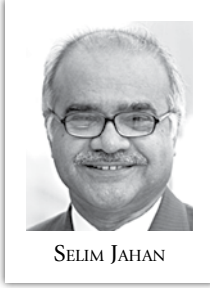


THE FUTURE OF AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan faces a grim economic future after Taliban takeover



THE Taliban have taken over Afghanistan—that is yesterday's news. That thousands of distressed Afghans were crowding Kabul Airport to try and escape the country has also become an old fact. The Taliban have killed certain local liberal humanist Afghan writers and artists—that is also known to everyone. But now that the last US troops have officially left Afghan soil, marking the end of a 20-year war where the Taliban came out stronger, the most critical question is—what is the economic scenario for Afghanistan under Taliban rule?

The context of the question has two dimensions—domestic and international. In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, the most important issues are: first, the domestic economy scenario of Afghanistan, and second, the role of the international community, particularly of the United States, in the process.

It goes without saying that the Afghan economy right now is in peril. Surely, this crisis has not been created in a day; rather, this is the legacy of past administrations over the years. The governments that came in after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 were weak, inefficient and vulnerable. The past two Presidents of Afghanistan were outsiders, having spent a large part of their lives in the US. As a result, the complex realities of Afghanistan were beyond their comprehension, and they did not have any real connection with life in Afghanistan and its people. Consequently, they could not build an effective administration in the country. During the past two decades, various regions of Afghanistan were disconnected from each other. In fact, the work of regional administration was carried out by a number of powerful warlords, making the central government of Afghanistan vulnerable and ineffective at the regional level.

Thus, things happened as expected. The

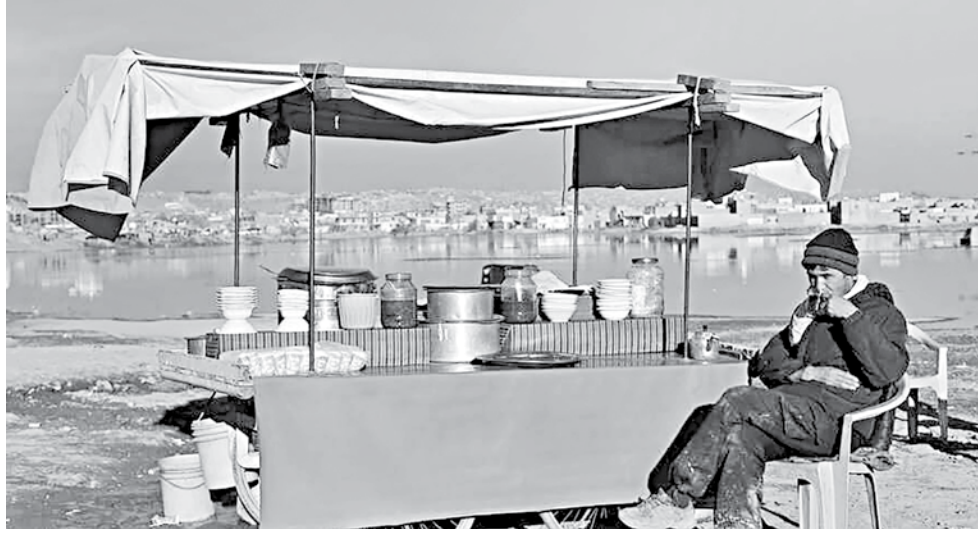
Afghan economy continued to be depressed. Over the past years, what could have been attained was not achieved, as the data shows. Currently, the gross national product of Afghanistan is around USD 190 billion, just a little more than the USD 160 billion economy of Dhaka city. The country's legal exports of goods and services every year account for USD one billion, and, every year, it has been importing USD six billion worth of goods and services. The balance of payments deficit has been a lingering problem.

The production, sale and export of opium have been playing a major role in the Afghan economy. About 80 percent of world production of opium comes from Afghanistan. Every year, Afghanistan produces nearly 10,000 tons of opium and the revenue generated from it amounts to USD seven billion approximately. About 87 percent of the income of opium producing farmers comes exclusively from this single product.

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The illicit opium export by Afghanistan is worth USD two billion every year. Therefore, both at the micro and macro levels of the Afghan economy, the role of opium is significant.

The other element that is crucial for the Afghan economy is foreign assistance. Last year, the donor community promised to provide USD 20 billion as aid to Afghanistan. About 80 percent of public expenditure



Sanctions always negatively impact the poorest segment of a population.

PHOTO: AP

in this country is funded by grants. Since 2002, the World Bank has provided Afghanistan with a total of USD 5.3 billion as development and emergency relief assistance. The IMF has earmarked for Afghanistan USD 400 million in Special Drawing Rights (SDR) for combating the Covid-19 pandemic in the country.

It is clear from the socioeconomic indicators of Afghanistan that the country is at a vulnerable stage. About 47 percent of its people live below the dollar-a-day poverty line. The percentage of working poor—those who work but live below the poverty line—is 33 percent in the country. If the poverty line is pushed to two US dollars a day, 90 percent of Afghans would be poor. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) of Afghanistan also indicates that 55 percent of its people are poor in multiple dimensions of deprivation. Even in this 21st century, the average life expectancy of an Afghan is only 64 years, and the mean years of schooling in the country is only four years. About 55 percent of Afghans are illiterate.

In Afghan society, the position of women

remains the most vulnerable one. An Afghan woman, on average, can expect to live up to 64 years—their mean years of schooling is only two years. One out of five Afghan women participates in the labour market. The maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan is 638 per 100,000 live births.

It is under these circumstances that the Taliban have assumed power. The takeover of power by a group with such archaic and intolerant ideals and beliefs is not acceptable to the democratic world. As a result, Western countries and international organisations have been undertaking various economic measures to make the Taliban ineffective. Economic sanctions and impositions are some such measures.

The United States has frozen about USD10 billion worth of Afghan assets held at various banks in Afghanistan. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has withdrawn the USD 400 worth of SDRs allocated earlier to Afghanistan for addressing the Covid-19 crisis. The World Bank has not said anything as of yet, but it may also put restrictions on its funding to Afghanistan. There has been

Af-Pak takes on a new meaning with the rise of the Taliban



RECENT attacks on Kabul's international airport by the Islamic State's Afghan affiliate raise multiple questions, as well as the spectre of paradigm shifts in the drivers and expanding geography of political violence. The attacks

have called into question the Taliban's ability to maintain security and keep a lid on the activities of multiple militant groups in Afghanistan. Long at war with the Islamic State (IS), the Taliban have promised to ensure that neither IS, nor groups with which it maintains good relations, will be allowed to use the Central Asian state for cross border attacks in the region.

That may be easier said than done even though Al Qaeda, which launched the most spectacular and successful of jihadist attacks on 9/11 almost two decades ago, may turn out to be the least of the Taliban's jihadist worries.

Analyst Abdul Sayed noted that Al Qaeda, in an effort to prevent the US from driving it out of Afghanistan and Pakistan, has "shifted focus from global terrorist attacks and external operations to supporting local jihadist groups throughout South Asia, and fuelling the narratives that underpin their objectives. This shift helped build resilience, allowing al-Qaeda to survive despite the massive blows inflicted by the United States and its allies."

The shift was further driven by the success of Western counter-terrorism agencies in reducing Al Qaeda's ability to attack the West. "2011 did mark the end of al Qaeda's war on the West. The group lives on as a set of regional militias with local agendas in places such as Somalia, but it has not successfully conducted a serious attack on the West for almost a decade," said political violence scholar Thomas Hegghammer.

Hegghammer went on to say that "by 2018, the number of jihadi plots and attacks in Europe had been cut in half compared to 2016, and the flow of foreign fighters had dried up entirely. What is more remarkable, every jihadi assault in Europe since 2017 has been carried out by a lone individual, suggesting that it has become very difficult to plan group attacks. Similarly, no terrorist strike since 2017 has involved explosives: instead, the attackers have used simpler weapons, such as guns, knives, and vehicles."

By the same token, Western successes have persuaded most analysts that the Islamic State, like Al Qaeda, is unlikely to be able to launch transnational attacks in the West from Afghanistan any time soon. As a result, the Taliban's security problems are likely to be domestic and regional rather than hailing from transnational jihadist groups who have long dominated analysis of and discourse about political violence.

What that means in practice is that the Taliban's war with IS will be a domestic fight that could threaten efforts to stabilise the country and ensure good relations with Afghanistan's neighbours. IS is banking on the hope that disgruntled Taliban, unhappy with a movement that once in government could be forced to compromise on its principles and moderate its policies, will join its ranks. Foreign fighters such as the Uighurs may also opt to throw in their lot with IS, which in the past has threatened China. Discontent members of ethnic minorities could do the same or join groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has a presence in Afghanistan.

The Taliban are expected to include representatives of ethnic minorities in their government in a nod to both various segments of the population as well as Afghanistan's neighbours. "ISIS-K will try

superpower to bite the dust in Afghanistan in a war against Islamic militants. The American withdrawal means that the US is no longer a prime target in the region.

In discussing the fallout for Pakistan of the Taliban victory, analysts have, by and large, focused on Pakistan as fertile ground for the spread of Taliban-style religious ultra-conservatism, as well as concerns that it would enable Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), more commonly known as the Pakistani Taliban, to rekindle their campaign of attacks in Pakistan. The TTP is a coalition of Pashtun Islamist groups with close ties to the Afghan Taliban that, last year, joined forces with several other militant Pakistani groups, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a violently anti-Shiite Sunni Muslim supremacist organisation.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid left the door open on the Taliban's



A Pakistani paramilitary soldier controls people waiting with a Taliban's flag to welcome a man who, according to them, was released from prison in Afghanistan.

PHOTO: REUTERS

to assassinate Taliban leaders behaving in a pragmatic manner. Mullah Baradar is likely a key target particularly in the light of his recent meeting with D/CIA. Eliminating Baradar helps ISIS-K undermine Taliban efforts to consolidate power," tweeted South Asia scholar, Kamran Bokhari, referring to a commonly used acronym for the Islamic State in Afghanistan. A co-founder of the Taliban, Abdul Ghani Baradar is widely viewed as a compromiser and problem solver. He reportedly met last week with CIA Director William J Burns.

Al Qaeda's local focus; the fact that Uighur, Uzbek and other Central Asians may concentrate on their own countries; and the Islamic State's limited capability suggest a potential paradigm shift in the drivers and expanding geography of political violence in South and Central Asia.

The shift could be boosted by the perceived defeat of the US, the second

relationship with the TTP. "The issue of the TTP is one that Pakistan will have to deal with, not Afghanistan. It is up to Pakistan, and Pakistani Islamic scholars and religious figures, not the Taliban, to decide on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their war and to formulate a strategy in response," Mujahid told a Pakistani TV programme. The spokesman stopped short of saying whether the Taliban would abide by a decision of the scholars.

The Taliban reportedly have advised the TTP to restrict their fight to Pakistani soil and have offered to negotiate with the Pakistan government an amnesty and the return of the Pakistani militants to the South Asian nation, according to Afghan sources.

The TTP is believed to be responsible for the killing this week of two Pakistani soldiers on the border with Afghanistan.

"Our fight against Pakistan will continue until we establish it as an Islamic state. We

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will not spare their dollar-dependent soldiers and politicians," said TTP commander Molvi Faqeer Mohamad. A wanted man in Pakistan, Mohamad was speaking to Al Jazeera after having been freed from jail in one of the Taliban's many prison breaks. The US-backed government of Ashraf Ghani had refused to extradite Mohamad to Pakistan.

Only a few analysts have pointed to what would constitute the greatest threat to Pakistan: the potential coalescing of a campaign of TTP violence with the notion of merging Pashtun-populated areas of Pakistan with Afghanistan. The intertwining of Pashtun national identity and Islam resounds in a Pashto poem quoted by Anas Haqqani, a senior Taliban official and brother of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the group's deputy leader. "The essence of my Pashto is so Islamic. Were there no Islam, I would still be a Muslim," a couplet of the poem says. Haqqani quoted the couplet while discussing Pashtun identity with no reference to geopolitics.

"Pashtuns of the Afghan Taliban will, after a few years in power, find common cause with their Pashtun kinsmen in Pakistan... There are plenty of Pakistani Pashtuns who would prefer the whole of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly North-West Frontier Province) to be part of a wider Pashtunistan," predicted scholar and former British ambassador to Pakistan, Tim Willasey-Wilsey.

Other analysts have privately argued that a Pakistan-dominated Pashtunistan embedded in a broader Asian confederation would counter the various threats Pakistan is concerned about, including the TTP, ultra-conservatism, and secession.

The views of these analysts embody the Pakistani military and government's worst fears: the undermining of Islam as Pakistan's glue by ethnic cleavages. It is a fear that was first expressed by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the country's founder, who warned against the "poison of provincialism." The fear has been reinforced by the secession of predominantly

a 20 percent decline over the past four years in the allocation of grants to Afghanistan by the donor community. Donors seem to be more interested in providing year-wise grants, rather than making any long-term commitments. In the context of all this, the current weak economy of Afghanistan may become even more vulnerable.

Because of all these sanctions and restrictions, it is the Afghan people who would be the hardest hit. Sanctions always negatively impact the poorest segment of a population. Afghanistan will not be an exception to this. There may also be inflations in the economy, and food shortages may emerge. The possibility of a famine cannot be brushed off.

Till the end of June this year, the Afghan central bank has had in its vault assets worth USD 10 billion, of which USD 366 million were in foreign exchange reserves, which is not much. This amount will not go far in meeting the import demands of Afghanistan. The income of the Taliban from different sources is estimated to be in the range of USD 300 to USD 1,600 million. It is not clear whether it will spend this money on the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

In the meantime, two other things may happen. First, because of the imposition of Western economic sanctions, the Taliban may encourage the production and export of more opium. Such an initiative may resonate well with Afghan farmers. Second, with the withdrawal of the SDR funding from the IMF, the Covid-19 situation may worsen in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, the economic situation in Afghanistan under Taliban rule is expected to be more vulnerable. The incidence and depth of poverty may enhance, the woes of the common people are likely to increase and infrastructure development is expected to be hampered. And the rights and lives of Afghan women are already taking a turn for the worse. Overall, the economic scenario of Afghanistan under Taliban rule does not look promising at all.

Selim Jahan is former Director, Human Development Report Office and Poverty Division, UNDP.

Bengali East Pakistan to form Bangladesh in 1971.

"The time is now ripe for America and its allies to marginalise the remnants of radical Islamdom in South-Central Asia as a first step in generating a mega-confederation of free peoples extending from Pashtunistan in the West all the way to and including Indonesia in the East," said a former Western government official-turned-scholar.

"The key step for Pakistan in countering the extremism of radical Muslims trained by the Saudi Wahhabis is simply to absorb the western half of Pashtunistan, which includes the southern two-thirds of Afghanistan, and the eastern half which makes up most of the western third of Pakistan, into a new Province of Pashtunistan in a greater Pakistan confederation as a model for the world and especially for the looser confederation extending across India to Indonesia," the scholar said.

Pakistan last year cracked down on the Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement (PTM), a non-violent protest movement demanding rights for Pashtuns in Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas. It is completing a physical barrier to any changes along the Durand Line that separates it from Afghanistan, the country's longest border, with the construction of a USD 500 million, 2,600-kilometre-long wall.

The wall, conceived to keep militants and potential refugees on the Afghan side of the border, is being bolstered by state-of-the-art surveillance technology and multiple fortresses. Pakistan has closed 75 of its 78 border crossings in the wake of the Taliban takeover. Much of the border is mountainous, and in the words of a former Pakistani military officer, "good territory for guerrillas to operate and hide in."

The notion of Pashtunistan or a confederation that includes arch-rivals Pakistan and India, as well as countries as diverse as Indonesia, may be far-fetched to say the least, but is certain to ring bells in Islamabad. Those bells may already be ringing after Taliban official Sher Mohammed Abbas Stanekzai declared, in a rare statement on foreign policy, that "we give due importance to our political, economic and trade ties with India and we want these ties to continue. We are looking forward to working with India in this regard."

Said scholar and author Pervez Hoodbhoy: "Like it or not, Af-Pak has become reality. Despised in Pakistan because of its American origin, this term rings true. Geographical proximity is now augmented by the ideological proximity of rulers in both countries. Taliban-style thinking is bound to spread through the length and breadth of Pakistan."

Af-Pak was a term used by the US government to signal that Afghanistan and Pakistan constituted a single theatre of operations in the war on terror.

Dr James M Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and scholar and a senior fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute.