



Fateh Sami

10/02/2025

Pakistan's Strategic Dilemma: Choosing Between the Asian and American Axis in the Context of Afghanistan

Introduction

The situation in Afghanistan remains a highly complex and fluid geopolitical issue, deeply intertwined with global power struggles and regional dynamics. The country's role in the strategic games of both Western and Eastern powers, particularly the United States, Pakistan, and neighboring Asian countries, has made it a focal point of international tension. Since the Soviet era, Afghanistan has been used as a pawn in the broader competition between global and regional actors, and its recent developments under Taliban rule signal the continuation of this intricate, high-stakes struggle. Understanding Afghanistan's present challenges requires not only examining its internal politics but also considering the influence of external powers and their competing interests in the region.

These dynamics have evolved both overtly and covertly since the collapse of the regime backed by the Soviet Union, led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Throughout the Cold War era, the United States extended substantial political, economic, and security support to Mujahideen factions, primarily channelled through Pakistan. Following the fall of the corrupt and puppet government headed by Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, the U.S. further reinforced the Taliban, providing funding, arms, and strategic backing. The U.S. also cultivated numerous terrorist organizations, aiming to destabilize regions and create hotbeds of tension, particularly targeting its Asian rivals—Russia, Iran, and China. The broader strategic objective was to generate instability and undermine these rival powers.

The Taliban's return to power, formalized through the Doha Peace Agreement, is seen as part of a continuation of this broader strategic and intelligence program. In this sense, the resurgence of the Taliban represents not an unforeseen development, but rather an extension of long-standing U.S. foreign policy initiatives in the region.

The reemergence of the Taliban, particularly in the political centres of Kabul and Kandahar, is characterized by a power struggle under the leadership of figures like Sirajuddin Haqqani and the elusive Mullah Hibatullah. While the Kandahar faction of the Taliban draws its support from various branches of the Durrani Pashtuns, the Kabul faction, led by Haqqani, has established a significant foothold in the country's power structures. At the heart of the Kandahar Taliban's leadership is Mullah Hibatullah, whose physical existence remains shrouded in mystery following an alleged explosion in Pakistan in 2016. Despite his absence, intelligence networks—particularly from Pakistan—continue to issue directives under his name, compelling the Taliban to adhere to these orders. This is reminiscent of the earlier practice under Mullah Omar, who also remained physically absent but was still invoked posthumously to provide legitimacy to the group's commands.

Intelligence agencies often create narratives to shape public opinion and advance their strategic goals. Since the onset of the Cold War, the actions of major powers, particularly the United States, have been geared towards supporting Mujahideen groups to counter the Moscow-backed regime. The formation and rise of the Taliban, along with the establishment of numerous affiliated terrorist organizations, was part of a broader strategy to “create a hotbed of tension” aimed at destabilizing Asia. This included providing consistent political, security, economic, and military support to the Taliban regime.

Recent reports suggest that unforeseen developments are imminent in Afghanistan. Notably, the disobedience of senior Taliban officials, particularly those connected to the Haqqani faction, in relation to their unseen leader is manifesting in military activities in northern and northeastern Afghanistan. These movements indicate the possibility of an internal coup within the Taliban, with potential support for the Haqqani faction in Kandahar. Many Taliban officials, along with their families, are reportedly being relocated outside Afghanistan, while regional foreign ministers, particularly from neighbouring countries, are visiting Afghanistan. These visits seem to deliver specific messages to the Taliban, particularly through the Iranian Foreign Minister. The growing concerns expressed by Russia and China about Afghanistan's deteriorating security

situation further suggest that significant developments are unfolding behind the scenes.

President Trump has attempted to portray his administration as laying the groundwork for absolute control over the Taliban. In his speeches, he alludes to facilitating the movement of terrorist forces across regions, particularly through Pakistan and Syria, positioning them for future operations in Afghanistan's north and northeast. The rapid formation of the ISIS project within this context underscores the ongoing volatility. Additionally, the cessation of U.S. financial support to the Taliban, which has led to further instability, signals that Afghanistan remains entrenched in complex security and intelligence dynamics with far-reaching implications.

The situation in Afghanistan continues to serve as a tool for geopolitical pressure, particularly targeting rivals such as China, Russia, and Iran. However, its effectiveness in achieving these goals remains uncertain. The U.S. continues its efforts to alter the nature of the Taliban regime, which has been undermined by its own peace strategies. As the international landscape shifts, the global order is descending into an unprecedented state of flux. This period of transition marks a critical moment in the restructuring of global security, politics, and power, with changes expected across national, regional, and international systems.

Afghanistan on the Brink of Civil War: A Strategic Hotspot in Global Rivalries

Afghanistan stands on the precipice of a civil war, a conflict that could exacerbate regional crises and bring profound suffering to its people. In the current geopolitical landscape, the Taliban remains the most prominent proxy force, benefiting from an increased opportunity for survival amid the ongoing transition and power struggle. However, the shifting dynamics of international power and the conflicting interests of the various state actors influencing Afghanistan's situation may necessitate significant changes in such proxy forces, including the Taliban.

Recent developments complicate the analysis of Afghanistan's future trajectory. The cessation of U.S. aid under Taliban rule, coupled with growing pressure on the group, including an arrest warrant for the elusive Mullah Hibatullah, has intensified the already precarious situation. Additionally, the geopolitical stances of Pakistan and regional dynamics, combined with the heightened competition between regional and transregional powers, make it difficult to accurately predict the unfolding events.

For instance, reports suggest that several Taliban families, initially relocated to the Panjshir and Andarab areas, have been moved to the southern provinces. This shift has been accompanied by the redeployment of military forces previously stationed in the north for operations in Panjshir and Andarab, now redirected to the south. These manoeuvres could indicate that significant developments are imminent, potentially forcing the Taliban to take these steps in response to internal or external pressures. Furthermore, discontent within the ranks of the Taliban, particularly a group of dissenting mullahs criticizing the centralization of power in Kandahar, has garnered media attention, signalling possible internal fractures. These developments raise the question: are such movements likely to occur spontaneously, or are they indicative of larger, more orchestrated shifts in Afghanistan's political and security landscape?

President Trump's Ambiguous Stance on the Taliban: Implications for U.S. Strategy and Asian Rivalry

Pakistan's actions are largely shaped by its historical alliances with the United Kingdom and the United States, yet it now faces increasing pressure to align with the Asian axis.

President Donald Trump's position on the Taliban has been marked by a certain vagueness and contradiction, especially in the broader context of U.S. strategy in Asia. While his administration was instrumental in facilitating the Doha Peace Agreement, which led to the Taliban's return to power, his rhetoric surrounding the group has often been inconsistent. Trump's policies appeared to prioritize withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan, in part to focus on countering the rising influence of Asian powers like China and Russia. However, his administration's approach towards the Taliban was seen as pragmatic, engaging in negotiations with a group that had previously been deemed a terrorist organization, suggesting a willingness to adapt to changing strategic needs. This apparent endorsement of the Taliban, combined with the broader U.S. push to counterbalance Chinese and Russian influence in the region, added a layer of ambiguity to America's foreign policy. Trump's strategy seemed to use the Taliban as a tool for maintaining regional instability, likely aiming to undermine the geopolitical ambitions of his Asian rivals, but his rhetoric never fully clarified whether he intended for the Taliban to play a lasting or destabilizing role in Afghanistan's future.

It must decide whether to embrace one of two paths: either prioritize regional stability and work towards ending the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan, or continue engaging in geopolitical competition with external powers. Evidence

suggests that the rising security threats within Pakistan are a direct consequence of the regional pressure, which has restricted Pakistan's ability to play a more influential role in the broader geopolitical landscape. However, as the global stance towards Afghanistan under Taliban rule shifts, Pakistan's role in these developments is expected to become more pronounced.

The U.S. effort to regain control of Afghanistan, particularly to better counter its Asian rivals, has been accompanied by the involvement of India, Arab nations, and Turkey. This coalition has heightened Pakistan's engagement in the situation, signalling the start of a new chapter in the ongoing East-West competition. Furthermore, the intensification of intelligence operations involving the Taliban, the Arab states, and the U.S. has created a complex network of interactions. The frequent travels of Taliban leaders, such as Sirajuddin Haqqani, under the guidance of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), along with diplomatic missions like Mr. Wasiq's visits to Arab countries, suggest that a more coordinated strategy is at play.

The formation of a Taliban leadership circle, which includes figures like Mullah Baradar, Mullah Yaqoob, Sirajuddin Haqqani, and Khairullah Khairkha, is not coincidental. Behind these movements lies an attempt to reshape the Taliban's leadership and maintain an ongoing cycle of violence, presenting a precarious future for Afghanistan. Moreover, efforts to drive a wedge between Taliban factions to create a security crisis that could evolve into a regional black hole are part of this larger geopolitical manoeuvre. This plan is intricately tied to the broader competition between regional powers and transregional actors, particularly in the context of securing access to Central Asia's vital resources.

If this strategy, led by the U.S. and its Western allies, fails, the resulting consequences could be catastrophic. A failure to execute this plan would likely usher in a more violent and ruthless alternative led by the Taliban, and the country could spiral into an even more devastating civil war. As previously noted, such a conflict would lead to widespread bloodshed, further destabilizing the region and exacerbating the suffering of the people of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the situation in Afghanistan is not merely a domestic crisis, but a focal point for the larger power struggle between East and West. The U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power under the Doha Peace Agreement reflect the continuation of strategic maneuvers that have been in play for decades. Pakistan, along with other regional players, will increasingly find itself caught between competing axes, with Afghanistan serving as the battleground for a

broader geopolitical contest. Meanwhile, the future remains uncertain, as external powers continue to exploit the country's instability for their own strategic advantage. The role of the Afghan people in shaping their future remains a complex and unresolved question, as they face the consequences of a world in transition and a security landscape that is ever more fragmented and uncertain.

Bibliography

Coll, S., 2004. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. Penguin Press.

Cohen, S.P., 2004. *The Pakistan Army*. Oxford University Press.

Gerges, F.A., 2021. *The Taliban's War on Terrorism: The Afghan Crisis and the Global Struggle Against Radical Islam*. Oxford University Press.

Hussain, Z., 2021. *The Taliban's Return: The Impact on Pakistan and the Region*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Johnson, T.H. & Mason, M.C., 2008. *No Sign Until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier*. RAND Corporation.

Katzman, K., 2021. *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*. Congressional Research Service.

Klein, N., 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Picador.

Rubin, B.R., 2013. *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way*. Oxford University Press.

Sanger, D.E., 2009. *The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power*. Doubleday.

Wilkinson, M., 2018. *The Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Peter Lang.

Zardad, S.A., 2020. *The Taliban and the War on Terror: Strategic Geopolitics and the Role of External Powers*. *Journal of International Politics*.