

Taliban here and Across the Khyber

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With the United States (US)' hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan sans a politically negotiated settlement between Kabul and the Taliban, the Afghan conflict has entered a crucial phase. Since the beginning of the US and NATO forces withdrawal in May, the security situation is constantly deteriorating. The Taliban's rapid territorial gains have exposed the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)'s inability to defend the Afghan territory. Resultantly, the Taliban have made great strides beyond their traditional strongholds in the northern and western parts of the country and currently [claim](#) to control 90 percent of Afghan soil. Contrary to their initial [commitments](#), Taliban have now launched offensive against provincial capitals as well and as of now have gained control over ten provincial capitals, including Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan in the north, that was traditionally an anti-Taliban stronghold. Additionally, over the last month the Taliban have successfully captured eight out of 14 official Afghan international border crossings, including six dry ports. Losing control of these border crossings have added to the [economic woes](#) of the already beleaguered Afghan government.

As the Taliban continue to make military advances, diplomatic efforts to avoid a civil war and find a peaceful settlement have increased in parallel. The [announcement](#) of Troika Plus meeting comprising of the US, China, Russia and Pakistan on August 11 in Doha amidst growing violence had raised some hopes of reviving moribund intra-Afghan peace talks. However, in view of noncompromising behaviour of the Ghani government and the Taliban at one hand and the waning leverage of other participating states at the other, chances of a breakthrough are limited.

Pakistan has played a key role in facilitating the peace deal between the US and Taliban. Islamabad has been calling for a result-oriented intra-Afghan dialogue for a peaceful power transition in Kabul. Despite some usual [unfounded criticism](#) over its position in the Afghan crisis by the Kabul government, Pakistan's role has largely been acknowledged by the international community as constructive in bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table. However, that appreciation is accompanying additional and rather unrealistic expectations regarding Islamabad's perceived leverage over the Taliban. Pakistan had managed to exercise some leverage over the Taliban when they were equally in need of some legitimacy and brought them to the table. Unfortunately, the unconditional US withdrawal without a peace deal has removed a major pressure point for the Taliban to sit on the table and have jeopardised the sustainability of existing gains. In view of an imminent rise of the Taliban following complete US and NATO forces withdrawal by August 31 and waning chances of a political settlement offering a collective regional security formula, the regional stakeholders are scrambling to secure bilateral security assurances. China most recently has

hosted a high-level Taliban delegation and have secured a [commitment](#) to crack down on the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Bilateral outreach by important regional actors offers the Taliban a sense of desired political legitimacy thereby removing another layer of leverage that could have been used to dissuade them from attempting a military takeover of Kabul.

Amidst the rapidly evolving situation, Pakistan stands as the most vulnerable country that is likely to face the major brunt of the ensuing crisis in Afghanistan. One of the major challenges faced by Islamabad is that while the Afghan crisis is inherently a foreign policy issue, it has an overriding domestic angle and the two cannot be treated separately. The decisions and actions on the Afghan foreign policy front will have direct consequences at the domestic level. If the situation further deteriorates in Afghanistan in the coming weeks and months, it will not just have a ripple effect but may well create waves of instability inside Pakistan. Especially, already troubled border areas will face the worst spillover effects of war in Afghanistan.

Since May this year, terrorist incidents have steadily increased in Pakistan involving significant civil and military casualties. In the past two months alone, almost 167 terrorist attacks have been [reported](#) in the border areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces. While fencing of the border has mitigated the risk to a certain extent, it cannot completely stop the illegal infiltration given the nature of the terrain. Potential refugee influx in case of a protracted conflict will add to Islamabad's economic and security challenges. Pakistan has already demanded a dignified return of existing refugees and has expressed its [inability](#) to host more in case of civil war and have called for establishing refugee zones inside Afghanistan. However, it will be very difficult to sustain that position if an [estimated](#) 2-3 million additional refugees would gather on Pakistan's border. Facilitating them even on the border would require enormous financial resources with huge security implications.

On the security front, Afghanistan's military takeover by the Taliban is likely to revive the domestic terror organisations such as the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and would spur the sleeper cells of other transnational terror outfits including Daesh and al-Qaida. Pakistan's biggest security challenge will come in form of a more strengthened and tactically advanced TTP that has more than 6,000 fighters based in Afghanistan and has already begun launching cross border attacks from Afghanistan. TTP has already started asserting its role and its new approach is a clear departure from its previous policy which was largely based on its objective to impose its version of sharia law in Pakistan and did not harbour any separatist designs. In a recent interview with [CNN](#), the TTP Chief Nur Wali Mehsud reiterated that his group will continue its "war against Pakistan's security forces" and shared his bold new vision to "take control of the border regions and make them independent." This newly adopted irredentist approach is trying to win support from elements on both sides of the border who seek to invalidate the status of the Durand Line as an international border. Additionally, the very fact that the TTP chief, who is a specially designated global terrorist by the US and sanctioned by

the UN as well, was given airtime on CNN for an interview is indicative of evolving international narrative. Pakistan is likely to witness more international promotion of TTP's narrative in the coming days as the situation unfolds.-

It is worth emphasizing that the situation in Afghanistan is a subset of broader regional security dynamics and is greatly influenced by the geopolitical agendas of regional and extra-regional powers. While there is a convergence of interest among great powers including China, Russia and the US to stabilize Afghanistan, their approach is not completely insulated from the impact of regional competition and great power rivalry. Therefore, there is a great risk of Afghanistan once again becoming a hub of regional proxy wars.

In recent months, Pakistan has become very vocal in calling out the Indian involvement in using the Afghan territory to carry out terrorist activities against Pakistan and have described this as a major red line in its future engagements with the country. Similarly, the divergence between the US and China was visible when the US removed the ETIM from the US terrorist list, whereas China perceives it as a major terrorism risk. The recent attack on the Chinese engineers working on the Dasu hydropower project in Pakistan underscores the complexity of the situation. China and Pakistan's [announcement](#) to take joint action against terrorism spillover from Afghanistan can be seen in the context of evolving regional alliances.

Finally, peace in Afghanistan holds the key to Pakistan's desired pivot to geo-economics from geopolitics. The whole idea of regional connectivity and trade is dependent on a peaceful resolution of the Afghan crisis and to realize this goal. On its part, Pakistan has exhibited greater flexibility and invested heavily in Afghanistan's peace process. Time and again, Pakistan has called for a shared role and responsibility as the Afghan situation will determine not only Pakistan's but the entire region's future trajectory.

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