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Taliban's Afghanistan: Strategic Gain for Pakistan?

By Dr Anne-Marie Schleich

SYNOPSIS

The regime takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban has strong implications for Pakistan. As an immediate neighbour, Pakistan faces various new challenges such as the influx of Afghan refugees, while the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has also come under threat. But Pakistan is not without leverage with the Taliban.

COMMENTARY

IT IS too early to judge whether the recent developments in Afghanistan will be a game changer for Pakistan. It is a close neighbour with deep interests not only in the country next door but also the wider sub-continental region. At first sight, Pakistan seems to have consolidated its strategic gains with the regime change in Afghanistan. India, Pakistan's geopolitical rival which has been supporting the Ashraf Ghani government prior to its fall, seems to be at the losing end.

Pakistan has had longstanding close links with the Taliban. Prime Minister Imran Khan's first comments after the fall of the Ashraf Ghani regime in August were triumphant as relations between the ousted Kabul government and Pakistan had been strained.

Regional Diplomacy

Pakistan has always been suspected of providing supplies and logistics to the Taliban while the old Ashraf Ghani regime, in turn, had been accused of supporting the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban. Islamabad has alleged that India was supporting the TTP in order to destabilise Pakistan.

PM Khan has since toned down his language, underlined the importance of an

inclusive Afghan government and lobbied for “support of Afghan people to address their humanitarian needs and help to sustain its economy”. At the same time, PM Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi have liaised with regional partners in Central Asia and with Iran.

A pro-Pakistan Afghan government might help facilitate Pakistan’s trade with Central Asia. PM Khan and Russian President Vladimir Putin recently agreed to cooperate more closely as co-members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) for which China is a prime mover. The SCO also has the participation of India and the Central Asian countries.

This notwithstanding, China and Russia are no longer dependent on Pakistan’s good offices with the Taliban as both communist states had started to directly engage with the Taliban in recent years to safeguard their respective interests.

Refugees: Problem or Geopolitical Lever?

Pakistan has assisted recent rescue efforts in Kabul by facilitating the humanitarian air bridges of the UN World Food Programme as well as the joint rescue missions of a number of countries. Pakistan’s national carrier PIA had also assisted evacuations of foreign nationals.

A number of European ministers have been seeking Islamabad’s assistance in stemming a potential flood of Afghan refugees to Europe and help establish links with the new Taliban government. Should Pakistan be able to help, it will be in a position to present a shopping list of demands to those countries. Among them could be the abolition of existing trade and aid restrictions as well as political support for the next IMF tranche to Pakistan.

According to the 2020 UNHCR statistics, Pakistan has already been hosting 1.4 million Afghan refugees. The Pakistani government has kept open some of the five Pakistan-Afghanistan border crossings for trade and border commuters but closed these transit points for refugees without visas.

It has also increased its border troops along the 2,500 kilometre fortified Afghan-Pakistan border in order to avoid mass migration. Still, with the help of people smugglers, Afghan refugees are coming into Pakistan through the porous border along Balochistan. Concern about a growing influx of refugees is growing in Pakistan.

Security Challenge

The Pakistani government is faced with two militant groups threatening Pakistan: the Afghanistan-based TTP and the Balochistan-based Liberation Army (BLA). The TTP, a 3,000 to 5,000-member Pashtun Islamist group in the Afghan-Pakistan border region with links to al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, aims to overthrow the Pakistan government.

It has overcome internal rifts, regrouped under new leadership and executed major terror attacks on Pakistani soil. Security experts estimate that there were about 60 TTP terror acts in Pakistan at the beginning of 2021. The 2020 US-Taliban Doha

Agreement requires the Taliban to ensure that no militant groups are allowed to use Afghanistan as an operating theatre.

PM Khan has, therefore, demanded from the Taliban the “extradition of the most wanted TTP extremists”. Pakistan will be closely watching whether the Taliban will be able to reign in these anti-Pakistan forces.

China’s Security Concerns

For decades, BLA, a group of separatists in Pakistan’s Balochistan province, has been fighting the Pakistani Army. The Pakistani government established a Special Security Force to protect projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), along with the accompanying Chinese personnel, which have come under attack since 2018.

The Pakistani Army launched major security operations against the BLA but is accused of having been rather heavy-handed with alleged extrajudicial arrests and the abduction of hundreds of people by the Army.

China is increasingly alarmed and has requested Pakistan to step up protection measures for projects and Chinese citizens. CPEC has become unpopular among the Balochistan population. It symbolises China’s close relationship with the Pakistani central government which the BLA accuse of human rights abuses in Balochistan.

CPEC projects only have a small impact on Balochistan’s economy and unemployment. As PM Khan needs to appear to manage the threat on Pakistan’s home front, he offered peace talks with the BLA and appointed a ‘Special Assistant on Reconciliation in Balochistan’ in July.

However, should these talks not tackle the underlying political and economic causes of the BLA estrangement, there is a likelihood that they will end without results, similar to initiatives of previous governments.

Potential Winner Despite Opposition

The leaders of Pakistan’s two biggest opposition parties, Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz Sharif (PML-N), and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), are closely watching the government. They hope for a national consensus in Afghanistan and have requested to be consulted before any decision is made in Islamabad regarding the recognition of the new regime.

PM Khan has had to tread carefully so as not to appear to be giving in too much to the Taliban. Last year, eleven opposition parties formed the “Pakistan Democratic Movement” and called for his ouster. The alliance criticised PM Khan’s handling of the economy, high costs of living and the dominant role of the military in governance.

PM Khan is carefully juggling all these problems. His future relationship with a newly established Taliban leadership will be scrutinised by the international community and Pakistan’s opposition. If he handles these issues well, the spillover effect on Pakistan from the Afghan change of regime could make Islamabad one of the winners.

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