

Leading global jihad or ruling Afghans?

Experts see limited impact of Taliban takeover on jihadist movements in South Asia

THE DAILY STAR/ANN

Against all odds, the Taliban need to prove their credentials as Afghan nationalists and shun global jihadist movements along with delivering promises to the international community if they want to govern Afghanistan, a panel of experts said. They said that the fear of jihadist attacks in the South and south Asia region was overblown, but Taliban's victory over superpowers would provide moral boost for jihadist groups. They said it's too early to predict the regional and global implications of the changes in Afghanistan.

The speakers were speaking at a webinar titled "Afghanistan's Taliban: Impacts on South and South East Asia" arranged by Asia News Network, an organisation comprised of 23 news organisations across Asia.

"Taliban need to decide who they are. Are they Afghan nationalists or, in some shape or form, international jihadists?" asked Anthony Davis, security consultant and analyst with IHS-Jane's, Bangkok, adding that they might need months, even years, to answer this fundamental question.

Since seizing Kabul, the Taliban have presented a more moderate face, saying they want peace, will not take revenge against old enemies and will respect the rights of women within the framework of Islamic law. They have also pledged not to allow any group to use Afghanistan to launch terror attacks on any country.

Anthony said the Taliban is caught between their two most important, influential allies: Pakistan and Al-Qaeda.

Since their emergence in the early 1990's, he said, Pakistan has been aiding the Taliban and continued to support them to power in 1996. But then, because of Taliban's association with Osama bin Laden and with the 9/11 terror attack in the US, the whole Pakistani military enterprise was "torpedoed, it blew up on their faces" and a quick offensive by US and its allies pushed the Taliban out of power in late 2001.

As the Taliban are now in power again, Pakistan, with the bitter experience they had, is now clear on what it wants, he added.

"Pakistan will want a stable government in Kabul who are sympathetic to their causes and also nationalistic," Anthony said. It clearly doesn't want Afghanistan to become a hub for terrorist activities.

On the other hand, during their insurgency in the last 20 years, the Taliban have deepened their associations with jihadist movements, especially with Al-Qaeda, the international genre of jihadist revolution, he said.

Besides, he said, they have associations with nationalist jihadist groups like the TTP in Pakistan, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).

He said Al-Qaeda fighters are still operating with the Taliban and it will be extremely hard for them to decide as the group has diverse vines running within them regarding the issue.

There are groups of Taliban who definitely want stability and prosperity for the country after winning the war, he added.

However, other important players like Sirajuddin Haqqani, the chief of the powerful Haqqani Network and the defacto number two in the Taliban ranks, doesn't want to throw the Al-Qaeda under the bus, Anthony said adding they have bonded closely over the years through blood and family bonds.

He said the Taliban leadership has now to answer the important question: Should we close down the jihadist chapter of the movement, or continue with it despite the international threats and pressure?

However, Zahid Hussain, a prominent

the Taliban had committed that they won't allow Afghanistan to be used by any terrorist groups, he said.

He also pointed to the fact that even before the final offensive, the Taliban had already established "tactical alliances" with neighbouring powers like Iran, Russia and China to a common purpose: that is to curb the influence of IS, the global jihadists.

"The other factor is the Taliban leadership now is much different than the 1990's. These leaders regularly meet with foreign leaders, negotiate with them and they now know they can't work like they used to," he added.

Moreover, he said the situation is completely different than the 1990s chaos.. In fact, global jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda were able to grow inside Afghanistan because of the post-Soviet civil war.

"One of the concerns of international community is that if the Taliban fail and

the country," he argued.

The Western nations have made clear what they want from them through deals and UNSC resolution. So they have to fulfil the commitments they have made with the international community regarding an inclusive government, human rights, women's rights and other issues.

"For economic and other reasons, Taliban cannot afford isolation like the 1990s," he said.

But to implement those, the Taliban will face a major problem with local leadership and fighters because of their ultra-conservative mindset derived from the traditional tribal societal framework, he noted. That will be a bigger challenge within Taliban, he added.

Anthony, however, said that if the Taliban indeed want to reign in the other small jihadist groups and warlords, they risk pushing them to IS strengthening the global jihadist movements.

Mahfuz Anam, editor of *The Daily Star*, said the Taliban should get some breathing space now to prove their intent.

He said the delay in forming a government can be seen as a sign of internal discussions to form an "inclusive government" keeping in mind the volatile ethnic divide of the country.

"Nobody likes a defeat, let alone a superpower," he said referring to the United States, urging caution against exploiting the fissure and differences within the Taliban ranks.

"If the United States, derived from the ego, decides to make the Taliban look so bad, project them as a mediaeval force and criticise them, attack them and create fault line within them at every step, that might create a problem," he added.

He feared that, despite the argument put forward by Zahid Hossain, Pakistan might use the opportunity to reignite the Kashmir issue.

He hoped that all powers, including the US, China, India, Pakistan, should look closely at how the Taliban react to the options that Anthony said earlier and take actions accordingly.

"If the Taliban take the nationalist route, everybody should cooperate. If they take the route of international jihadist, then all of us need to take our own precautions," he suggested.

He said that Bangladesh is concerned because the country has a latent jihadist tendency. But thanks to the actions of the current government, since the 2016 Dhaka attack inspired by IS, the situation has been under control, he added.

But the ideological impact of the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan can't be ignored, he said.

Their victory against a coalition of superpowers without backing, which they had during their victory against the Soviets, and

without airpower and modern warfare means, delivers a strong message to jihadist groups across the world, he said.

Noor Huda Ismail, visiting Fellow, the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore, and founder of the Institute of International Peace Building in Indonesia, agreed.

He said, apart from the exploitations from outside, if the Taliban fail to control or suppress different pockets of resistance by different warlords, those forces might create or escalate the fault lines within the group.

Self-motivated radicals still possess the more serious threat to jihadist attacks than organised groups, he added.

Anthony said, though New Delhi might be looking at developments very closely, the impact of power change in Kabul is unlikely to have any major impact on India.

He said despite a huge Muslim population, strikingly international jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have failed miserably to inspire them. He noted that the few major attacks on India by jihadists—the Red Fort attack by Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Mumbai attack by the same group, the Pulwama attack by Jaish-e-Muhammad—were all aided, staged, managed by Pakistani military establishments to destabilise the state.

However Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba have footholds in Afghanistan. And he predicted that Pakistan will like for the groups to remain dormant till the dust settles down.

He also played down militancy threat to China saying Beijing needs to worry more about Syria than Afghanistan.

Former Thai lawmaker and ambassador Kobsak Chutikul feared that after the debacle in Afghanistan, the US might refocus on South Asia again after decades to regain its lost honour potentially making this region the centre of US-China rivalry.

He pointed to the recent visits by US Vice President Kamala Harris and US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin to countries which have disputes with China over the resource rich South China Sea.

He said, in light of the controversial US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan, South Asia might have to reassess their allies and friends. With the rise of China as the new superpower next door, he feared countries in the region make the difficult choice of choosing between the US and China.

He asked whether the situation in Afghanistan had brought that choice closer.

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Taliban fighters inside the Afghan presidential palace.

PHOTO: AFP

expert on regional security and terrorism issues, argued that though the Taliban might have limited contact with Al-Qaeda, they were no longer involved in global jihadist movements.

He said the antagonism between the Taliban and the Islamic State is a proof of that. He also claimed the Al-Qaeda elements are not as active in Afghanistan as many people think.

"Will the West engage with the Taliban if they were directly linked with Al-Qaeda or global jihadist movements?" he asked referring to the 18-month-long talks with US in Doha that paved the way for US troops withdrawal.

The Doha agreement, which was supported by China, Russia and Pakistan and unanimously endorsed by the UN Security Council, was only possible because

another civil war start in Afghanistan, that will be much more conducive for global jihadi movements," he said.

He also refuted the idea that Taliban would be hostile to countries like India and stick to Pakistan.

"They will not and cannot," the veteran columnist at *Dawn* said, noting that the Taliban's main challenge now is to govern the country.

It was much easier to take over the country as the Kabul government collapsed. But to govern it would be far more challenging given that the country is mired by ethnic and all other kinds of conflicts, he added.

"Moreover, the previous government was completely dependent, almost 90 percent, on US or foreign aid to run the day-to-day government. The Taliban cannot afford to antagonise any country if they want to run

Pakistan unlikely to hurry in recognising Taliban

Says regional security expert, fears refugee influx, boost for local militants

THE DAILY STAR/ANN

Only three nations—Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia—recognised the previous Taliban regime which imposed an ultra-austere interpretation of Islam in Afghanistan.

PAKISTAN may not hurry to recognise the Taliban as new rulers of Afghanistan this time and wait for regional powers like China, Russia and Iran to make their decisions, a prominent expert on regional security and terrorism issues said.

Zahid Hussain, also a *Dawn* columnist, said what is happening in Afghanistan has direct consequences for Pakistan as the two countries share a 2,500 km long porous border and the same people living across the lines.

Only three nations—Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia—recognised the previous Taliban regime which imposed an ultra-austere interpretation of Islam in Afghanistan.

"Pakistan is not overtly happy, but the changes are seen as positive for the country. There are huge apprehensions too as a radical Islamic party like Taliban have taken control across the border," Zahid told a webinar arranged by Asia News Network on Thursday.

What happened in the last 11 days in Afghanistan has taken everyone by surprise. Even the Taliban seem to be unprepared for the quick outcome of the offensive and the complete collapse of the Western-backed Afghani government, he said.

Though Pakistan has been working with US



What is happening in Afghanistan has direct consequences for Pakistan as the two countries share a 2,500 km long porous border.

PHOTO: AFP

on its war against terror, the two countries have divergent goals in Afghanistan.

"On one hand, Pakistan is a partner of US in its war against terror, on the other it has very good relationship with Taliban leadership. In fact, most of the Taliban leadership who fled Afghanistan after 2001, managed sanctuary in Pakistan and from there they carried on their resistance against

the occupying force," he said.

He said the recent events in Afghanistan pose a few challenges for Pakistan.

Pakistan supported the Taliban wholeheartedly in the 1990s but the situation has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. Pakistan has its own right-wing political parties and militancy problems and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan

will surely boost them, he said.

Militant groups, including Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) alternatively referred to as the Pakistani Taliban, have long been operating their activities mostly from across the border.

As the Taliban has given commitment to Pakistan and also to the international community not to allow any militant or terror groups to operate from Afghanistan, Islamabad has enough reasons to be hopeful about solving the cross-border militancy problem, he added.

"But the situation is really tricky. TTP had actually pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar, the founder of Taliban in Afghanistan. Their objectives might differ but their world-views are the same. Only time can tell if the Taliban can actually keep their promises on this issue."

Secondly, Pakistan is worried about a possible refugee influx through its porous 2500-km-long border with Afghanistan. The country already hosts around 3 million Afghan refugees and further addition of refugees will be a problem, he said.

"There is huge apprehension that the change in Afghanistan will have a huge impact on regional geo-politics," he said adding that US, China, Russia, and Iran all have huge stakes here.

"One can hope that this region would not become a playground for world powers again," he said.

QUOTABLE Quote

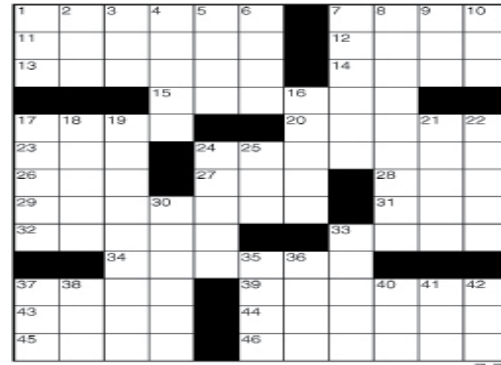


JUDITH BUTLER AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER (born February 24, 1956)

What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is liveable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unliveable for some.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 With no markup
 - 7 Play group
 - 11 State division
 - 12 "Lonely Boy" singer
 - 13 Toothbrush target
 - 14 River of Hades
 - 15 Tennis star Andre
 - 17 Ginger cookie
 - 20 Annoyed state
 - 23 Wallet bill
 - 24 Dragging on the shore
 - 26 Mob pariah
 - 27 Stephen of "The Crying Game"
 - 28 Lend a hand
 - 29 Electric company, e.g.
 - 31 King of France
 - 32 Brimless hat
 - 33 Unit of force
 - 34 Hesitant
 - 37 Rugged rock
 - 39 Inferior
 - 43 Fast runner
 - 44 Tempt
 - 45 Printer's supplies
 - 46 Took a breather
- DOWN**
- 1 Do something
 - 2 Grind - halt
 - 3 Nasty dog
 - 4 Like bar beer
 - 5 Doe's mate
 - 6 Model Banks
 - 7 "Othello" character
 - 8 Expert in old objects
 - 9 Sun setting
 - 10 Price addition
 - 16 Aerosol output
 - 17 Walk with pride
 - 18 "Keen!"
 - 19 Subatomic particle
 - 21 Labor group
 - 22 Jockey Arcaro
 - 24 Spring sign
 - 25 Attain
 - 30 Fencing moves
 - 33 Owed amounts
 - 35 Manual reader
 - 36 Celtic letter
 - 37 Greek X
 - 38 Campaigned
 - 40 Peach part
 - 41 Poker card
 - 42 Wine choice



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

WASTE CRAFT
EXCUSE HELLO
PLAY THE FOOL
TEN ROW TED
MATES
ZIP UP DECAF
ACES TOGA
PERIL VIGOR
CABIN
SPA SAP TSA
WORK THE ROOM
ARIEL RANUP
MEANY STEPS

BEETLE BAILEY



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