used by international countries to blunt some of the Taliban's more repressive policies on women and minority groups within the country. However, as Elah Cohen argues in her article, *The Future of the Hazara*, the Hazara minority group within the country are unlikely to be free from repression given that countries like Iran have provided the Taliban with legitimacy and recognition, without any assurances of protecting human and minority rights.

While it is clear that the Taliban have relied heavily on financial success to drive their revolution, outside help from actors has remained crucial to success. Supriya Shekharr's analysis of the geopolitical and international response in *Aiding or Abetting the Taliban?* surveys the geopolitical landscape, questioning to what extent neighbouring countries hindered or assisted the Taliban. Challenging many conventional notions, her article reveals that many countries such as Pakistan and China have in reality provided direct or indirect aid in some form to the Taliban. In fact, many of these countries have capitalised on the unstable situation, by undermining the US's reputation and foreign policy by criticising the US's bungled retreat from the country. Finally, Cosima Allen, focuses on the domestic and international condemnation the Biden administration is facing by both the Afghani people along with the wider international community, in *The Forever War*.

By Dhruv Shah

KEY EVENTS: AFGHANISTAN

JULY

King Mohammed Zahir Shah overthrown in coup d'etat

Mohammed Daoud Khan declares himself head of state and government

1973

1978

APRIL

Mohammed Daoud Khan assassinated by communists

Communist coup by military establishes Democratic republic of Afghanistan

DECEMBER

Soviet-Afghan war begins

1979-89

1992-96

APRIL

Civil war in Afghanistan

SEPTEMBER

Taliban seized Kabul

Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan established

Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, arrives in Afghanistan

1996

SEPTEMBER

9/11 terror attacks

US invasion of Afghanistan

Taliban overthrown

2001

2021

SEPTEMBER

Taliban retakes Kabul

Islamic Republic of Afghanistan established



**A FRACTURED PAST
A FEARFUL FUTURE**

BY LUCY WRIGHT

The media is flooded with heart breaking images of the people of Afghanistan, desperately trying to flee their home. Constant updates on the escalating crisis dominate headlines and news reports. Fractured glimpses of a country paralysed by memories of a brutal past, and anxious for the future. One image in particular haunts the collective mind: an infant is lifted over the barricades of Kabul airport into the hands of a US soldier: an act of parental desperation that is far removed from the realities of our everyday lives. Desperation: the dominant mood in Kabul and beyond, as the citizens of Afghanistan preempt the destruction that a return of the Taliban to power will bring. Destruction of the progress that has been made to Afghanistan's society and economy, most prominently, the significant improvements in women's rights. A reversal of a way of life that the Afghan people have fought so hard to secure, fears that it will soon be shattered. To contextualise the desperation and despair, it is important to question who the Taliban are, in order to understand why their return to power has caused an internal and international outcry.

In April 1978, Mohammed Daoud Khan, president of the single party republic of Afghanistan is assassinated during a communist coup d'etat. Seeking to modernise the country, Mohammed Daoud Khan received aid from the dominant superpowers, the Soviet Union and the USA, who were competing for influence within the country. The communist agenda triumphed, and the Soviet backed government pushed wide ranging reforms. Seeking to modernise the country, the regime abolished most traditional and religious societal structures, causing widespread insurrection and Soviet involvement in the long war of attrition. The Soviet Afghan war of 1979-1989 caused millions of refugees to flee the country and was considered the starting point for the 9-year fight between the mujahideen - Afghan guerrillas - and troops

from the Soviet Union. Supporting the mujahideen was money and weapons provided by the CIA, allowing the rebels to eventually triumph over the Soviet Union. The Soviets officially withdrew from Afghanistan on the 15th of May 1988, ending one year later on the 15th of May 1989.

Following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, a power vacuum is created within the country. April 1992: the ensuing chaos leads to a civil war. By 1994, a militia called the Taliban began gaining momentum. Translated to English as 'students' or 'seekers', many of the group's members had studied in conservative religious schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some had fought as mujahideen during the Soviet occupation. The ultraconservative group take over the southern city of Kandahar, and quickly impose their harsh interpretation of Islam on the territory under their control. Their goal is to seize Kabul and establish an Islamic government. Attempting to capitalise on civilian frustrations of the lawlessness witnessed in Afghanistan, the Taliban promises to make cities safe again.

By September 1996, the Taliban had seized Kabul, declaring Afghanistan an Islamic Emirate. Many of the capital's residents hail them as saviours. The people of Kabul had emerged from a country in the grip of a vicious civil war that had destroyed their city and killed thousands of people. When gaining control in the south, they had chased out the gunmen who had terrorized the population. "We wanted an end to the warlords, and we wanted national unity," recalled Nasimi. "The Taliban gave us that." Yet it was their oppressive and intermittently brutal practices that characterised their rule. The Taliban began imposing their own strict interpretation of Islamic law, and restrictive measures translated into atrocities and abuses of human rights, particularly targeting women

and minorities.

The Amr bel Maaruf, or the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, patrolled the streets looking for those who strayed outside the narrow confines of their laws. “It was like being in prison,” said Abdul Qadir. “We lost the feeling of being young.” Subjugated and oppressed, women were largely restricted to the home, and most girls were barred from education. Universities continued to function, with young women absent from all faculties except medicine.

The totalitarian rule of the Taliban lasted for five years. Their downfall began in October 2001, a direct result of Saudi-born al-Qaida leader, Osama bin Laden, who had received protection by the Taliban. Following the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001, the US demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden. When they refused, the US coalition forces and the northern alliance invaded, launching Operation Enduring Freedom targeting the Taliban and al-Qaida with military strikes. By November 13th, the Taliban had fled south, their regime overthrown, leaving Afghanistan with an interim government. In the years following the US invasion, Afghanistan witnessed devastating conflict and remained deeply unstable. The Taliban, meanwhile, regrouped and remained a force to be reckoned with, still controlling portions of Afghanistan. The insurgency saw themselves as fighting international occupation, fighting what they believed to be the illegitimate government in Kabul, instead viewing themselves as a voice of resistance to restore a purer Islamic society to Afghanistan. An almost parallel state, the Taliban remained well organised, with a strong political structure and offering their form of justice via the sharia courts. Yet in 2019, the Asia foundation found that 85% of people have no sympathy for the Taliban.

Afghanistan. A fractured past. A fearful future. We must hope for her people, that history does not repeat itself.

By Lucy Wright

A large American flag is shown waving against a clear blue sky. The flag's red and white stripes are prominent, and the blue field with stars is visible in the lower-left corner. The flag is captured in motion, with its fabric billowing and creating a sense of dynamic energy.

HOW TO DIG AN IMPERIAL WAR GRAVE

BY SHONA MCCALLUM

Afghanistan is often described as ‘the graveyard of empires’. The epithet was generated from a repeated pattern of global powers attempting military invasion, occupation, and restructuring in the country but eventually retreating, defeated, without having met such aims. Arguably, Afghanistan’s extreme underdevelopment and unrelenting state of conflict find their origins here too – this history of suffering and stunting has buried many more Afghans than foreigners. This repetition has occurred once again; the saying re-emerging as an apt epitaph for US intervention in the nation – seen in the form of war and aid. As the last US soldiers withdraw from the country – one which has taken a mere weeks to collapse following the official withdrawal of the military from the country – surveying the US’s role historically within the country is more imperative than ever to understand how they have dug Afghanistan’s grave.

Afghanistan was the first ‘war on terror’, with US and UK forces invading the nation shortly after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. The aim of the ironically titled ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ was to prevent Afghanistan functioning as a training ground for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Within a month, the Taliban fled Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul, under darkness. By the end of the year, the total defeat of the Taliban seemed to vindicate US intervention.

The following year a defiant George Bush, speaking to the US military, acknowledged the history of foreign involvement in Afghanistan was “one of initial success followed by long years of floundering and ultimate failure”. He promised “we’re not going to repeat that mistake.”

Today, however, these words prove chillingly foreboding. Following 2001, public and political opinion was divided between the new-found

responsibility for Afghanistan’s reconstruction, and a punish and leave approach. A NYT article from 2001 feared a “military quagmire” in Afghanistan reminiscent of Vietnam, proving prescient. Buoyed by early success, however, George Bush pledged to “rebuild” a democratic government and liberal society in Afghanistan with humanitarian aid – an aspiration which now seems hopelessly deluded. Thus, a NATO-led group of militaries and NGOs embarked on an improbable combination of sustained military resistance to the Taliban (war), and optimistic nation-building (aid).

These contradictions quickly developed problems. As the war stagnated and development projects ground along, US administrations were caught-up in crippling indecision. The impossibilities which arose in 2002 as the dust of the original invasion settled – to continue a costly, difficult military occupation or to attempt humanitarian restructuring of an impoverished nation – hung over an entrenched, attritional war. From these morphed the problem: did continued US presence and war do more harm than good? Paradoxically, under Obama administration in 2011, aid flows and US troop levels both peaked, at \$6.7bn and 110,000 personnel. The blustering, unplanned invasion led to over-zealous, unplanned reconstruction efforts for Afghanistan’s war-torn infrastructure, institutions, and society – then paralysis.

More recent events show the awful effects of this. In 2020, the US’s Trump administration and Taliban agreed on a controversial deal: the US to leave Afghanistan completely by September 2021 and the Taliban to no longer train or support terrorists. In line with this agreement, the Biden administration pulled troops out of Afghanistan in July 2021. Despite the disastrous manner of leaving, Biden defended the decision, denying nation-building was ever an aim, and

dismissing the conflict as “Afghanistan’s civil war”. A mere month after American troops left, a triumphant Taliban returned to Kabul on August 15th 2021, jubilantly bearing left-over American weapons, in broad-daylight – a reversed repetition of twenty years prior.

The war ended in failure, and aid did not fare much better. Between 2001-2019, Afghanistan received \$76.1bn in aid. Estimates suggest 80% was ‘targeted’ to short-term military and security spending in the 5 most conflict-ridden provinces. A US government report found that 30-40% of aid was lost to waste, fraud, or abuse. Endemic corruption in the Afghan government (ranked 165 out of 178 countries) meant money dissipated. Even where aid made it to projects, donor mismanagement often meant little impact, such as building schools in rural areas where there were no teachers.

Economically, Afghanistan remains reliant on opiate and mineral exportation, with the small \$15billion increase in GDP since 2001 mainly attributed to NGO activity. Socially, illiteracy remains at around 60% and 60/1000 babies die before their fifth birthday (World Bank). There are thought to be 2.6 million Afghan refugees worldwide, with upwards of 389,000 internally displaced people. It is thought that 241,000 Afghans were killed directly in the war since 2001.

These are the statistical outcomes of America’s war in Afghanistan – which cost a reported \$1trillion, over 2,300 soldier lives, and saw defence contractors such as Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, and Blackwater profit vastly while committing war crimes against Afghan civilians – after two decades of misguided intervention and imperialism.

With hind-sight US involvement seems a rash and short-sighted reaction to the terrorist threat, a fleeting glimpse of might and righteousness. Pursued purportedly along the lines of emotive ideals like democracy, freedom, and women’s rights, events in Afghanistan only expose that occupation never brings liberation, and war never brings peace. Of course, after the West’s first nebulous ‘war on terror’, a similarly blunt military and security campaign multiplied these complex and devastating impacts across the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia. Perhaps the lesson against military intervention and nation-building will be acknowledged, amended, and laid to rest, or perhaps it will re-emerge, unheeded from Afghanistan’s doomed imperial graveyard.

By Shona McCallum

THE COLLAPSE OF THE TALIBAN

BY DHRUV SHAH

-
CRISIS

The recent toppling of the pro-Western government in Afghanistan has allowed the Taliban to re-establish control over the country. With limited foreign financial backing, the swift recapture of the country in a matter of weeks has surpassed all expectations; revealing a militant group which is extremely wealthy. The Taliban's declaration of an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan means they are firmly back in the seat of power in Afghanistan. Yet, the Taliban now confront the hard challenges of governing the economy. Afghanistan is a country where 80% of its budget is financed by the US and international donors. With the US blocking access to the country's central banking reserves, the country is at risk of high inflation and the Taliban unable to pay public servants. Faced with minimal financial assistance from foreign powers, a Taliban run Afghanistan is very likely to face considerable financial obstacles in the future.

Underpinning much of the Taliban's success in taking over Afghanistan has been their financial independence, which has allowed them to self-fund their uprising with minimal support from foreign governments. Since their fall from power in 2001, the Taliban have maintained a long running insurgency across parts of the country. To fund this they have run a "state like economy in areas they have controlled." Tracking flows of militant funding is notoriously difficult, but the BBC predicts that the annual income for the insurgents in 2011 was upwards of £316 million; a number estimated to have risen as high as £1.1 billion by the end of March 2020, according to a leaked NATO report.

The greatest source of income comes from legal and illegal taxation. For years, the Taliban have utilised strong arm tax collection tactics under areas of their control. This includes traditional taxes on production such as *oshr*, a one tenth tithe of harvest produced, and *zakat*, a religious

tax of 2.5% of disposable income for the poor. Other taxes focus primarily on taxing imports and exports within the country. With the Taliban controlling customs and important border crossings, they have greater oversight and ability to squeeze taxes from Afghani people. Examples of taxed goods include anything from medicine, food, fuel and cigarettes. However, if strong arming does not work, the Taliban can always resort to kidnapping and blackmail.

Another important source of income for the Taliban is the trade of opium and other narcotics. Afghanistan is the perfect country to take advantage of this, providing around 84% of global opium production, according to a 2020 UN World Drug Report. Most of the growing and cultivation takes place under Taliban controlled areas, with the Taliban imposing taxes at several stages of the process, for instance, a 10% cultivation tax is imposed on opium farmers. In fact, the Taliban's share of the illicit drug market is estimated to net them profit anywhere between \$100 - \$400 million, which has led analysts to describe the Taliban as the "world's biggest drug cartel." In recent years, the Taliban have been more akin to 'breaking bad', diversifying from heroin into methamphetamine - a drug with relatively low costs and high profit margins.

However, a poppy tightrope could undermine this source of income. The Taliban have gradually been losing market share of the established European markets to synthetic opioids. These opioids are produced in China and India and are preferred by drug traffickers as they are less bulky. They are already taking over North American and African markets and can easily replace Afghan opium. Moreover, heroin production has long been frowned upon by the international community with several attempts at banning opium production,

Occurring in the past – the Taliban in 1990s and by the international community post 2002.

Much like the 1990s, the Taliban realise that legitimacy and support are required to sustain a long-term future for the country. However, many countries will not provide it if the one of the most important sources of income for the government is dependent heavily on illegal means. Many of the neighbouring states such as Iran, China and particularly Russia will be happy to see a ban on opium production. In fact, the Taliban have stated that there will be “no drug production and smuggling.” Yet, this is an unrealistic goal: cracking down on opium production risks foregoing an important source of finance for the Taliban.

Yet, failing to ban opium production could prove to be as detrimental for governing the country. Afghanistan has long been dependent on foreign aid, with formal legal revenues making a small portion of the country’s revenue and budget. Western economies, including the EU member states have cut off a promised \$1.4 billion in emergency aid and development assistance to the country, following the Taliban’s takeover – funds contingent on conditions such as stopping illicit drugs, promoting human rights and protecting freedoms for women and children.

The US and IMF have followed suit, freezing \$9.5 billion in Afghanistan’s central bank assets. The impact of this, as argued by Chatham House, will create economic pressure by dropping cash liquidity and pushing up inflation, raising food prices and making it much harder for the average Afghani citizen to survive. With the value of the Afghan currency predicted to collapse in such an event, it is uncertain exactly how the Taliban will continue to pay civil servants without relying further on taxation and illicit activities.

Non-Western countries may intervene, but results are looking mixed. Countries such as

Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and China have been accused by the US of funding the Taliban since the 1990s, recently, however, they have not been as generous with their aid. The UAE has been documented to provide only small pots of money towards militias and political proxies as opposed to large financial handouts, while Pakistan – a country which has long provided support for Taliban -- continues to economically stagnate. China’s deep pockets may be the Taliban’s best bet. China has stated that it will aim to play a “positive role” in rebuilding the country and has been one of the first countries to engage in talks with the Taliban. However, China has remained equally cautious. Concerned by the threat of terrorism spilling over the borders of Afghanistan and its wider impact on the Belt and Road Initiative, China has remained hesitant in resuming the mining contracts within the country to extract an estimated \$1 trillion worth of minerals.

As the Taliban continue to govern Afghanistan, it is clear that financial issues are imminently on the horizon. The biggest problem facing the Taliban is a shortage of legal funds which makes it near impossible for them to remain linked within the international financial system. With millions and millions of frozen assets and painful sanctions looming over the country, the Taliban are facing a cash crunch which can only be avoided through international aid. Aid which is unlikely to come. Western economic pressure is aiming to drastically transform the Taliban regime away from more oppressive policies or bankrupt the militant group in the process. This tactic is unlikely to work. At best, the combination of pressure can blunt the more hard-line behaviour the group may possess. At worst, the economic pressure creates a precarious humanitarian situation within the country: allowing countries like China and Russia to swoop in and provide vital support to the Taliban at the expense of the West.

By Dhruv Shah



**THE FUTURE OF THE
HAZARA**
BY ELAH COHEN

As the Taliban have rapidly ascended to power in Afghanistan, the international community have remained stunned at the sheer rate at which the Afghan government has collapsed. With the country's reigns firmly held in the hands of the Taliban, many questions about the future of female rights and minority groups within the country are ambiguous. One such example is the Hazara minority group. Many international organisations have expressed concern over this minority group and their uncertain fates; whose existence has been defined by persecution for centuries.

The Hazara community are estimated to form just under 10% of the total Afghan population, with the group primarily living in the ethno-religious region of Hazarajat in Central Afghanistan. What is particularly prominent about the group is that aside from being descendants of Genghis Khan from the thirteenth century, the group adhere to Shia Islam in a predominantly Sunni Afghanistan. In fact, their following of the Shia faith and distinct ethnic features have made them easy targets from militant groups such as the Taliban and Daesh. However, this systemic marginalisation, and treatment as second-class citizens, was not invented by extremists, instead traces its roots back through history.

After Emir Abdul Rahman in the late nineteenth century set upon epic campaigns to expand his empire beyond Kabul, certain Hazaras protested. Bloody retaliation followed against the Hazaras, where Pashtun men were ordered to murder thousands of Hazara men and force the survivors into an even more miserable state of existence. The world has changed unimaginably since the nineteenth century, yet very little has changed since the reign of Emir Rahman for the Hazaras.

Similarly, to how the Sunni Uzbeks and Tajiks were united alongside the Pashtuns by the

hatred against the Hazara, so too have the Jihadist groups of the Taliban and Daesh - carrying out frequent attacks and pogroms against them. Only a few months ago, the Taliban massacred nine out of forty Hazara men in Ghazni Province, as part of their gradual takeover of the state. This contrasts sharply to top Taliban leaders and spokespersons attempting to garner legitimacy through adopting an image of a more magnanimous regime. It is in fact testament to the new regime's efficiency in cutting Wi-fi and patrolling of social media that the act is coming to light so many months later.

Western media has tended to attribute terror attacks as a symptom of "rural" Afghanistan, seemingly reluctant to admit the fragile peace bought by the US-led NATO coalition. Celebrated Afghan author Khaled Hosseini also created controversy for exhibiting a similar sentiment. Such simplistic views gloss over the inherent truth that the Hazara community face systemic persecution in all areas of the country - the portrayal of cities such as Kabul, as utopic, is harmful and untrue to the current situation experienced by this minority group.

A mixed-gender school in Dasht-e-Barchi, Kabul, was bombed this past May, resulting in the deaths of over ninety Hazara students. The attack signified more than religious intolerance - with bombs timed to strike in accordance with the school girls' timetables, it was a horrific example of gendered violence. For context, and to gain a deeper insight into the despair of the Hazara community, this massacre came just a year after an earlier suicide bombing tragically targeted a school, in the same Hazara-concentrated area of Kabul.

Moreover, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) reported an attack in May last year upon a maternity ward in Dasht-e-Barchi. The atrocious act against women and children left

Twenty-four dead, and was reportedly committed by an off-shoot of Daesh named ISIS-K. It prompted the decision for MSF to withdraw from the area. Dr Isabelle Defourny, director of operations for MSF, reflected upon the cruel act of murdering women in the act of giving birth stating: 'There is an unbearable symbolic meaning in this act of violence'.

The Taliban's utilisation of social media in identifying dissident individuals has effectively banished the human aspect shown in reporting. Nameless victims and figures make it easy to forget the devastation of the humanitarian crisis, thus making the BBC's recent interview with an anonymous female Hazara university student especially poignant. In the emotive interview, she details how her future and aspirations have been torn apart by the Taliban's ascendancy to power. She mentions living in a constant state of fear over the Taliban knocking on her door – stating her shocking intent to commit suicide as preferable to abduction by militant fighters. All her academic accreditations including awards and university papers were burned and social media profiles deleted to ensure her safety – the most tangible remnants of a previous life which now threatens her new existence.

The Hazara's future is in the hands of the new Taliban regime. As leading states are left puzzled over how the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan reshuffles the international hierarchy, certain countries such as Iran and China are eager to enter beneficial trade deals. The Taliban's demand for oil has created a lucrative deal with Iran, which offsets Iranian losses sustained by Western imposed sanctions.

Such trade relations can only bring further devastation, by lending greater credibility and legitimacy to the Taliban's brutal oppression of the Hazara. A brief glance at the news will demonstrate articles concerning the Hazara are falling down the agenda. Yet, as previously illustrated, there have been no shortage of humanitarian crises to comment on. It is sadly in-keeping with most of the Hazara's history that their struggle has remain unheard. This, coupled with external recognition of the Taliban by states such as Iran, render the future of the Hazara increasingly perilous.

By Elah Cohen

AIDING OR ABETTING THE TALIBAN

BY SUPRIYA SHEKHAR



Is it still called a military coup if the country's forces succumb to the insurgents? Undoubtedly Taliban's takeover of Kabul would not have been possible without their providential geo-political and international connections. With corruption oozing in and out of Afghanistan; the right alliances have allowed the Taliban to successfully overthrow the Afghani government at an unprecedented pace. With the Taliban back in power, it is more important than ever to consider the geopolitical relationship between a Taliban led Afghanistan and neighboring countries.

Pakistan, the silent winner, has often had an unsteady relation with Afghanistan's government likely due to widespread speculations of the Taliban working alongside the Pakistani government for the last decade. The 2670km border stretching between the two countries, is a regular witness of the Pakistani military harboring and catering to the militants. Sources have confirmed that children of Taliban members residing within Pakistan, do so with acres of land and complete provision of their education and any other lifestyle needs. Sheikh Rashid from Imran Khan's cabinet even prompted that trucks filled with arms and ammunition were flowing through the Durand border along with healthcare services and military training. Wounded Taliban treated in Pakistani hospitals of Chaman and Quetta; rapid recruitment from jihadist schools across the border and members of Imran Khan's cabinet welcoming this takeover as a new and reformed Taliban, together hint that Pakistan has a close relationship behind the scenes with the Taliban. To make matters more apparent, Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, even recently stated that Pakistan was their 'second home'.

Getting backed from an Asian superpower such as China has also played an important role in this insurgency. China struck a development and

supposedly national building scheme with the Taliban; a relationship which has benefited China by allowing easy oil pipelines through Afghanistan – not possible with the previous legitimate government. Under the Western backed government, the relations between both countries were frayed. Both countries have historically had a troubled relationship along the shared border – a narrow area called the Wakhan Corridor – with China demanding the removal of all Uyghur Militants from this geographical area. This outcome is much easier to envision under a Taliban regime; whose desire for recognition and financial help can be exchanged in return for achieving this goal.

India has always been fearful of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan consolidation. With it, they have adopted a wary eye on developments within the country to ensure their own safety. Over the years, India has spent billions in infrastructural development across Afghanistan (including Taliban ruled provinces). India has promised not to militarily interfere against the Taliban forces, while assuring a diplomatic and safe relationship with the Taliban government over the years. These new neighbors will surely be a cause of trouble for India in its Kashmiri provinces with an increased input of opium and extremist Islamist groups. India is yet to officially declare its recognition for the new Afghani rulers as granting legitimacy might reciprocate with domestic and international resistance and turmoil.

During the Intra-Afghan negotiations, Iran had had a prudent position as a mediator between the Taliban and Afghanistan. Iran provided financial aid to Ghani's government while simultaneously backing the Taliban's military to the which smoothened its ties with both the Ashraf Ghani's government as well as the Taliban. Iran's backing and reconciliation with the Taliban is based on common enmity with the

Islamic State and turbulent relationship with the US. Despite several allegations from Washington, Tehran refuses to publicly call itself a Taliban benefactor, however, it has been previously caught in the act of providing financial and military services to the insurgents. Iran connected Taliban to western world, which indirectly lead to us troops backing out of Afghanistan. Taliban's success in clearing a path within Afghanistan towards Kabul, has been partly dependent on indirect ambiguous backing by Iran.

In the north, Turkmenistan, and the Taliban have previously sat together to discuss matters such as Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural-gas pipeline, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) power line, and connecting Afghanistan to Turkmenistan by railway. However Turkmenistan was left disappointed in the Taliban. The same year of the promises made by Taliban to not hinder with Afghanistan's infrastructural progress, power lines were cut, schools and projects were destroyed etc., Based on these talks, Turkmenistan and Taliban have had a historical rocky relationship with one another. However, the new regime in Turkmenistan have intended on maintaining diplomatic relationships with the Taliban government if their ongoing/completed economic and infrastructural projects are not impeded. Uzbekistan has been reluctant to accept refugees from Afghanistan, ever since the previous Taliban regime and has maintained "closed contacts" with the Taliban borders and just wants security for its own. Last in the order, Tajikistan had offered a safe place for former president Ghani but has not delivered on that account. These northern neighbors are mostly concerned about the narcotics trade and each country has secured its border through military and trade restrictions. Central Asia is wary of their Talibani neighbors and require sufficient stability for their ongoing projects, which then

requires them to maintain cordial relations with the Taliban.

Much like countries, international organizations have been startled by the momentum of Taliban's conquests; largely left ill prepared for evacuation and management. The UN Security Council and other UN committees have not left their posts in Afghanistan and are determined to continue to serve and protect human rights during this regime. They have called for an international community to speak with 'one voice' concerning the human rights violations and threat to female rights under Taliban rule. The UN has expressed that it will not support America's decision to withdraw - which has allowed a Taliban takeover - stating that it will continue to negotiate for a more inclusive government in Afghanistan. Nations with powerful armies and economic systems with leverage over such insurgents still have the option to go with or against, however developing nations with troubles of their own would find it easier to not counter groups like the Taliban.

The last few weeks has been extremely chaotic geopolitically for Afghanistan. The Taliban have expanded rapidly; controlling small portions of the country just a few weeks ago, to now ousting the government and taking charge. Compared to 20 years ago, - when they were last in power - it is abundantly clear that their political, financial, and militant resources have increased. This is heavily the result of geopolitics. Neighboring countries with different intentions have provided various degrees of support, aiming to capitalize on the recent turn of events within the country. In this sense, conducting a country wide analysis is important to understanding and analyzing the bigger picture in Afghanistan. Ultimately, each country is a piece of a larger jigsaw puzzle, making up the geopolitical fabric of the region.

By Supriya Shekhar



THE FOREVER WAR

BY COSIMA ALLEN

'I was not going to extend this forever war'. Biden's words echoed across the podium on September 1st, the day after the final withdrawal of US troops out of Afghanistan. The belligerence of his tone struck the audience as a seemingly deliberate avoidance of his responsibility in the chaos that emerged at the hands of his administration. Within two weeks, the Taliban secured victory over the US, secured on August 15th by Taliban forces strolling into a deserted Kabul brandishing US weapons under white flags promoting the Shahada scripture beginning the end of the twenty year long US occupation.

The organisation of the new Taliban government remains undecided. Senior leader Wahidullah Hashemi suggested a council will be formed under the top Taliban leader, Mullah Hubatullah Akhundzada, who has led since 2016. As former head of the Sharia courts in the 1990's his concern mostly pertains to religious restructuring. The council would be comprised of other prominent and longstanding Taliban leaders working under their senior figurehead. The next senior position will be held by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar as political deputy. He was one of the four cofounders of the Taliban and headed the political office from Doha, Qatar. After spending eight years in prison following his capture in a joint US- Pakistani mission, his release in 2018 was facilitated as a peace barter and in 2020 he was the first Taliban leader to communicate with a US president, signing the Doha agreement with the Trump administration for the withdrawal of US troops by May 2021. The leaders of the various Taliban sects hold significance when trying to infer how this new government will lead. The religiosity of the supreme leader weakens the threat of a purely outward militaristic regime informing their state aims. Statements by leaders such as Mohammad Yaqoob, the head of military organisation urging fighters not to harm members of the toppled

government seem to agree with this, however the aggressive search and kill missions of individuals who aided US troops question the spoken narrative of the Taliban for the future.

The bedlam that emerged following the takeover seemed inevitable. A sudden flush of fury infiltrated people across the city. Scenes emerged from the Kabul airport in a pertinent display of the desperation of those entrapped in this new regime. The shock of the speed by which the Taliban took over stunted evacuation order. Hundreds of people flooded the airport runway, obstructing moving cargo planes or handing over their children to US soldiers trying to secure a place leaving Afghanistan. While hundreds of thousands of refugees walked across the border to Pakistan, those attempting to fly out were left disillusioned by the lack of opportunity to do so. The Taliban made it increasingly difficult, erecting armed checkpoints on Airport Road to prevent individuals from reaching the terminal and arbitrarily rejecting those with a legitimate right to leave. This chaos claimed over a dozen lives including that of a nineteen-year-old who fell from a departing military plane. Now, with the final evacuation of foreign troops, the Taliban has officially secured control and has full authority over those remaining in an unprecedented power shift.

Statements such as "American myth down" by Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chungying seem to exploit the monstrous mishandling of this crisis in an attempt to manifest the demise of the US as a global force. The immediate international response and criticism reflected the disappointment directed towards the irresponsibility of the US position, the crux of which is directed personally towards President Biden. This was exacerbated by polarisation of political media outlets demonising Biden from the right while

encouraging this move as a necessary shift of US resources from the left. What has become an objective truth however is the neglect of the administration of their responsibility in the organisation of the withdrawal, abandoning individuals who aided troops during their long occupation and weakening the moral credibility of US foreign policy. The Biden administration continues to justify their mishandling by the suggestion the war was never winnable, and after over a trillion dollars in investment, Biden welcomed the agreement made by his predecessor President Trump as the opportunity to step back and refocus foreign policy. Unfortunately, an indelible mark has been left on his promises of competence and order, and his miscalculations of the ease by which this withdrawal could occur encouraged sentiments regarding this as a failure rather than a victory arguably putting his legacy in an unrecoverable position.

The future remains unknown. The speed by which the Taliban took over only proves the fragility of leadership positions in Afghanistan. The Taliban have attempted to rebrand themselves as more moderate, pledging their sincerity to protect Afghan citizens. However, the events of the 1990's when the Taliban previously held power shows the true colour the humanitarian crisis which is already beginning to emerge towards women and those considered traitors to the Islamic State. This coupled with the US arsenal the Taliban now has access to, following the 80-billion-dollar total US investment to Afghan troops has only bred more unrest in ensuring the safety of Afghan citizens. For now, the Biden administration must focus on rebuilding internal support while preparing for the influx of millions of Afghan refugees let down by the global networks who pledged to protect their safety.

By Cosima Allen