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Future of South Asian Geopolitics

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This article is based on **The fall of Kabul, the future of regional geopolitics** which was published in The Hindu on 21/08/2021. It talks about the fall of Afghanistan to Taliban forces and future implications on the geopolitics of the region.

The fall of Kabul in the wake of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan will prove to be a defining moment for the region and the future shape of its geopolitics; it would be as defining, if not more, as the Soviet intervention in 1979 and the American one in 2001.

While a lot depends on the Taliban's actual conduct both domestically as well as on the southern and western Asian geopolitical chessboard in the months ahead, the Taliban are likely to continue as a '**useful villain**' in the unfolding great power competition.

For India and the whole region, the fall of Afghanistan is a moment of reckoning and it must rethink its regional strategies and options.

Reasons For Fall of Afghanistan to Taliban

- **US' Unconditional Exit:** The US decision to pull out its troops unconditionally without waiting for a negotiated political settlement regardless of consequences that were almost entirely predictable other than the speed with which it occurred.
- **Afghan's Psychological Denial:** Afghan's psychological denial that the US would indeed leave as they warned, a lack of military strategy, poor supplies and logistics, indefensible and thinly manned posts, unpaid salaries, phantom rolls, and a sense of betrayal, abandonment and demoralisation, all played a role in the capitulation.
The Afghan had technical dependence on the US for air support, weapon systems, intelligence etc.
- **Lack of Preparation:** The Afghan Army was unprepared and caught by surprise by the Taliban offensive.

- **Lack of Training of Afghan Forces:** The Afghan National Army (ANA) was never really trained and equipped with the normal attributes of a national army capable of defending territory with adequate mobility, artillery, armour, engineering, logistics, intelligence, air support etc for rugged terrain; and infantry battalions and doctrines designed for it.

Future of Regional Geopolitics

- **Regional Power Vacuum Created:** An axis of regional powers such as China, Pakistan, Russia, and the Taliban, have already started filling this power vacuum, shaping, thereby, the contours of the region's geopolitics based on their individual and common interests.
 - Iran might also jump on this opportunistic bandwagon under the Chinese leadership.
- **Anti-American Axis:** Most of the countries in the region harbor deep anti-American feelings in varying degrees which will further shrink the American influence in the Eurasian heartland.
- **Advantage China:** The post-American power vacuum in the region will be primarily advantageous to China and its grand strategic plans for the region.
 - China will further strengthen its efforts to bring every country in the region, except India, on the **Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** bandwagon, thereby altering the geopolitical and geoeconomic foundations of the region.
 - **Challenges of Chinese Advantage:**
 - The much-feared **Chinese encirclement of India** will become ever more pronounced.
 - China is likely to become **less accommodative towards India** including on the **Line of Actual Control(LAC)**.
 - Even in **trade India needs trade with China more** than the other way round. Unless India can find ways of ensuring a rapprochement with China, China would keep on challenging India on occasion.
- **Hub of Terrorism:** The bigger challenge for the region would be a near-certain increase in terrorism and extremism.
 - The USA's presence in Afghanistan, international pressure on the Taliban and **Financial Action Task Force** worries in Pakistan had a relatively moderating effect on the region's terror ecosystem. With the Taliban now back in Afghanistan, things are bound to change.
 - Moreover, the international community may have no choice but to recognise the Taliban regime. **UN Security Council members** such as China and Russia have already indicated their intent to do so.
 - It would also mean that the Taliban would hold more power in a bargain on the terror question.

- **Impact on Regional Interests:** The return of the Taliban to Afghanistan has effectively laid India's '**mission(Connect) Central Asia**' to rest.
 - India's diplomatic and civilian presence as well as its civilian investments will now be at the mercy of the Taliban, and to some extent Pakistan.
 - If there is a concerted effort by China, Pakistan and the Taliban to erase the Indian presence from Afghanistan, there would be many challenges for India.
- **India-Pakistan Ties:** The developments in Afghanistan could force India to seek stability, if not peace, with Pakistan. While there is little desire in India today to reopen a broad-based dialogue process with Pakistan, even a 'cold peace' would be in India's interest.
 - For Pakistan too, such a 'cold peace' will help it to focus its energies on consolidating its interests and gains in Afghanistan.
 - As a result, both sides might refrain from indulging in competitive risk-taking unless something dramatic happens which is always a possibility between the two rivals.
 - Stability between India and Pakistan depends a great deal on how politics in Kashmir plays out, and whether India is able to pacify the aggrieved sections in the Valley.
- **Use of Terrorism For Tactical Purpose:** It is unlikely that the Taliban will proactively export terror to other countries unless of course for tactical purposes by, say for instance, Pakistan against India.

The real worry, however, is the inspiration that disgruntled elements in the region will draw from the Taliban's victory against the world's sole superpower.
- **Challenges For Pakistan:** The celebration in Pakistan over the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan could eventually become counterproductive for Pakistan itself.

Whether Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan refers to them as a force that has 'unshackled the chains of slavery' or the country's deep state considers them as a strategic asset, the reality is that many anti-Pakistan terror organisations would be emboldened as well.

Way Forward

- **US's New Role:** While it is too early to determine whether the anti-American axis countries have on their hands is **an opportunity or a ticking bomb**.

The USA, as a direct consequence of the formation of this axis, can decide to explore **new ways of working with them to stabilise the region**, if it desires to do so, and remain relevant there.
- **Regional solution:** There is a convergence of interests (Infrastructural development and trade) between India and three key regional players — China, Russia and Iran — in seeing a stable settlement in Afghanistan.

Thus, there is a need for cooperation from like minded countries on this front.

- **Global Cooperation:** There is a lot less global acceptance of terrorism today than in it was in the 1990s.
 - No major power would like to see Afghanistan re-emerge as a global sanctuary of terror.
 - The world has also imposed significant new constraints on Pakistan's support for terror through mechanisms like the **Financial Action Task Force**.
- **Talking with the Taliban:** Taliban now should be taken under confidence for any kind of development (political or economic) in the region.

For India, talking to the Taliban would allow it to seek security guarantees from the insurgents in return for continued development assistance or other pledges as well as explore the possibility of the Taliban's autonomy from Pakistan.

Conclusion

The lesson for India in the wake of these developments is clear: It will have to fight its own battles. So it must make enemies wisely, choose friends carefully, rekindle flickering friendships, and make peace while it can.

Drishti Mains Question

The post-American power vacuum in Afghanistan will aid China and shape India's strategic choices and behaviour. Comment
