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OPINION

Pakistan's Worries Since Taliban Takeover and Prognosis for the Region

Ashok Behuria*



There was a sense of relief and an overwhelming show of excitement at Taliban's success in Pakistan in the immediate aftermath of Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. However, the sense of euphoria has slowly yielded ground to realistic assessments that do not augur too well for Pakistan. Often called a Siamese twin of Pakistan, Afghanistan has always had an inevitable impact on Pakistani society, politics and economy, even though developments in Afghanistan are curated by Pakistan. Its cross-border ethnic overlap with Pakistan, not only Pakhtuns but also Baloch and others, its proclivity for radical Islam (that throws up ever more radical groups over time) as well as Pakistan's obsession with seeking strategic depth make Afghanistan a continuing challenge for policy-

makers in Islamabad. Pakistan today has the following five sets of anxieties/worries in the wake of Taliban's return to Kabul.

(i) How to stabilise Afghanistan

Afghanistan is faced with a serious resource crunch. The economy is in doldrums. More than US\$9 billion worth of Afghan central bank reserves lie frozen in the US Federal reserve. The inflation is at an all time high. Various estimates suggest that about 3.5 million are internally displaced due to the conflict and more than 1.5 million are displaced due to drought. The UNDP's report on economic outlook for Afghanistan says that the economy could contract 20 per cent of the GDP this year. The head of the World Food Programme in Afghanistan Mary-Ellen McGroarty stated recently that about

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8.7 million people are 'one step away from starvation' and that there "is a tsunami of destitution, incredible suffering and hunger spiralling out of control". By throwing the women out of jobs, the Taliban have even made matters worse as household incomes have come down drastically. There is a looming humanitarian crisis staring Afghanistan on its face.

The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) are not willing to help because international community is still unsure of the way Taliban want to govern Afghanistan. Its appeal to the Taliban to ensure the formation of an inclusive system of government has fallen on deaf ears. After two rounds of announcements to populate different ministries, out of 53 ministries, only 10 minor ones are being held by minority groups consisting of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and Turkmens, while together they constitute nearly 50 per cent of the entire population of Afghanistan.

Pakistan has failed to bring moderation into the Taliban's scheme of things. The most enthusiastic backer of the Taliban notwithstanding, it has not yet accorded formal recognition to the Taliban government and it is perhaps awaiting the verdict of the

international community on this. In the meanwhile, it is trying, in its own ways, to persuade whosoever it can to help Afghanistan avert an acute humanitarian crisis, it is facing at the moment. It has hosted a summit of foreign ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and gathered diplomats from China, Russia and the US to discuss the unfolding situation on the war-torn country and especially, to impress upon them the fact that Afghanistan stood "at the brink of an economic collapse" and it was "imperative for the international community to buttress provision of humanitarian assistance on an urgent basis". Predictably, it refused to participate in the NSA-level meeting organised by India to discuss Afghanistan. Even after the Taliban's appeal to allow India to send food-grains (50 MTs of wheat), medicines and vaccines, Pakistan has brought in unnecessary restrictions to delay the process of delivery of these items citing security reasons. This is despite the fact that Pakistan knows it cannot address the issue on its own and will have to ensure flow of aid to Pakistan from all possible sources. Amid all this, Pakistan's is gripped with the fear of an unstable Afghanistan in the face of failure of the Taliban to operate responsibly.

**(ii) Fear of India
regaining its influence**

There is an expectation in Islamabad that the Taliban will now oblige their mentors in Pakistan and rein in groups working against Pakistani interests allegedly being funded by Indian agencies and elements in the previous Ghani establishment.

This hope is however not unmixed. It is laced with possible fear of Taliban adopting a neutral position vis-à-vis India, which, they say, has deeper pockets and, therefore, remains more attractive than Pakistan in the post-conflict situation. Remarks by Stanikzai and Zabihullah about the Taliban welcoming trade and business links with India through Pakistan and their request not to drag Afghanistan into the bilateral fight between India and Pakistan must be adding to the worries of Pakistan in this regard.

One would have imagined that with the coming of the Taliban, Pakistan's unreasoned fear of India would take a back seat. However, on the contrary, it is taking deeper roots, thanks to the high-pitched propaganda unleashed in Pakistan that India has been using Afghan territory against Pakistan, and also partially thanks to the overtures

Taliban have made to India after they overran Kabul.

**(iii) Taliban having
reverse strategic depth:**

Pakistani interlocutors often say jokingly, what Nepal is for India, Afghanistan is for Pakistan. Taliban are regarded as levers to acquire strategic depth in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan's control over the Taliban is overstated. In the past, even at a time when Pakistan had stronger control over Taliban in the 1990s, it could not make them agree to the Duran Line as the legitimate border between the two countries. For all practical purposes, it is the reverse strategic depth that Taliban have acquired in Pakistan, which bothers Pakistan immensely. Pakistanis know that operatives and handlers within their intelligence establishment— those who have worked with the Taliban and other Jihadi groups— are pledged to the worldview of the Taliban, which is anti-democracy and virulently pro-Islam.

There is a political, moral and religious commitment attached to their prolonged connivance with the Taliban efforts post-9/11 which has had a destabilising fall out inside Pakistan. This remains a critical concern, even if the top leadership

brushes away any suggestion of progressive greening/Islamisation of its forces from bottom up.

Therefore, in Pakistan, the power elite that has used Islam to serve its own interests both at home and outside, is now concerned about the possible ripple effects of the Taliban's success against the US, the most powerful country in the world. If one scans the pronouncements by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Al Qaeda in the India Subcontinent (AQIS) sympathisers in the social media, Taliban's swift takeover has been a huge psychological boost for them.

Many of them are saying that compared to the US military and its resources, the Pakistan army is a pigmy that can be easily overcome, if there is a sincere effort to bring Sharia rule to Pakistan. Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) is also flexing its muscles in a menacing way in Afghanistan accounting for most of the bloody attacks after Taliban's return to power, signalling the growing assertion of a more virulent strain of radical Islam slowly announcing its presence felt in a much more visible manner than ever before. The Taliban have not so far been able to control them and rumours of Taliban cadres slowly defecting to IS-K ranks abound,

increasing the worries of the Pakistani establishment primarily because of the dangerous mutations taking place among extremist groups in the tribal borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

(iv) Groups demanding Sharia rule emboldened

There are some civil society activists in Pakistan who would say that there was a psychological barrier in the minds of average Pakistanis about supporting violent Islamist efforts, after the TTP attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014. However, such a barrier may now be easier to overcome by fervent advocates of *Nizam-e-Mustafa*.

Even if TTP may not be backed enthusiastically by the people outside the tribal belt, their argument that the army and the political leadership of Pakistan have failed to deliver because of their lack of sincerity to Islamic values, has its appeal amongst the people.

Religious parties like Jamat-i-Islami, Jamat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam and others may feel emboldened by Taliban's unexpected success. One should not forget that many of these parties have had their links with the Taliban and various other

mujahideen and jihadi groups operating in the region. They have effective presence in the media and especially vernacular media through which the pace of propagation of anti-army views and anti-liberal/secular ethos seems to have picked up in recent months. The possibility of a critical religio-political churning in Pakistan cannot be ruled out if the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates further.

In this setting, the talks between the security establishment and the TTP, mediated by the powerful Haqqani group, which had initially raised the hopes in Islamabad of a turnaround in TTP's approach, have failed as the TTP has declared an end to a month-long ceasefire in the wake of the talks. The TTP alleged that the government reneged on its commitment to release its cadres, carried out raids even during the ceasefire and had not appointed any team to carry the talks forward. It reminds one of the previous agreements the government had had with TTP at Shakai (2004) Sararogha (2005), Swat (2008) as well as the talks under Nawaz Sharif in 2013. All these talks failed because both parties accused each other of violation of the terms of agreement. This time round, the government faces another problem of lack of consensus at home

about talks with the TTP, which had carried out the 2016 attack on school children in Peshawar. As a conglomerate with more than 30 outfits, TTP is not a monolithic organisation and the state might persuade a handful of them to close ranks with the security forces, however, the TTP-Central is likely to continue with agenda of establishing Islamic rule in Pakistan, by all means.

(v) Afghan Taliban's duplicity

Taliban have already indicated that nothing in their agreement with the US at Doha stops them from maintaining relations with fellow 'Muslim' groups, including even with members of Al Qaeda. They would even invoke Islamic principles to say that they are obliged to provide hospitality to all Muslims, even if they are jihadists. Therefore, they may continue to aid their militant cousins in Pakistan, making Pakistani society and politics even more vulnerable to jihadi pressures.

Moreover, both the Taliban spokespersons, Zabihullah Mujahid and Suhail Shaheen have been remarkably economical and evasive in their responses to queries about TTP from probing journalists from Pakistan, which adds to Pakistani worries.

Prognosis

There is a deep sense of alarm within Pakistan at certain levels that with Afghanistan being controlled by an avowedly Sharia-based Islamic system— if the experiment succeeds there— it might have a domino effect on Pakistan, which could lead to radical change in the polity and society. The hybrid system of army-controlled democracy that is there in Pakistan may not be able to push back the wave of Talibanisation that is sweeping the Pak-Af region. There is a fear in India that like in the past, Pakistan may divert its internal militant groups towards India, especially towards Kashmir. After all, the most violent phases of militancy in Kashmir followed the pull out of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in the early 1990s and later, with the advent of the Taliban's rule in late-1990s, when various India-focussed jihadi groups were allowed to establish their camps in Afghanistan.

The effect of radical elements asserting in Pakistan and Afghanistan may also have a region-wide impact. The region has witnessed bloody terrorist acts by

fringe radical groups in Bangladesh (Holey Artisan case in 2016) and Sri Lanka (Easter attacks in 2019) in recent years. There are already speculations in Bangladesh that radical Islamist groups like Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) having connections with Afghan Jihad in the 1980s and with Taliban in the 1990s, who had raised slogans like “*Amra sabia hobo Taliban*” (We will all be Taliban), could draw inspiration from the Taliban victory and resurrect themselves. There is a favourable climate for such outfits in some sense as Bangladeshis reacted enthusiastically to Taliban's return in social media which was reported widely. There is a fear in countries like India, Sri Lanka and Nepal that the wave of radicalism may impact their Muslim minorities, while in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and Maldives conservative constituencies are likely to get a fillip to be more assertive with their demands to bring in Sharia rule. Thus, the entire region with substantial Muslim population may be adversely impacted by the success of Taliban in Afghanistan. ■