



WHAT NEXT?

Barbara Kelemen reports on the impact of the Taliban takeover on Afghanistan and the wider surrounding region

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's takeover are likely to have both geostrategic and security implications globally, although in the near term the impacts are more likely to be felt in the region. Afghanistan has changed considerably since the Taliban was last in power, as has US global counter-terrorism capability. It would be wrong to assume the current situation is a rerun of 2001, but it's unwise to overestimate the extent to which the Taliban can overcome the challenges it will face in adapting itself to governing a country that is likely to be beset by internal conflicts and chronic instability.

A Taliban government, despite claims of being more inclusive, will probably struggle to unify and stabilise the country. Combined with the group's affinity towards foreign militants we anticipate this will create opportunities for foreign jihadists to deepen and re-build their networks. Any significant increase in terrorism threat will create a powerful incentive for other foreign powers, such as China, to strengthen their commitment in the region to secure their own interests. In the case of Beijing, this will probably take a form of increased economic aid, but potentially also assistance to boost Afghanistan's counter-terrorism capabilities.

We do not anticipate any major changes in the Taliban's ideology or its relationship with foreign

militants as the group officially assumes power in Afghanistan. There seems to be a divide between analysts and the counter-terrorism community on whether the Taliban will become more moderate and pragmatic or how its relationship with al-Qaeda will change. However, it seems more likely than not that even if the group's leadership softens its rhetoric, the enforcement of the majority of its policies, which have a long-established pattern, will not change. This is mainly due to internal factionalism within the Taliban itself and ethnic divides across the country. Indeed, international and local press reports in recent weeks suggest that not even a week after the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, there was already a gap between the group's rhetoric and what is happening on the ground.

LINKED BY IDEOLOGY

The Taliban and al-Qaeda continue to have close ties. We suspect that while the Taliban's leadership will probably try to maintain some deniability, it will not expel foreign militants from its territory. The precedent suggests that the local Pashtunwali tribal code that mandates moral obligations to provide refuge is an important dynamic in the Taliban's relationship with al-Qaeda and similarly-minded groups. Additionally, UN reports in recent years have consistently shown that both groups continue to be closely linked by marriage and ideology.

However, while this permissive environment will probably provide some opportunities for militants to boost their capabilities and mount more attacks, it is likely to take a few years for this increased threat to materialise in the West. This is mainly because many Western governments have improved their ability to detect and prevent internationalised terrorist plots over the past two decades, not least through advances in border and aviation security. Yet there is little doubt that the American withdrawal will directly impact the country's ability to access intelligence on the presence of terrorists in Afghanistan, and therefore will probably erode the efficacy of any drone or air-strikes operations that the US have stated an intent to continue carrying out to prevent any nascent terrorist threat in the country.

The Taliban is probably keen on preventing any internationalised plots against the US emerging from Afghanistan to maintain its position of power. This aspect of the US-Taliban agreement seems to have been the main security concern for the US and we assess there is a high chance that the US will begin to push for a renewed sanction regime if any such plots emerged. We anticipate that, based on the profile of some foreign fighters already present in Afghanistan, an increase in attacks is most likely in countries that are geographically closer to Afghanistan, such as Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. According to the 2021 DOD reports, this includes fighters affiliated with the al-Qaeda Indian Subcontinent, which has reportedly solidified its presence in Afghanistan by embedding fighters in the Taliban.

Pakistan is likely to suffer the most tangible impact on its security environment as well as geostrategic standing in the region. The jihadist threat in Pakistan was already rising before the Taliban takeover, most likely due to the Pakistan Taliban (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan – TTP) regrouping since December 2019

and the escalation of terrorist attacks outside of the border areas and into the main cities. Furthermore, although the Taliban and the TTP are two completely separate entities, the two have cooperated in the past and mounted attacks together, particularly in border areas, according to the UN. While the Taliban's gains in Afghanistan may not necessarily directly benefit the TTP, each group is likely to benefit from the insecurity the other one perpetuates. Indeed, according to Dragonfly's TerrorismTracker database, attacks by the TTP in Afghanistan have already doubled over the past month compared with the month before.

On a geostrategic level, China's national interests in both Afghanistan and Pakistan make it well positioned to try to fill the security and economic vacuum left behind by the US and coalition forces. China has a particular interest to ensure its investment in Pakistan remains protected, particularly in the face of rising attacks against its nationals in Balochistan. In addition, China has maintained a pragmatic relationship with the Taliban since the late Nineties and seems to be inclined to recognise the Taliban as a legitimate ruler, but only if

PAKISTAN IS LIKELY TO SUFFER THE MOST TANGIBLE IMPACT ON ITS SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

it is able to prevent foreign militants from mounting attacks against Chinese interests.

Beijing's concern over Uyghur militancy in Xinjiang has been the main driver behind its relationship with the Taliban, and we doubt this will change in the coming few years. Back in the Nineties, two factors pushed Beijing to reach out to the Taliban. Firstly, heroin produced in Afghanistan was making its way to Xinjiang causing widespread addiction problems among the local population. Second, and more worryingly, many Uyghur militants have fought alongside Afghan mujahideen during the Soviet invasion and later joined camps established by Tahir Yuldashev, the founder of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). China, worried that these fighters might return home and mount attacks against the Chinese government, has pushed the Taliban to restrict Uyghurs from carrying out attacks against its interests, which remains one of its main concerns.

However, China's rising commitment in the region is unlikely to translate into any type of military intervention. Chinese strategic culture, as well as precedent, suggests that Beijing prefers to delegate responsibility for security provisions either to local authorities while it is willing to provide economic stimulus to fund it or use private security companies to directly protect its citizens. It has already done so in Pakistan and it will probably choose the same approach in Afghanistan, if needed. In fact, doing so would also have economic benefits for China; many of its projects, such as the Mes Aynak copper mine, have been stalled in recent years due to the poor local security environment.

The US withdrawal will directly impact its ability to access intelligence on the presence of terrorists in Afghanistan

The Taliban stabilising the country and providing China with a safe environment to operate in would provide Beijing with valuable opportunities to not only expand on already-existing projects, but also increase connectivity between Afghanistan and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan. For instance, it could finally route rail lines through the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, which was previously seemingly hindered due to the fact that these provinces were the primary

ATTACKS ARE MOST LIKELY IN COUNTRIES THAT ARE GEOGRAPHICALLY CLOSER TO AFGHANISTAN

stronghold of the Taliban and the country's leading opium-producing region.

The presence of Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) is another issue of concern both for China and the Taliban. IS-K continues to position itself as the main force in Afghanistan that is able to attract jihadists disaffected with the Taliban. According to Dragonfly's TerrorismTracker database, the group has so far carried out 81 attacks in the country

in 2021, the majority of which took place in Kabul. Islamic State has also previously threatened China in its propaganda for its treatment of Uyghurs and there is a reasonable chance that some Uyghur militants will join the IS-K if the Taliban implements restrictions on their operations.

In another less likely but still credible scenario, there is also a high possibility of IS-K expanding its influence into Pakistan. Were the ties between the Taliban and TTP to deteriorate, this would increase the likelihood of TTP eventually aligning itself with IS-K and moving away from al-Qaeda. At least two factions that the TTP re-absorbed in 2020 cooperated with IS-K in the past.

Overall, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is probably one of the most significant geopolitical events in the past few years and symbolises changing dynamics in the international area. And while the Taliban is likely to struggle to contain the probable overspill of terrorism onto the global stage, its attempts to legitimise its rule as well as expected support from China and Russia shows how pragmatism increasingly dominates international relations. In addition, new alliances that are likely to be formed in the aftermath of the US withdrawal are likely to challenge the traditional power dynamics in the region while simultaneously undermining the position and reputation of the US as a global power ●

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The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan symbolises changing dynamics in the international area



Picture credit: US Dept Defense