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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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03.09.2021

United States, NATO, and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: Analysis of the Politics

Earlier, in July 2021, President Biden had decided to withdraw US forces by 31 August, declared that “the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely”.

Much to the surprise of everyone, on August 15, 2021 Afghanistan’s Ghani government had collapsed, and the Taliban took over control of Kabul. The fall of Kabul to the Taliban was expected, albeit much later. David Smith, in his article “‘Biden’s worst nightmare’: how Afghanistan shook a president”, The Guardian, August 28, 2021, said that:

The unforeseen catastrophe has diminished his standing at home and America’s stature abroad. America’s allies, who assumed that the defeat of Donald Trump would at least Make America Competent Again, felt blindsided. The US struck an uneasy truce with the Taliban and undertook what may prove the biggest airlift in history.

The US and NATO had been evacuating their citizens and Afghans that had worked for them from the country since July. However, by the third week of August 2021, the Afghanistan evacuation operation had speeded up. As of August 24, 2021, the US and NATO, have evacuated nearly 59,000 people out of Kabul. Meanwhile, President Joe Biden is facing strong criticism at home and abroad for the chaos surrounding the troop withdrawal that led to the Taliban’s sudden advance to Kabul. Meanwhile, there were reports of ISIS in Khorasan, known as ISIS-K, threats to Kabul airport. By August 25, 2021, U.S. intelligence agencies were near-certain that an attack was imminent outside Kabul airport, triggering a warning to American citizens to leave the area immediately.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration had remained in constant contact with the Taliban regime on security matters. The CIA director, Bill Burns has met with Taliban leader

Abdul Ghani Baradar. Burns is the highest-ranking US official to meet in person with the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The Taliban had made clear that August 31 remained. Meanwhile, President Biden had decided to stick to the August 31 deadline for withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. However, he had also asked for Plan B in case it is needed. It was said that the extension if it happened, would be very brief and focused only on evacuating Americans. Like the US, the G7 powers had agreed to engage with the Taliban as they also seek safe passage for those who want to leave the country. Earlier, US allies had warned they will not be able to complete the whole evacuation operation before the August 31 deadline. What they meant was that all Afghans couldn't be evacuated. As expected, the evacuation of NATO citizens and permanent residents (Green Card holders) was the highest priority. The US and NATO were challenged to meet their commitment to Afghans desperately wanting to leave the country. Many had predicted that not all will be able to do so by the August 31 deadline.

In a horrific terrorist attack at the Kabul airport on August 26, 2021 some 3 US soldiers and at least 170 others were killed. The ISIS-K had claimed the suicide attack and Biden administration agrees that it is likely. The attack was one of the deadliest in the nearly two decades since the U.S.-led invasion.

American officials believe that another terror attack in Kabul is likely. As expected, On August 26, 2021, President Joe Biden had vowed to retaliate for the terrorist attack.

On August 27, 2021. the US military carried out a drone strike against a ISIS-K planner in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province. There are now warnings of possible further terror attacks targeting the ongoing last phase US evacuation effort from Kabul.

The US Embassy in Kabul on August 27, 2021 had again warned US citizens to leave the Kabul airport immediately citing security threats. Despite the attacks and as expected, the US military resumed evacuation flights, and by August 27, 2021 some 12,500 people had been evacuated from Afghanistan in the previous 24 hours. As of August 28, 2021, the desperate mission to airlift US citizens and Afghans from Afghanistan by the August 31, 2021 deadline, is now in its final phase. The US and other Western countries have been racing to evacuate their citizens and Afghan allies ahead of the deadline.

The US is still planning on ending the mission before the August 31 deadline. The US allies also are now concluding their evacuations. Britain plans to end its evacuation on August 28, 2021. Hundreds of people who were eligible to be brought to the UK will be left behind. Earlier, France had announced the end of its evacuation effort August 27, 2021 but vowed to "stand by the Afghan people" after August 31. The country had evacuated

nearly 3,000 people since August 15, 2021. An extra 1,500 Afghans who had worked for France were evacuated before August 15. Italy's Defense Ministry also said August 27, 2021 that it had concluded its military evacuations of Afghan nationals out of Kabul. Since June, 5,011 people has been evacuated in total, of whom 4,980 were Afghan citizens. Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey, and Spain have all said their evacuation missions ended on August 27, 2021.

By August 28, 2021 about 111,000 people had been evacuated. Given the new situation, the deadline shall now be definitely met because of the real threat of ISIL-K terror attacks at the Kabul airport. As of August 28, 2021, the hectic evacuation continues to meet the deadline of August 31. However, the whole operation remains under constant threat of further attacks. It is widely agreed that some US citizens and many thousands of Afghans will remain in Afghanistan after the deadline expires. The luck of these people shall remain acutely unclear and can be a blemish on the legacy of President Biden.^[12]

David Smith, "'Biden's worst nightmare': how Afghanistan shook a president", The Guardian, August 28, 2021, argues that:

The debacle has drawn the harshest rebukes of his seven-month presidency, with some Republicans demanding his impeachment or resignation. Trump called the retreat from Afghanistan "the single greatest humiliation in our history". Congresswoman Elise Stefanik insisted that Biden had "blood on his hands"...Other western nations rapidly wound down evacuation efforts after the bombing. For allies there is bitter disappointment: Biden had been seen as a steady hand who could restore US leadership on the world stage. Scathing comments expressed at a recent session of the British parliament made clear how faith in American hegemony has been shaken. Some observers have been puzzled that Biden's much-vaunted empathy, displayed for American troops, has been less copious for Afghan women and girls now at the mercy of the Taliban, and that a man steeped in foreign policy has unapologetically interests. Biden's popularity has taken a hit, dipping below 50% for the first time in opinion polls.... It is far from certain that he will suffer long-term damage for ending a war that had become profoundly unpopular.

To be fair, despite a botched exit strategy, President Biden is only acting in the larger national interests of the US.

Meanwhile, the politics of the exit strategy has become complex, to say the least.

The other issue of recognition is critical to the future of Afghanistan. So far, no governments have recognized the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan.

Doing so could allow the country access to previously committed foreign aid. Non-G7 powers like China and Russia have also been in contact with the Taliban.

As expected, a de facto recognition of the Afghanistan Emirate by the US has already happened. The de jure recognition is problematic, however. President Biden has said he wants to see tough conditions applied to the Taliban regime, especially in how they treat women, before recognizing the Islamic Emirate as legitimate. It would be advisable to have a minimalist approach to recognition not a maximalist one. Remember, Western notions of human rights are not universal and there are many who have different understandings of how best to organize societies. More importantly, the US is no more the global hegemon and there is nothing exceptional about it. The world has changed, and the US has lost its standing in the world. The US has declined relatively to other powers like China. Therefore, pressure on the

Taliban can backfire as they will go on a defiance mode. The Taliban will be supported by China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Qatar. It is in no one's interest to have a disintegration of Afghanistan and another era of civil strife and regional conflict. The US and NATO must not act ideologically but pragmatically now. Given the condition of their victory and their cultural background, the Taliban cannot give all assurances desired by the US and NATO as regards upholding human rights in the country. They will compromise somewhat but will largely stick to their Islamic legacy, no matter what the US and NATO desires. If recognition is withheld, the Emirate will collapse because of economic breakdown and humanitarian crisis. The breakdown of the Emirate will have a spillover effect on the region and will create the space for the rise of future terror threats. For this reason, it is advisable that the Emirate be recognized by the world and immediate humanitarian assistance be forthcoming. A complete collapse of the Emirate is in no one's national interest. Pragmatism requires that the Taliban be accommodate somewhat and be given a chance to establish their Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. Much depends on the Biden administration to chart a new foreign policy and a global reset of American power. The key to securing Afghanistan is for the Biden administration to mend relations with Pakistan with which it has a very strained relationship at present. Given the support that Pakistan gave the Taliban in the past twenty years, the trust deficit between the US and Pakistan is remarkably high. However, the two countries are most likely to cooperate at a certain level to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Perceptions matter in the conduct of international relations. The US and NATO have been humiliated in Afghanistan. Today, most Pakistanis are very upbeat about Afghanistan, It is

widely perceived that Pakistan has gained the most from developments in the neighboring country. Also, India, its arch enemy, has lost considerably because it put all its eggs in President Ghani's basket and lost when he fled the country, and the Taliban took over Afghanistan.

The ISIL-K threat in Afghanistan has made the US much more reliant on Pakistan than ever before. The US is seeking to mend its relationship with Pakistan which was extremely strained in the recent past. As expected, Pakistan is cooperating with the US at a certain level. Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa reiterated on August 27, 2021 that Pakistan had no favorites in Afghanistan. He said this to US chargé d'affaires Angela Ageler. The two discussed the evolving situation in Afghanistan during the meeting. The US diplomat praised Pakistan's efforts in promoting regional peace and stability and thanked the army chief for the special assistance in the evacuation operations from Kabul.

Graham, the influential Republican senator, said on August 28, 2021 that any "sustainable solution" in Afghanistan must include Pakistan.

Acknowledging that the region is "very complicated", and these are "dangerous times", emphasized that Pakistan is a "nuclear-armed nation", and that it has its own version of the Taliban who wish to "topple the Pakistani government and military".

The lawmaker further appreciated the efforts of the Pakistani government in assisting with the evacuation of US citizens, allies, and other nations from Kabul after the Taliban takeover.

Earlier, in June, Graham had expressed his surprise at President Biden's decision of not including Pakistan in the strategy for withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, warning that ignoring Islamabad could be disastrous.

In a meeting earlier this year between Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and the US lawmaker, Qureshi said that Pakistan wanted to forge closer economic and trade linkages with the US. Qureshi had said Pakistan would continue to support efforts for achieving an inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan that would lead to a comprehensive ceasefire.

He stressed that peace in Afghanistan was ultimately the shared responsibility of all Afghan parties as well as key international stakeholders. Senator Graham had appreciated Pakistan's support for deepening the peace process in Afghanistan, while underscoring the importance of economic engagement between the US and Pakistan that would also contribute to regional peace and stability.^[17]

It can be safely predicted that Pakistan's relations with the US will improve in the foreseeable future. There is a convergence of national interest in making sure that Afghanistan remains peaceful, secure, and stable. Therefore, both countries will cooperate to ensure that it happens.

President Biden is right in staying the course in Afghanistan. Despite the horrific attack and loss of American lives, the US and Taliban are somehow allying now. The US doesn't blame the Taliban for the Kabul airport attack. They will cooperate further given the certainty of future ISIL-K attacks. The Taliban have met their part of the Doha February 2020 peace deal and are certain to do so until the deadline of August 31. This much can be guaranteed. It is also very likely that the US will not use massive military force against the ISIL-K terrorists in the next few days as it doesn't want to sabotage the new working relationship with the Taliban rulers. In the future, limited kinetic operations by the US against ISIL-K will occur with the tacit approval of the Taliban. The total number of ISIL-K fighters is estimated to be only a few hundred. However, future suicide attack threats are very real and are very worrisome as they can't be prevented as such. Therefore, the Taliban need help to bolster their internal security. Most likely, Pakistan will assist the Taliban in this important quest. Most importantly, the Jihadist mindset of the ISIL-K cannot be easily ended. Given the powerful Jihadist legacy and radical Islamic ideology, this shall remain a big challenge for not only Afghanistan but also neighboring Muslim countries, especially Pakistan. According to this thinking, the crusade of Islam against Western oppression and Kufr (Unbelievers) is a fundamental postulate of the Jihadists and is a permanent battle of good versus evil.

This is the common thread of Islamic fundamentalist movements. The adherents of the radical ideology believe that only a Jihad can end the rule of Kufr and thereby establish Islamic rule. The Taliban are no angels but are considerably moderate now, as compared to the ISIL-K entity. Most troubling to the region's governments is that the adherents of the very extreme ideology of the ISIL-K believe in bringing down the governments of neighboring states to establish their version of the Islamic caliphate. A jihad against foreign lackeys is also another fundamental postulate of this thinking. More importantly, the Jihad stretches beyond West Asia into China and Russia proper. Remember, the Taliban were never a global jihadist entity, not even a regional one. They were and are limited to Afghanistan only. They shall remain an Afghanistan phenomenon in the future too. The local nature of the Taliban forbids them to wage all out military action against the likes of the Tehrik-I Taliban Pakistan, al Qaeda and even the ISIL-K. the tradition of war

in Afghanistan is first to neutralize the enemy through a negotiated settlement. Throughout history enemies have settled disputes through such negotiated settlements. Fighters have even frequently switched sides in such negotiations. Therefore, to expect that the new Taliban government will at once take up arms against such entities is a mistake. Give the Taliban a chance to sort out their problems in their own peculiar way. Prudence requires that massive force not be used by the US against the ISIL-K because of the possibility of the loss of innocent civilian lives, often termed as collateral damage. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans have lost their lives in the last half-century or so of permanent war. The proper manner of tackling the ISIL-K threat would be to adopt the regional approach. The US and NATO must initiate a working relationship with Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, China and Russia to have a comprehensive security arrangement for Afghanistan. Humanitarian assistance must be immediately forthcoming. Already, Germany has announced humanitarian aid to the beleaguered and hapless citizens of Afghanistan. More aid must be forthcoming and soon enough as the country struggles to open a new chapter in its tragic history.

Meanwhile, President Biden must stay the course and completely pull out American military forces by the August 31 deadline. The opponents of President Biden, especially in the Republican party, are waging a relentless attack against him now. This is unwarranted and is only the usual politics in a divided America. Such is the nature of the American political system that partisan politics is a permanent affair, largely because of the continuous cycle of elections. This is expected and can be ignored. However, a bipartisan commission must be formed like the 9/11 commission to ascertain the mistakes of the twenty-year Afghan war. Arguably, the whole Afghan war project was a colossal mistake on the part of the American leadership. The more significant thing is to focus on the August 31 deadline now. It bears repetition that President Biden was right in withdrawing the American military force and in partnering with the Taliban to make the exit possible. Given the nature of the suicide attacks, the attack at the airport was a tragedy which could hardly be prevented. It is an immense tragedy. Hopefully, the exit will now be completed without further loss. Overall, President Biden is proving to be a capable leader. Later, a rethink of America's West Asia policy must happen. It is time to recognize the Islamic Republic of Iran and return to the JCPOA – the Iranian nuclear deal. Also, the recognition of the Islamic emirate must happen sooner, than later. Only such actions can bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. The hapless people of Afghanistan deserve better, mind you

CounterPunch 02.09.2021