

Afghanistan Security Future and Impact on Central Asia

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Key Points

- US-led coalition withdrawal from Afghanistan enables strengthening of the Taliban.
- Central Asian countries see Afghanistan as a route for diversifying their economies.
- Security future of Central Asia relies on the situation in Afghanistan.

Introduction

The land that is now Afghanistan has a long history of domination by foreign conquerors and strife among internal warring factions. At the gateway between Asia and Europe, this land was conquered by Darius I of Babylonia circa 500 B.C., and Alexander the Great of Macedonia in 329 B.C., among others.¹ For most of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century the British Empire and the Russian Empire started what was called “The Great Game.” The Great Game is a term used for the strategic rivalry and conflict for supremacy in Central and South Asia, particularly over Afghanistan.

In the 20th century, the interests of the Great Powers over the control of Afghanistan significantly increased as the disagreements between the USSR and the US intensified during the Cold War. Recent instability is the outcome of the Soviet invasion and the US led coalition’s invasion after 9/11 attacks. In this regard, the security situation in Afghanistan is a by-product of the invading forces and the quest for power and fortune by local players. The next chapter in Afghanistan’s history is the US forces’ withdrawal from the country. The withdrawal will lead the two main parties, the Taliban and the US-backed Afghan government, into conflict.

Main Actors of the Conflict

Despite the decline of the US military presence in Afghanistan, the US continues to play a key role in the country. The US remains committed to Afghanistan’s political stability, democratic governance, and productive bilateral

¹ News Desk, “A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan,” *PBS News Hour*, Dec 31, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june-11-timeline-afghanistan> (accessed Apr 30, 2021).

and multilateral relations. The US fully supports efforts to reform Afghanistan's electoral institutions, strengthen its justice sector, and promote public accountability and transparency.

Part of the United States' development assistance focuses on promoting peace, self-reliance, and stability. This includes programs to increase economic growth via an export-oriented trade strategy; enhancing the capacity of civilian institutions, improving the performance of the justice system, and helping the government maintain and improve upon the gains made over the last decade in health, education, and women's rights. The United States also provides support for Afghan civil society, promotes increased respect for human rights, helps to fight the illegal trade in narcotics, and continues to provide significant humanitarian support.²

With a US troop withdrawal set for September and a national peace deal nowhere in sight, the Taliban are claiming victory in its long war to retake power in Kabul. Taliban leader Haji Hekmat said that "we have won the war and America has lost... We want an Islamic government ruled by the sharia."³ Based on the leader's statement, the Taliban's near future goal is to change Afghanistan's political system from democratic to Islamic. Therefore, the Taliban no longer view themselves as a mere rebel outfit, but as the ruling elite of the country.

On the other hand, the Taliban may be reluctant to take over as a pariah government, which could result in a loss of international support and financial aid for the country.⁴ This means that the 20-year presence of the coalition forces in Afghanistan influenced the Taliban and its views on integration into the world community. In this regard, the author expects the Taliban will take the following steps: *First*, formulation of an inclusive government through negotiations with Ghani's government, in which the Taliban's position will be strengthened as the coalition forces withdraw. *Second*, creating stability in the region to stimulate trade with regional partners through trade capacity development. *Third*, the control of Afghanistan by the Taliban implies the absence of opponents in the form of various terrorist organizations (Al-Qaeda, ISIS, etc.) and denial of safe haven to VEOs. *Fourth*, adherence to human rights as per local traditions.

Impact on Central Asian States

The withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan positions bordering countries (Pakistan, Iran and three Central Asian states: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) and regional powers (China, Russia, and India) will have a greater role in Afghan security issues. Each of them has their own interests in Afghanistan, but common strategic aims.

1) Creating and supporting stability in terms of security environment and political situation in Afghanistan.

For a longtime, the country was a safe haven to different radical and terroristic organizations.

² Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, "US Relations With Afghanistan," US Dept of State, Jan 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-afghanistan/> (accessed Apr 30, 2021).

³ Salman Rafi Sheikh, "Cause to fear a Taliban victory in Afghanistan," *Asia Times*, Apr 26, 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/cause-to-fear-a-taliban-victory-in-afghanistan/> (accessed Apr 30, 2021).

⁴ Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, "Biden Will withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021," *The Washington Post*, Apr 13, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan/2021/04/13/918c3cae-9beb-11eb8a83-3bc1fa69c2e8_story.html (accessed Apr 30, 2021).

1.1 Defeated in Central Asia **the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan** (its original objective was creation of an Islamic state under Sharia in Uzbekistan) moved to Afghanistan where it still has a potential to destabilize Central Asian states.

1.2 **The East Turkestan Islamic Movement** (a Uyghur separatist organization based in Afghanistan with the goal of creating an independent Islamist state in Xinjiang province in northwest China), poses a threat to Beijing amid growing reports of alleged "genocide" against the Uyghur minority in the PRC.

1.3 Despite the successful offensive operations against the **IS-Khorasan** group in Afghanistan by the American and Afghan military in 2020, the group is recovering and, as a result, its activity in the country and in Central Asia has intensified. According to U.S. Central Command's Gen. McKenzie, the "new leadership [of ISKhorasan] allowed it to stabilize and increase localized and lone wolf attacks throughout the second half of the year [2020]."⁵ The recent U.N. report concluded IS-Khorasan has been responsible for the deaths of some 600 civilians and about 2,500 Afghan security forces over the past 12 months. Some analysts caution there could be more to come, warning it would be a mistake to write-off IS-Khorasan despite the real and significant setbacks over the past year or so.⁶

2) Improving and strengthening Afghanistan's economy.

In the long term, there is an opportunity to link Central and South Asia via transport and energy corridors through Afghanistan. Once completed, these projects would transform Eurasian security, significantly increase regional economic activity, and potentially bring peace at last to Afghanistan.

2.1 On February 2, 2021 a joint action plan for the construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway, the so called "Kabul Corridor" was adopted, was a result of high-level talks between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷ The railway could transport up to 20 million tons of cargo per year; it is estimated that it will reduce goods transportation times from Central Asia to Pakistan from 30 to 15 days and cut transportation costs by 30-35%.⁸

2.2 The TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) gas pipeline is another mega-project under construction connecting Central and South Asia. The 1,814-kilometer pipeline will run from the Galkynysh gas field in Turkmenistan to the Indian city of Fazilka via Herat and Kandahar in Afghanistan and the Pakistani cities of Quetta and Multan. It will have a capacity of 33 billion cubic meters of gas per year and cost an estimated \$8-10 billion. Although security concerns have long cast doubt on the TAPI pipeline's viability, completion is now scheduled for December 2023. Crucially, a high-ranking Taliban delegation visited Turkmenistan on February 6, promising to support the project.

2.3 CASA-1000, a new high-voltage electricity transmission system connecting two Central Asian countries (Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, which have abundant clean hydropower resources) with two South Asian countries (Afghanistan and Pakistan, which have substantial and growing

⁵ Jeff Seldin, "Islamic State Poised for Possible Resurgence in Afghanistan, US Officials Warn," *VOA*, Feb 09, 2021

<https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/islamic-state-poised-possible-resurgence-afghanistan-us-officials-warn> (accessed Apr 30, 2021).

⁶ Ibid

⁷ *KUN*, "O'zbekiston, Afg'oniston va Pokiston temir yo'l qurilishi bo'yicha «Yo'l xaritasi»ni imzoladi" [Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan have signed Railway "Road Map,"] Feb 9, 2021, <https://kun.uz/news/2021/02/09/ozbekiston-afgoniston-va-pokiston-temir-yol-qurilishiboyicha-yol-xaritasini-imzoladi> (accessed Apr 30, 2021).

⁸ Djoomart Otorbaev, "Central Asia's Afghan Route to Prosperity," *Project Syndicate*, Apr 13, 2021,

<https://www.projectsyndicate.org/commentary/central-asia-afghanistan-transport-energy-opportunity-by-djoomart-otorbaev-2021-04> (accessed Apr 30, 2021).

electricity demand) facilitating trade of electricity. The CASA-1000 construction project required funding of \$1.2 billion; the period of construction is planned to be from January 2020 until June 2024.

Conclusion

While Russia, China, and Iran all seem to believe that the benefits of a Taliban takeover still outweigh the risks of a sustained US military presence, the Taliban's return poses its own risks that could ultimately be more hostile to their interests than the US-forged status quo.⁹ On the other hand, for the last 20 years the Taliban's ideology changed significantly. Leaders of the movement now want international recognition, rather than be seen as an isolated rebel organization. Moreover, connectivity to Central and South Asia is the only way for the Taliban to improve Afghanistan's business climate, to include strengthening Afghanistan's commercial framework to attract foreign trade and investment.

Recommendations for US / USCENTCOM

- On the military level, continue promoting mil-to-mil relations between Central Asia and Afghanistan using CHOD conferences, regional exercises (Steppe Eagle) and high delegation visits.
- Focus on promoting peace, self-reliance, and stability in Afghanistan through programs to increase economic growth via an export-oriented trade strategy with neighboring countries.
- Continue to make efforts toward the connectivity of Afghanistan with Central Asian countries.

⁹ Salman Rafi Sheikh, "Cause to fear a Taliban victory in Afghanistan," *Asia Times*, Apr 26, 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/cause-to-fear-a-taliban-victory-in-afghanistan/> (accessed Apr 30, 2021).