



Pakistan's Policy Options for Taliban-Led Afghanistan Post US Withdrawal

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Abstract: The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was concluded in August 2021, which posed various challenges for the entire region. Likewise, it posed difficulties for the Pakistani State to shape policy vis-à-vis Taliban-led Afghanistan. Although Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban informally, yet its takeover posed certain challenges for Pakistan such as its economic meltdown and lack of diplomatic recognition. The subsequent economic crisis and political instability may lead the miserable Afghan masses to take refuge in Pakistan. Islamabad's informal relations with the Taliban could also lead to its tense relations with the US and other European countries. Likewise, the Taliban's failure to take strict action against the Pakistani militants operating from Afghan territory could endanger internal security of Pakistan. Notably, Pakistan cannot force the Afghan Taliban to soften its hardline governance policies because it may offend the local religious circles. However, Pakistan may suggest the Taliban to make certain compromises on governance, counterterrorism and treatment of women which may lead to its global support.

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghan Taliban, US Withdrawal, Economic Crisis

1. Introduction

After the Afghan Taliban's takeover in mid-August 2021, Pakistan has suggested to the foreign world to interact with Afghanistan's new rulers for the sake of its political stabilization. (Crisis Group, 2021). Pakistan's relations have been complicated by Afghanistan's refusal to accept the 2430 km Durand Line as the international border as well as its claim on adjacent areas in Pakistan itself that remain predominantly Pashtun-speaking. Despite all these issues, Pakistan always maintained warm relations with Afghanistan.

In 1996, after the Taliban first took the capital of Kabul, Pakistan was one of the three countries, along with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to recognize the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. However, Pakistan had reluctantly severed formal ties with the Emirate after the September 2001 terror attacks in the US. After the October 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan which had thrown the Taliban's regime out of power, the Taliban's political and military command structures were reconstituted from various sanctuaries, allowing them to recruit, raise money and conduct operations against the US and aligned forces. As the insurgency began picking up momentum in Afghanistan, the US accused Pakistan of giving it support.

Pakistan had facilitated the US dialogue process with the Taliban. Pakistan viewed the inclusion of the Taliban in such power-sharing arrangements as being in Islamabad's interest. It would safeguard Pakistan's security interests because of political stability in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Islamabad may improve its strained relations with Washington by facilitating peace talks. In April 2021, the White House decided to unconditionally withdraw US forces by 11 September, the twentieth anniversary of the terror attacks that had led to the US military intervention.

Pakistan called instead for a conditional withdrawal, whereby the troops' departure would coincide with progress in the peace talks.

After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Afghan security forces, led by a feeble and divided government, were no match for an emboldened Taliban. Taking much of the country very quickly, the Taliban took over Kabul on 15 August, but its victory generates new diplomatic and security dilemmas for Pakistan. This paper examines Islamabad's response to the Taliban's rise to power. It is concerned with diplomatic, economic and security challenges that Taliban's triumph poses to Pakistan as it builds policy toward Afghanistan.

1.1 Backdrop

The Taliban's victory was possible because of multiple reasons including Biden regime's hasty, unconditional withdrawal and the failure of support for former President Ashraf Ghani's government inside Afghanistan. As PM Imran Khan complained, Pakistan is "being held responsible for the shortcomings of the US " in Afghanistan (Khan, 2021). There is growing fear that the Taliban will quickly become more of a liability than an asset for Pakistani policymakers facing an internationally non-recognized Taliban government and the economic crisis this brings (Yousaf, 2021).

The Taliban have taken the physical control of Afghanistan, but their government is still sanctioned by the US and its allies. The Taliban inherited a feeble economy, battered hard by conflict, political instability, institutional deficiencies and drought. The economic situation has been worsened by the freeze in donor funding, largely from Europe and the US, which under the previous government made up about 75 per cent of Afghanistan's public spending, threatening a humanitarian catastrophe (Crisis Group, 2021). Multilateral institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have blocked the Taliban's availability of funds.

The Taliban, however, had shown no sign of backing down against such blockades. They did not bend to the will of the donors, which insists that the Taliban must follow the formula of shared power in the form of representatives, fundamental rights must be respected, women and girls must be represented, and obligations related to counterterrorism must be delivered (Crisis Group, 2021). Islamabad fears for an unstable neighbor that borders on economic collapse, not to mention all that might spill over in ways that could involve waves of new refugees searching for a place to rest its head on Pakistani soil. (Crisis Group, 2021). Yet, Islamabad is in no hurry to sever ties with the Taliban for few reasons. It does not want the Taliban to collapse or face a civil war challenge because a new Afghanistan conflict would spill over across the border. Islamabad's policy thus entails trying to ease the Taliban government's isolation and, to that end, convincing the Taliban to make the necessary concessions to international demands on governance and counterterrorism, urging them to sever ties with the Pakistani militants operating from Afghan soil.

2. Mitigating Diplomatic Isolation of Taliban

Fearing that the Taliban's government would be internationally isolated and deprived of crucial funding, Pakistan launched diplomatic efforts aimed primarily at the West, particularly the US and EU states (Kugelman, 2021). Islamabad also emphasized the Taliban's willingness to follow through on international commitments with regard to basic human rights and counterterrorism. Pakistan tried to convince the Taliban to make an inclusive government structure including the past political leadership (Hussain, 2021). Islamabad hoped that a façade of inclusive government would change international perceptions and prepare the ground for broad acceptance and formal recognition of the Taliban government.

Pakistan's diplomatic push is to convince the Western world that incentives rather than coercion will propel the desired change in the Taliban's behavioral pattern. Washington has asked Islamabad to employ its sources with the Taliban and persuade them to commit themselves to inclusive and representative government, and to protect rights for women and girls, as well as take steps to counter terrorist networks. Washington has also reportedly urged Pakistan to provide the required support for US counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, likely focused on preventing an al-Qaeda revival and countering the resurgent Islamic State's local franchise (Iqbal, 2021).

While simultaneously wooing Western powers, Islamabad has taken steps toward a regional consensus over diplomatic acceptance of the Taliban regime (Siddiqui, 2021). Pakistan has played a role in creating a new platform for ministerial talks between foreign ministers among Afghanistan's neighbours. The cluster consists of Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. At the forums' meetings, Islamabad called for a workable long-term road map of political interaction with Kabul. China, Russia and Iran have signaled willingness to increase their engagement with the Taliban regime by keeping open their embassies in Kabul and have pledged

economic support to the Afghan government. Islamabad now faces the task of convincing the Taliban leadership to rethink governance and security policies so as to ease their diplomatic isolation.

3. Opportunities and Hurdles

During all the regional and global forums, the Pakistani officials continue to insist that the Taliban takeover has not destabilized Afghanistan. There has been no widespread violence or violation of human rights, and the security situation has vastly improved. Meeting Taliban officials in Kabul and Islamabad, the Pakistani officials also continued to advise the Taliban that they need to compromise if they wish to end their diplomatic isolation in Dawn (2021). Despite Islamabad's strong desire to stabilize the political dynamics of Afghanistan, new challenges have emerged for the policymakers in Pakistan.

3.1 Border Issue

The contested border between the two countries has been one of the tensions in the Pakistan-Afghan relationship. In the past, Pakistan's fencing of this line has sparked periodic clashes between the two militaries. Outright confrontation might have ended but border disputes, as reflected in occasional closures, are a growing irritant. Since the Taliban takeover, one side or the other has clamped down on the movement of goods and peoples through the two main crossings - Chaman-Spin Boldak and Torkham.

Pakistan's frontier fence along the border has also created controversy. On 18 December 2021, Taliban blocked the Pakistan military from constructing parts of the fence along Afghanistan's Nangarhar province border (Guramani, 2021). On 2 January 2022, after Taliban soldiers tried to take away a part of fence, Pakistan's foreign minister said such differences would soon be resolved "through diplomatic means", a view endorsed by the Taliban foreign ministry spokesman. But in a statement, the Taliban acting information minister said there was no need for border fencing. "The matter of the Durand Line remains unsettled, yet fence-making alone is creating enclaves along a [Pashtun] people divided across borders both ways" (Siddiqui and Khan, 2021). For now, differences in border management do not have the potential to threaten relations between Islamabad and Kabul, but the dispute might become a more serious point of contention if the Taliban authorities more sternly reject Pakistani military efforts to fence their border and Islamabad's barriers to cross-border traffic.

3.2 Commerce

The second source of pressure is commerce. One reason that Pakistan wanted the Taliban to receive international support once they established an administration is that only then, for example, economic complementarity between Pakistan and Afghanistan could have been fully exploited (Crisis Group, 2021). Instead, these economic opportunities for Pakistan are being held hostage by Western sanctions and the Taliban's refusal to give up any of their commitments. Pakistan businesses had initially read the Taliban take over and improved bilateral relations with Kabul as a golden opportunity to expand bilateral trade, which had sunk to an all-time low of \$2 billion in 2003, when Pakistan was Afghanistan's largest trading partner, to less than half that amount due to tensions between Islamabad and the Ghani government.

It is time for Pakistan to regain the lost share of the market in Afghanistan. The hoped-for economic dividends have yet to appear. Challenges to bilateral trade relate to both border crossings and Western policy. The Pakistani merchants and local economies dependent on trade across the border allege that closures have constrained the bilateral trade. Western sanctions and freezing assets have had an even more serious effect, primarily by depriving the Afghan banking system of liquidity. For now, Pakistani policymakers are increasingly concerned about the cross-border implications of an Afghan economy crumbling under the weight of sanctions.

4. Effects of Afghanistan's Economic Crisis

The Pakistani policymakers, time and again, have appealed to the international community to immediately provide all sorts of help and economic support to Kabul to prevent the likelihood of a full-scale humanitarian catastrophe. They have been appealing to the Western capitals and international financial institutions to lighten or cancel sanctions on their flow of economic assistance to Afghanistan. Pakistan has also appealed to the US to unfreeze billions of dollars in Afghanistan's own financial reserves (Express Tribune, 2021).

Pakistan is allowing vital assistance by the UN agencies into Afghanistan by opening up road and air humanitarian corridors. Islamabad has spent some \$30 million on food, medicines and other vital commodities. However, with Pakistan's own economic crisis, its ability to provide aid is woefully restricted. The Pakistani policymakers fear that

the Taliban, crippled by insufficient economic capital, will be too weak to govern effectively and address the needs of the public (Crisis Group, 2021). Rising alienation in the Afghan society would undermine the Taliban government's claim to legitimacy, dealing another blow to its chances of international recognition (Lodhi, 2021). Islamabad is also concerned that widespread economic deprivation amid a major humanitarian crisis could lead hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees to seek shelter in Pakistan.

Islamabad is unwilling to accommodate more Afghans who are fleeing hardship and instability. It emphasizes that Pakistan, with some 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees and another 770,000 undocumented Afghan nationals already on its soil, cannot be overburdened further. Islamabad has thus restricted the entry of new Afghan refugees. Yet only Afghans with valid visas are allowed to enter Pakistan.

4.1 Security Concerns

As Islamabad forges policy toward Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, it encounters new security challenges, paramount among these is the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) transborder presence. Military operations since the mid-2000s had succeeded in driving the TTP out of Pakistan's tribal belt and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's mainland. In concert ethnically and ideologically with the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban leadership and hundreds of fighters relocated to Afghanistan. Islamabad has accused India's intelligence agency of supporting Pakistani militants. Pakistan's national security adviser said the TTP, along with other "terrorists based in Afghanistan", had collaborated with India to carry out attacks within Pakistan (Yusuf, 2021). Even before the Taliban's August takeover, Pakistan had called on the Afghan government to deny the TTP cross-border sanctuary.

A Western news agency while quoting a militant stated that TTP fighters will "feel more comfortable after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. They will be able to move around freely in Afghanistan. They will have no fears of drone attacks. And they will meet and communicate easily (Yousaf, 2021). In this regard, Islamabad renewed its appeals to the Taliban authorities to either take action against the Pakistani militants or to expel them from Afghan territory in Dawn (2021). The TTP's cross-border raids from its bases in Afghanistan are straining Islamabad's ties with the Taliban.

The Islamic State-Khorasan, as the local Islamic State branch is known, is a lesser concern for Pakistani security agencies than the TTP, but its resurgence in Afghanistan could bring new dangers to the whole region including Pakistan. Members of such groups may regard Afghanistan as an exciting destination to further their campaigns in the region and endanger the security dynamics. Apart from that, religious parties in Pakistan were among the first to welcome the Taliban takeover ("Religious parties hail," 2021). In Islamabad, the hardline Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) leadership hoisted the Taliban flag ("Taliban flags found on rooftop," 2021). A top former counter-terrorism official said: "The Taliban victory is a boost for radical Sunni groups in Pakistan. They believe that they, too, like the Taliban, will win their battle for sharia in Pakistan" (Crisis Group, 2001).

4.2 Way Forward for Pakistan

While Islamabad's support of the Taliban government is understandable as a way to keep its western neighbour stable, the Pakistani policymakers should not turn into Taliban apologists at the cost of other important relationships, such as with the US and the European Union, important security and economic partners. There are also serious implications for Pakistan's internal security if Islamabad is seen to have aligned its thinking with the Taliban. (Rafiq, 2021). Emboldened by the Taliban victory, the Pakistani militants may conclude that force is the only way to promulgate Sharia at home.

Pakistan should support the Taliban and the Afghan people both – the Taliban with the help of China, Russia and any other friends in the region; and the Afghan people with America's help on the issues of women's rights and inclusivity which is important for Afghanistan's stabilization and is in Pakistan's own interest. Pakistan should also maintain a distance from the Taliban government as it will enhance its leverage with the Taliban as well as its credentials as an honest broker between Afghan Taliban and the outside world.

Islamabad should persuade Afghan Taliban to honour commitments on governance and security. If the Taliban government is able to meet the expectations of the international community, the regional and international response would be more receptive. Coordination and flexibility would expedite foreign financial assistance to resume more speedy assistance and thus from deteriorating Afghanistan's humanitarian and economic crises. Pakistan's informal influence over the Taliban may have diminished and the Taliban may be averse to taking advice from Islamabad; yet as the new government's trusted external supporter, Pakistan still has a role to play. Islamabad should warn the Afghan Taliban's leadership that an unwillingness to compromise comes at a high cost for Afghan civilians.

Islamabad must also make clear, by using back-door diplomacy and continuous public comments, that the Taliban's refusal to relinquish ties with the TTP will stress their relationship in the future.

Pakistan should be doing much to alleviate Afghans' suffering. Pakistani policymakers insist that they are doing everything within the country's limited resources to provide life-saving assistance to Afghan citizens. Yet if saving Afghan civilians from the horrors of a major economic and humanitarian crisis is indeed a priority, then Islamabad should end the forced deportation of newly arriving Afghan refugees and instead provide shelter to those in desperate need.

5. Conclusion

Islamabad may view the Taliban's control over Afghanistan as a positive sign for political stability, but the group's seizure of power is far from ideal. The Pakistani leadership hoped that the Taliban government be accepted as part of an internationally recognized and funded power-sharing arrangement. Instead, the Taliban is starved of aid and has no formal recognition by a single state across the world.

Under these circumstances, Pakistan has few good options left. Its leaders are well justified in pushing the world to give Afghanistan more than mere humanitarian aid over the coming months and cooperate with Taliban ministries in order to preserve at least basic services. Better is to convince the Taliban even more to become more pluralistic in governance and toward fundamental rights, which would best ensure stability in Afghanistan itself and make things easier for decision-makers in the Western capitals to take steps that can help in averting an economic catastrophe and save millions of lives in Afghanistan.

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