



The Ramifications of Ho Chi Minh City, Afghanistan

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Abstract

Taken together, the US ignominious withdrawal and the rise of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan are a game changing event on a global scale. The integration of Afghanistan into the tapestry of the New Silk Road enables China and Russia to jointly complete the transformation of the Heart of Asia and the entire Eurasia they have been working on for decades. Meanwhile, Afghanistan will remain a dysfunctional state.

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Analysis

On 19 August 2021, the Taliban officially reinstated and reaffirmed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.¹ The date chosen was singularly important. This is the Afghan Independence Day that commemorates the Anglo-Afghan Treaty of 19 August 1919 and the relinquishing of the British protectorate status. The Taliban compared their victory and the end of “the US occupation” to the end of the British occupation and influence 102 years ago. In so doing, the Taliban were paying homage to the establishment of the modern Afghan state. This move reinforces the moderate image the Taliban currently seek to project globally - even when this image contradicts the Taliban’s declared commitment to eradicating the modern state (Da’ula) and replacing it with an Islamic Emirate. Ultimately, for the Taliban, 19 August 2021 was a celebration of the US withdrawal and the triumph of the Taliban’s twenty-year-long Jihad.

The US ignominious withdrawal from Afghanistan was expected the moment the US signed the Doha agreement with the Taliban back on 29 February 2020.² For the Islamist leadership - both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and their Pakistani sponsors - the Doha agreement amounted to the US and Western acceptance of the demise of the modern centralized Afghan state and possibly of the Pakistani state as well. The Taliban’s working assumption was that they would be able to seize power the moment the US withdrawal was completed. Hence, the Taliban started preparing for the revival of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with the help of Pakistan, Iran and Qatar. This would be a very challenging undertaking given the inner-working of the Afghan Taliban themselves.

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Taken together, the US ignominious withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rise of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan are a game changing event on a global scale. The issue is not what will happen inside Afghanistan - but how the regional foreign powers, led by Russia and China, will capitalize on the crisis in Afghanistan in order to profoundly transform their geopolitical and geo-economic posture.

Rhetoric notwithstanding, Afghanistan will remain a dysfunctional state. Like all Afghan governments before them, the Taliban will not be able to impose any policy outside the center of Kabul. On the contrary, the “arrangements” that facilitated the spectacular march on Kabul gave the local commanders, chieftains and mullahs who delivered far greater power and self-rule in their respective areas of influence. The Taliban’s Afghanistan will thus be a loose amalgam of fiercely independent tribal, ethnic and regional entities. The Kabul Taliban have neither the intention nor the power to impose anything on the rest of the country. Domestically, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will continue to function on the basis of ad-hoc “arrangements” between Kabul and the local foci of power. This will apply to the extent of imposition of Sharia Law, socio-economic development, individual rights, export of opium and support for foreign Jihadists.

Whether foreign Jihadists will be able to have training camps or other facilities will depend on the local leaders on whose territory they are - not on Kabul. These facilities will be defined as refugee camps for foreign “brethren

¹ This paper is an extract from the longer paper: Yossef Bodansky, Ho Chi Minh City, Afghanistan, Is Here, ISPSW Issue No 783, August 2021. For a concise analysis of the overall situation in Afghanistan, see: Yossef Bodansky, Concise History of the Afghanistan-Pakistan War, ISPSW Issue No 495, July 2017. For background on the events leading to spring 2020, see: The Road to Ho Chi Minh City, Afghanistan, ISPSW Issue No 675, March 2020.

² For analysis of the Doha agreement see: Yossef Bodansky, The Road to Ho Chi Minh City, Afghanistan, ISPSW Issue No 675, March 2020.



in distress” - which is an Islamic obligation. According to Jundullah leaders, there is an “understanding” with the foreign Jihadists that they will not launch attacks on neighboring countries from Afghan territory in order “not to embarrass the Taliban”. However, Jundullah Jihadists will be able to deploy to a forward base in the nearby Fergana Valley and strike out from there. The same principle will apply to supporting the Taliban’s Jihadist allies in Pakistan - Jihadists whose contribution to the Taliban’s war since the early 1990's has been incalculable.

In practical terms, a lot will depend on the implementation, if any, of the “four secret annexes” and/or the “four secret understandings” of the original Doha agreement. They include the definition of the presence of US and allied intelligence personnel in order to sponsor the forthcoming Jihads into China, Russia and the Central Asian ‘Stans. The presence of any American personnel is now out of the question. However, Turkish Intelligence (MIT) expressed interest in taking over the project. The MIT, with the assistance of the ISI, are already discussing these issues with the Taliban. Since Doha is extremely supportive of this endeavor - it will be nearly impossible for Kabul to say ‘No’. Ultimately, however, the Turks and the Qataris will have to make their own deals with the local Taliban authorities. Taliban senior commander Qari Faseehuddin, who handles the high-level contacts with the Jundullah, is said to be most interested in sponsoring the foreign Jihadists and helping them spread their Jihads back home.

Both the Chinese and the Russians have no illusions about the real situation concerning the foreign Jihadists in Afghanistan. They accept this as an inevitable cost of doing business in and around Afghanistan. But China and Russia have far higher priorities - namely, to capitalize on the US/NATO withdrawal from their only bastion at the Heart of Asia in order to further consolidate their effective control over Eurasia - implementing the Greater Eurasian Partnership starting with the Central-South Asia bloc.

Between China and Russia there is already an agreed upon long-term grand strategy that is being implemented through extremely close cooperation. There is distribution of labor: China focuses on the economic and soft power aspects through the sponsorship of local development and trade. Russia focuses on security issues, mainly counter-terrorism and subversion, through both the empowerment of the local militaries and security forces, and the maintaining of very impressive military intervention capacity should the need arise. In August, both Russia and China conducted military and anti-terrorism exercises with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan near the Afghan border. Russia also provided large quantities of modern weapons and other military supplies to several armies in Central Asia. As well, Russia and China conducted a major military exercise in northwestern China - where the terrain is similar to northern Afghanistan. The exercise saw breakthroughs in military cooperation and interoperability, as well as the ability to conduct joint long-range intervention operations.

However, the primary objective of China and Russia objective is to ensnare Afghanistan is a web of regional development projects and political undertakings. China and Russia prefer multilateral programs rather than bilateral ones that might challenge the Taliban. The primary venue for the main programs will be the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Afghanistan and Iran are observers, and Iran is in the final stage of becoming a full member. Turkey is a dialogue partner of the SCO. Hence, the Taliban will be able to justify certain undertakings as prerequisites emanating from commitments made to the SCO by previous Afghan governments. The SCO will also provide the Taliban with cover for continuing to deal with regional powers.

China also intends to present the Chinese projects as international undertakings. Ultimately, the Chinese economic development projects are Afghanistan’s only chance to sustain the country economically without total reliance on opium trade. China wants to integrate Afghanistan into the Chinese-dominated Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and particularly the sub-program China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). There are already



concrete plans for an economic and transportation corridor from the Pushtun-populated western Pakistan to the Kabul area that will be the natural extension and expansion of CPEC.

Given Afghanistan's geographic location, Afghanistan's integration will permit the marked expansion of the New Silk Road - both regionally and globally. In the longer term, rail-lines and pipelines will cross Afghanistan from Central Asia to the Chinese port in Gwadar, Pakistan, on the Arabian Sea, and via Iran to Europe. Once Afghanistan's transportation corridors and national infrastructure start becoming viable, China and its allies will be in position to start extracting Afghanistan's huge natural resources - starting with rare earths and minerals. Their value, in current prices, is estimated at over two trillion US\$. In Tianjin, Baradar committed the Taliban to giving China near monopoly over the extraction of Afghanistan's riches. Russia will provide the security umbrella for the whole undertaking. Under these circumstances, it would be impossible to challenge the Russian-Chinese influence over the Central-South Asia bloc and the New Silk Road.

Meanwhile, the US is out of the region - completely. The mistrust and bad blood are not going to evaporate for a long long time. This puts an end to the Western efforts to isolate Russia and contain China via the New Silk Road. If Europe - both the EU and individual states - would like to grab some crumbs from the regional development - they will have to do so via the good graces of both Russia and China. And this will have a high price concerning the European relations with the US, as well as Eurasia, China and Russia.

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The rise of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ushers in and facilitates a new era in the Heart of Asia. The integration of Afghanistan into the tapestry of the New Silk Road and the SCO enables China and Russia to jointly complete the epoch-making transformation of the Heart of Asia, and the entire Eurasia, they have been working on for decades. With Western threats to this endeavor removed - China, Russia and their local allies can concentrate on implementing their historic vision for Eurasia and beyond. Europe will ultimately tilt eastward because only China and Russia can facilitate the recovery and modernization of European economies. And so, the ascent of a viable Eurasia received a major boost from the upheaval in Kabul. The acceleration of the ascent as led by China and Russia is bolstered by the new realities in Central-South Asia. Correct and timely capitalizing on the historic opportunities made possible by the regional ramifications of the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will benefit the entire Eastern Hemisphere for decades to come.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This paper is an extract from the longer paper: Yossef Bodansky, Ho Chi Minh City, Afghanistan, Is Here, ISPSW Issue No 783, August 2021.



About the Author

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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