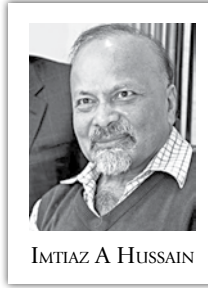


# Afghanistan, Taliban and the United States

## 'Damned-if-I-do, damned-if-I-don't'



IMTIAZ A HUSSAIN

FULL US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan was announced by President Joe Biden on April 14, 2021. It raised eyebrows but did not ruffle public feathers. The sudden and complete mid-August pull-out did. Desperate Afghans running to cling on to a military transport plane taking off exposed how pathetic the plight was.

Two such war-related photos once shook the world and left some lessons. The first photo, no less of an Afghani, portrayed Sharbat Gula, a captivating green-eyed *Pashtun* girl driven by Soviet troops into Pakistan's Nasir Bagh refugee camp, the second of "napalm girl," Phan Thi Kim Phuc, a naked 9-year-old with a burned back screaming as she fled Viet Cong bombings in 1972. Whereas the former graced the June 1985 *National Geographic* cover and the latter won a photography Pulitzer Prize, some such accolade surely awaits this month's Kabul escapade.

Germany's sedate Chancellor, Angela Merkel, called this rushed exit a "mistake"; whispering UK willows alluded to it as "the biggest foreign policy disaster since Suez" (in 1956); and French President Emmanuel Macron's desire of "strategic autonomy from the United States" strengthened. China saw that exit as US "humiliation" and Russia its consequences as "horror." Both gleefully constructed Taliban deals.

The United States did that too. Stanford historian Robert Crews calls Donald J. Trump's March 2020 Taliban deal as the exit "roadmap". "We're dealing very well with the Taliban," spoke Trump on September 18, 2020. "They're very tough, they're very smart, they're very sharp," he continued, "[b]ut, you know, it's been 19 years... even they are tired of fighting." His May 2021 exit deadline was stricter than Biden's.

Analysts wonder why this hullabaloo. That exit was being suggested by at least five slow-moving dynamics: (a) the "sinking-in" failure; (b) coffer considerations; as well as

(c) changes in domestic priorities of policy-supplying country; (d) neighbourhood climate of the policy-recipient country; and (e) the global context.

Except for "westernising" Kabul and modernising Bagram Airfield (located 40kms north of Hamid Karzai International Airport), US and NATO troops simply could not transplant any "anti-terrorism" mindset among Afghans, who know more about war than the typical US citizen, after 9/11. Particularly difficult to harness was the countryside. Malleable *Loya Jirga* representatives and a public largely untutored in 9/11 conversations did not gel with foreign troops, with US troops now, or with Soviet troops in the 1980s. Carrying a 40-year psychological toll of swaying battles, Afghan citizens only rallied to what they knew well: faith (read: Islam), and ethnic identity. Reforms centrally initiated at the centre hardly trickled down, the urban-rural gap widened, and appropriate integrative infrastructures remained pipe-dreams. How Afghan unity was hijacked by mostly Kabul-based mercenaries, gold-diggers, and drug-traffickers exposed why a 300,000-strong army simply collapsed with US departure and after 20 years of training. Staying and defending a marriage is fine, but not a mirage. President Ashraf Ghani's cowardly escape with his loot dramatised the longest US war as being nothing more than a security soap opera.

Though security considerations made development unproductive and costly, behind the military bandwagon numerous academic, business, gender, social, and welfare global groups entered a once-forbidden country, exposing possibilities and opening hitherto closed segments, particularly among women. Negotiating with Taliban in Qatar raised policymakers' hopes, but not *vox populi's*. Hoof-sounds of the *Taliban* Trojan Horse were heard loud and clear, far and near.

Once bitten, today's twice shy Taliban has become more worldly, socially savvy, experienced, and youthful enough to go the distance, even if this compromises its own brand of Islam. It can look US negotiators eyeball-to-eyeball and enter cities without blazing guns. Hard-line fall-backs cannot be ruled out, but if "carrots" could convert

fearful, fed-up, and uprooted rural dwellers, why turn to "sticks"? Though a smaller Al-Qaeda faction remains a Taliban partner, Imran Khan, the Pakistani leader whose instrument the Taliban is, remains wary of fundamentalism spilling over. Only seething countryside anger pitting Pashtuns, Hazara, Nuristanis, Tajiks, Turkmenis, and Uzbeks against each other could derail immediate Taliban prospects.

Secondly, "coffer considerations" haunts

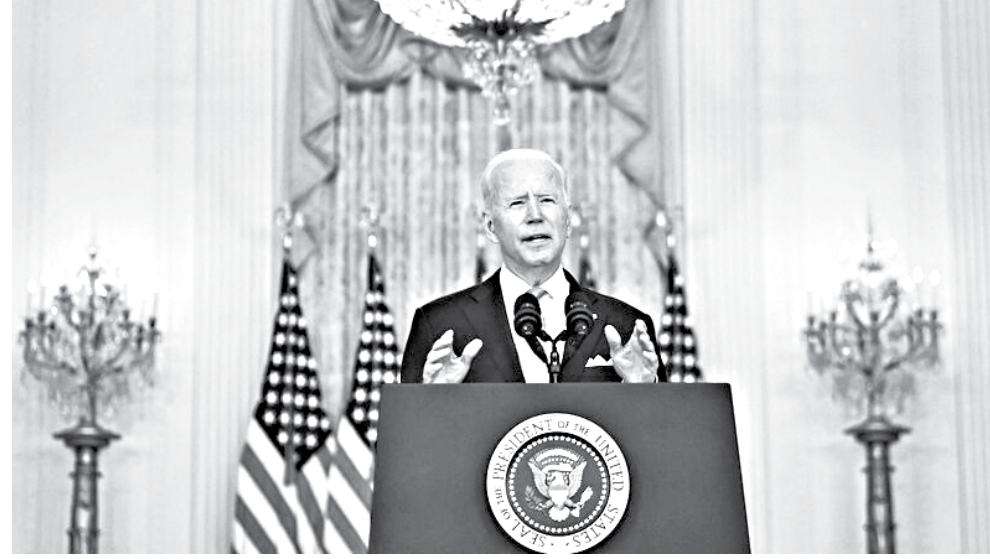
and fifth dynamics portrayed domestic US priorities, Afghanistan's fluctuating neighbourhood pulse, and in-flux global order stakeholders. Envisaged in 2013, the USD 62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project opened Gwadar Port as China's outlet to the strategic Straits of Hormuz and economically ever-bountiful Africa. India followed suit building Iran's Chabahar Port from 2015 to plant its own Persian Gulf flag and divert Afghanistan from

Turkmenistan (and later Uzbekistan). Among new members, India and Pakistan moved from "observer" status to "full membership", with Afghanistan and Iran tip-toeing them. As goals and interests proliferate, this originally soft-power non-US bulwark loosens further.

Reduced US profile where the "great game" was historically played can be seen as globally destabilising, but it has never been a US "game". Alongside Australia, Japan, and the Philippines, the United States sees the South China Sea as its new Alamo. Still, any China-US contestation differs from the Cold War Soviet-US rivalry: its *economic* premises rather than geopolitical; globally pivotal commercial exchanges between the two protagonists, China and the United States; and looser alliances than the NATO/Warsaw Pact counterparts. All told, the South China Rubicon is all set to displace the "graveyard" of empires, that is, Afghanistan, from behind the "global-order" steering-wheel. China's Belt and Road Initiative guaranteed that on land by neutralising Afghanistan's "graveyard" potential, and on sea through a string of artificial islands.

Afghanistan free-riding US economic and security resources generalises the apt "damned-if-I-do, damned-if-I-don't" phrase for the United States, Taliban, and Afghanistan: any policy/decision of anyone will fetch inevitable condemnation from a single, few, or all others, just as not making a policy/decision, will also be finger-pointed on all fronts. When one country or group faces that predicament, a balancing act typically comes from the actions of others; if two countries or groups err similarly, order can still be brought, though the climb becomes more uphill. With all sides similarly oriented, mitigating factors vanish. Anything can happen, even without invoking domestic public considerations, a louder clout today than ever before. Whether it is the US exit, Taliban takeover, or missed Afghan opportunities, the blame-game innings is unlikely to end soon, but that is just what opportunists of all stripes need to thrive. They win because "Rome" slept.

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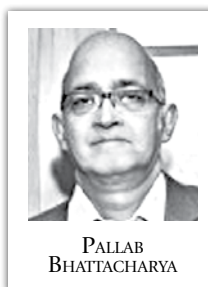
President Biden delivers remarks on August 16 about the situation in Afghanistan for the first time since the Taliban's takeover. PHOTO: AFP

the United States. When 9/11 happened, the United States concluded its longest 20th century economic expansion (1992-2001). By contrast, the stagnating post 2008-11 Great Recession decade saw healthy global competition turn nastier, long-term jobs displaced by fickle and fluid alternatives, technological shifts from hardware to software becoming institutionalised, spiking migrant flows fuelling populism, and obviously Covid pandemic hammerings. No democratic public can forever fund a lost cause against that backdrop. President Trump made this his election talking-point. President Biden independently followed suit. Changes undergird the third, fourth,

Pakistani ports. Taliban retaking Kabul now puts Pakistan behind the region's steering-wheel, meaning the next move is India's. Two masks must be removed: Pakistan's remodelling Taliban to make it receptive enough for Uyghur-suppressing China; and India's superficial SCO membership, given its friendly Russian stripe, even friendlier US colours.

As relative US global salience diminishes, the China-Russia SCO (Shanghai Cooperative Organisation) influence grows. Often falsely dubbed as "China's NATO," this loose multilateral 2002 construction originated from multilateral 1996-1998 Shanghai Five deals, bonding Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and

# India's Taliban challenge and Afghan policy



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE joke going around in diplomatic circles in New Delhi is that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was much smoother than the change of guard at the White House after Joe Biden won the presidential elections in the world's biggest democracy. It is a deceptive calm that preceded and followed the ultra-conservative group's seizing the levers of power in Kabul on August 15. What lies behind the smoothness and calm is the danger of a radical ideology that has serious security and geostrategic implications not just for India, but for South Asia as well. It is nothing more than a geographical indicator that Afghanistan is a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) given the dysfunctional nature of the forum.

As the second coming of the Taliban to power—the first time was in 1996 with horrific consequences for Afghanistan—plays out, one of its first announcements was to establish an Islamic Emirate. New Delhi seems to be reworking its Afghan policy. On August 18 and 19, Prime Minister Narendra Modi deliberated with his top cabinet colleagues and National Security Adviser on the developments in Afghanistan and the way forward for India. Clearly, India does not have many options as the rise of the Taliban has clearly led to a new power shift and set off jockeying for influence by regional powers like China, Russia, Turkey and Afghanistan's next door eastern neighbour Pakistan. This is an area of great concern for India, according to strategic affairs experts.

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan of the 1990s was recognised by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the UAE. Russia and China had

not recognised the Taliban then but they are now falling head over heels to embrace the group. This is a big change from 1996. China, with its deep pocket, is not only looking at making investments in the Afghan economy, but also taking its Belt and Road Initiative to that country to complement its project already going on in Pakistan. China is particularly keen on tapping the deposits of copper, iron ore and lithium which is important for the electric vehicles of the future. There could be a *quid pro quo* between China's financial muscle to help out the Afghan economy, heavily dependent on foreign aid, and mineral mining rights.

The assessment in the strategic establishment in New Delhi is that Pakistan, which has for decades invested heavily in the Taliban by supplying it with funds, weapons and intelligence, is in the driver's seat on matters relating to Afghanistan and will now try to whittle down India's role in the economic development of that country. Pakistan is looking to benefit from a friendly regime in Kabul to take advantage of Afghanistan's extremely strategic location as a transit hub linking South Asia with Central Asia and beyond. So, India's challenges today are quite different and complicated. Will India finally reconcile itself with recognising the Taliban?

After being so closely tied to the governments in Afghanistan over the last two decades, India, which did not recognise the Taliban in 1996, is in no hurry to recognise the new dispensation in Kabul this time around. How India reworks its Afghan policy will depend a lot on a number of variables. Will India go with the western democracies and other Asian countries it has strong relations with based on shared values of democracy, fight against terror and a rule-based international order? Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar's recent visit to the US and Qatar is aimed at, among other things, to ascertain the thinking in Washington and

the influential Gulf country about the future of Afghanistan. As part of the same exercise, a team of Indian officials led by Deputy National Security Adviser Pankaj Saran was in Moscow this week meeting Russian National Security Adviser Nikolai Patrushev.

Right now, India is waiting to see the contours of the new power structure and the character of a new government that is expected to emerge in Afghanistan. Senior Taliban leader Amir Khan Motaqi has already held talks with former President Hamid Karzai and senior leader Abdullah Abdullah. India is also keeping a close watch if the talks on the future government could include non-Talibans in view of the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan—Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. What India is looking at with keenness is can Afghanistan come up with a system that can preserve the gains of the last two decades. After its military prowess shown in the speed with which it captured Afghanistan this time, the Taliban is under no obligation to share power with anyone else. Buoyed by its military victory, the Taliban will try to dictate terms from a position of strength.

Some strategic affairs experts in India rue that New Delhi should not have hesitated to reach out to the Taliban, a policy that sees India squeezed out of the big picture of international power-play in Afghanistan. Such an outreach would have required India to make deft diplomacy and a subtle shift from its stand of looking at the Taliban from a UN-designated terror outfit.

India may be wary of the Taliban but it is far from abandoning the people of Afghanistan where there is considerable goodwill generated by India's soft power in constructing welfare projects in all the 34 provinces of that country like roads, power, dams, hospitals, setting up educational facilities and giving scholarships. Being mindful of this even after the Taliban takeover on August 15, India was quick to announce

e-visa facility for Afghans, wanting to come to India in view of the situation in that country. India is also considering offering help to Afghan students who have taken admission in Indian universities but are unable to come to the country due to the flight disruptions in Kabul. To sustain its image as a reliable development partner, India may have to rethink on its decision to reopen its shut diplomatic missions in Kabul, Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif. To sum up, India has to find a way to stay invested in Afghanistan post-Taliban takeover.

Much will depend on how the Taliban conducts itself in Afghanistan, deals with the international community, if it distances itself from various terror groups, including Al Qaeda, which helped it, and how it deals with Pakistan, the principal backer of the hardline Islamist group. If the Taliban sticks to its medieval mores like in the 1990s, oppressing women and indulging in revenge killings, it could run the risk of once again becoming an international pariah. Post-takeover, initial vibes emanating from Kabul is that the group is trying to signal its transformation into a force of moderation by promising no reprisal violence and that women are welcome in government offices. During the talks on government formation with Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, Motaqi reportedly pledged to form an "inclusive" government that would give representation to all ethnic groups. So, the Taliban seems to be making the right noises, keeping an eye on the international community in a bid to get acceptance and legitimacy. But these words need to be verified on the ground in the months to come.

The Taliban must realise that winning a military victory is quite different from the challenges of governance, the foremost of which is to ensure development projects of the last 20 years in connectivity network, energy supply, healthcare facilities and several community development projects.

A key marker of India's response to the

new regime in Kabul will, of course, be the Taliban's relations with Pakistan. The Taliban has close links with Tehreek-i-Taliban of Pakistan and other anti-India terror groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Recently, TTP leader Mufi Noor Wali Mehsud has thanked the Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada for releasing their deputy leader Maulvi Faqir Muhammad from Bagram high security prison—from where around 7,000 hardcore terrorists were freed by the Taliban. The issue is: will Pakistan stop using cross-border terrorism as an instrument of state policy and give more stress on geo-economics rather than geo-politics? It does not look like it.

The question also is: will the Taliban be able to snap its ties with non-Afghan terror outfits which will try to extract their pounds of flesh for having helped the Taliban. One must remember that Jaish chief Maulana Masood Azhar was taken directly to Mullah Omar (who had led the Taliban's charge in Afghanistan in 1996), in Kandahar after he was freed by India in return for the safe release of passengers of the Indian Airlines flight hijacked from Kathmandu in December, 1999.

The change of guard in Kabul has set off security concerns for India and some other parts of South Asia. India will have to be on guard against the possibility of the Taliban sending its fighters or helping other terror groups to Jammu and Kashmir. Both India and Bangladesh must recognise that Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh has its roots in an earlier Afghan war. The JMB was founded by Afghan war veterans, and how the outfit went on a rampage in Bangladesh in the early 2000s is well-known. The Taliban recruited a large number of fighters from Bangladesh in the 1990s and some from India. The spillover of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan may result in a rise in extremism not only among radicals in Bangladesh and Rohingyas there, but also in India.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**MARGARET ATWOOD**  
Canadian poet and novelist (born November 18, 1939)

*An eye for an eye only leads to more blindness.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Olympic awards
- 7 Mass unit
- 11 Egypt neighbor
- 12 Doily stuff
- 13 Comfort for a losing fan
- 15 Precious ones
- 16 Went out, as a fire
- 18 Egyptian goddess
- 21 Diamond scores
- 22 Pricey stadium spot
- 24 Play division
- 25 Suit accessory
- 26 Take to court
- 27 Chapel worker
- 29 Flex

**DOWN**

- 1 Comic Bernie
- 2 Mess up
- 3 Calendar box
- 4 Tolerates
- 5 Like some jackets
- 6 Sweeping story
- 7 Like patent leather
- 8 Unrefined
- 9 Trick taker, often
- 10 Director Brooks
- 14 Kid's transport
- 16 Old gold coin
- 17 Prologue
- 19 "Ghosts" playwright
- 20 Wide inlet
- 21 Drake's music
- 22 Sermon topic
- 23 Marked a ballot
- 25 Gear part
- 28 Rocket sections
- 29 Snoopy, for one
- 31 Mideast peninsula
- 33 Tire holders
- 34 Rent out
- 35 Heady brew
- 36 Try out
- 37 Bit of humor
- 38 Stunned wonder
- 39 Bro's sibling

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**FRIDAY'S ANSWERS**

L O A F S P A B L O  
A L L O W A P R O N  
D E F O E G E E S E  
T A C O W E S  
F U E L R O D S  
O S L O D A K O T A  
R E S O W S I M O N  
E R A S E S N A T O  
E L E C T R O N  
P U B D E L I  
O R A T E A G I L E  
M A J O R S H R E W  
P L A N S S T A G E

**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

GUYS, I HAVE AN IDEA.  
WE'RE THINKING ABOUT US RENTING A MOTORHOME FOR OUR SUMMER VACATION.  
I EXPECTED MORE EXCITEMENT.  
WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH OUR UN-FUN DAD?

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

DONE!  
KEEP GOING OR YOU WILL BE!