



Ho Chi Minh City, Afghanistan, Is Here

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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. 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 2020.¹ 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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The Afghan Taliban have never been a coherent well-defined entity. Although calling themselves Afghan - the Taliban are a predominantly Pushtun organization with far greater affinity to the Pushtuns of Pakistan than to the non-Pushtuns minorities of central and northern Afghanistan.² The Taliban are divided into three centers of power - each of them with distinct priorities, distinct leaders, and separate relations with key sponsors such as the ISI, the IRGC’s Qods Force, Qatari Intelligence, as well as the non-Pushtun forces and warlords of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The first center of power is the Leadership Shura. The Shura is under the direct control of Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada - the Taliban’s supreme leader. The Shura is located in Quetta, Pakistan. The Shura is responsible for formulating the theological and practical policies of the Taliban and their Jihadist allies and proteges. Officially, the Shura is supposed to be the supreme decision-making council for religious, political and military affairs. Akhundzada is considered “the Emir of the Faithful” and thus the supreme Islamist-Jihadist authority in the region. Therefore, all key Jihadist leaders operating in Afghanistan-Pakistan, starting with Al-Qaida’s Ayman al-Zawahiri and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement’s (ETIM) Abdul Haq al-Turkistani (real name Memet Amin Memet or Mehmetiming Memeti) and Hajji Furqan, have sworn personal allegiance (Bay’ah) to Akhundzada. The Shura approves the presence and operations of these Jihadist entities in the Pushtun-populated areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Shura also coordinates policies with the highest authorities in Islamabad.

¹ For analysis of the Doha agreement see: Yossef Bodansky, The Road to Ho Chi Minh City, Afghanistan, ISPSW Issue No 675, March 2020.

² 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.



The second center of power is the Military Shura or the Shura's Army/Force that is responsible for running the military, terrorist and civilian operations in Afghanistan, as well as the practical cooperation with the Taliban's two main sponsors - the ISI and the IRGC's Qods Force. The Military Shura is a loosely organized entity that is based on the cooperation of predominantly Pushtun local commanders - usually in return for lavish supplies of weapons and funds. The Shura is nominally run by two young commanders who are the sons of legendary mujahedin leaders - Sirajuddin Haqqani (the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani) and Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob (the son of Mullah Omar). The Military Shura coordinates all the activities of the local chieftains, war lords and commanders; as well as the flow of military and financial resources from the center to the local forces.

In recent years, facing reality, the Military Shura has expanded cooperation to the non-Pushtun population of Afghanistan - starting with Sunni Tajiks and Uzbeks, and then even the Shiite Hazara. Among the Taliban's key non-Pushtun commanders are Qari Din Muhammad (Tajik from northern Badakhshan province), Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi (Uzbek from the northern Faryab province), and Qari Faseehuddin (Tajik from northern Badakhshan province who coordinates with the Jundullah and other large groups of foreign Jihadists in northern Afghanistan). Ultimately, these initiatives have made the Taliban forces even more fractured, less cohesive, and largely uncontrollable by the top leadership.

The third center of power is the Political Shura that is largely located in Doha, Qatar. The Shura is responsible for the Taliban's relations with "the rest of the world" - from ostensible friends like China and Russia to sworn enemies like the US, Europe and the Afghan Government in Kabul. The Shura is under the direct leadership of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar - the closest friend of the founder of the Taliban Mullah Omar. This gives Baradar immense authority within the ranks of the movement. This also caused frequent clashes with the ISI, that, in turn, led to Baradar's lengthy house arrest and isolation by the ISI (2010-18) when he was considered uncontrollable. Another key Shura member is Mullah Abdul Haq Waseeq. He is considered the head of the Taliban's Foreign Intelligence. Waseeq spent 12 years (2001-13) in Guantanamo where he learned English and the American mentality. Also of great importance is the presence in Doha of Anas Haqqani (the young brother of Sirajuddin Haqqani) because he manages the complex coordination between the Political and the Military Shuras. The Political Shura cooperates closely with Qatari Intelligence and rarely dares not to abide by their "advice".

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In Spring 2020, the Political Shura concluded that the most expedient way to victory would be by undermining the Kabul Government's ability to rule over the country. Hence, on advice of the Political Shura, the leaders of the Military Shura instructed all their key commanders throughout Afghanistan to initiate clandestine negotiations with the Kabul Government's local senior officials/representatives, local senior Military/Police/Security officials, as well as tribal chieftains, religious leaders, and anybody else who exercised authority over the population and local resources. Significantly, the entire web of negotiations was conducted via blood relatives and close personal friends of the Kabul Government's personnel. This way, the mere existence of these contacts and discussions was not disclosed to the Americans. The Taliban emissaries argued that the US has given up on Afghanistan in Doha, and that the return to power of the Taliban was only a question of time. The Taliban, they explained, would like to reach local "arrangements" on non-violent conduct that would prevent unnecessary bloodshed when the Taliban marched on Kabul.

The initial cycles of communications had mixed results. Some seniors would not believe that the US was abandoning them. Still, the ISI, that monitored closely most of the negotiations, and the Qods Force, that monitored



closely the negotiations along the Iranian border and in the Shiite populated areas, were encouraged by the progress and the mere willingness of so many Kabul Government senior personnel to entertain the Taliban's proposals, and, most important, by the fact that they did not warn the Americans about these Taliban initiatives. Hence, by early 2021, both the ISI and the Qods Force concluded that it would soon be possible to reach numerous "arrangements" throughout Afghanistan.

In Spring 2021, Islamabad could not fathom what the new Biden Administration was going to do. There was trepidation in Islamabad that with the declared commitment to reverse all of Trump's policies - the US would also renege on the Doha agreement and resist the ascent of the Taliban. Therefore, Islamabad reached out to Moscow in quest of a security-political umbrella against the US. (Beijing was reluctant to escalate the already bitter face-off with the US.) On 6-7 April, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Islamabad to ascertain the extent of the Pakistani and Taliban commitments, and what exactly they expected Russia to do. While the discussions were extremely friendly (all the more so since Lavrov had completed unsatisfactory talks in India on 5-6 April), both sides agreed that all concrete steps and policies would have to be formulated and committed to only after they could ascertain Biden's intentions and policies. They did not have to wait long because, on 14 April, Biden announced the US intent to complete the withdrawal from Afghanistan before 11 September 2021.

Immediately, the Political and the Military Shuras coordinated a twin-track surge in order to enable the Taliban to capitalize on the American and NATO withdrawal in order to seize power in Kabul and revive the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The first track was the marked intensification of the negotiations with local authorities and personalities throughout Afghanistan. Emboldened, the Taliban's emissaries now approached the most senior and venerable leaders in order to reach "arrangements" on cooperating with the forthcoming ascent of the Taliban. This time, the Taliban found their interlocutors eager and ready to abandon and betray the Kabul Government in return for promises that they and their coteries would not be harmed, that their local power positions and influence be tolerated, and that their property would not be confiscated. After the US escape from Bagram on 2 July in the middle of the night, virtually all Kabul Government interlocutors were eager to finalize deals and "arrangements" with the Taliban. As instructed, the Taliban emissaries agreed to everything in return for iron-clad assurances that no effort would be made to block the forthcoming Taliban assault on Kabul and the toppling of the Government.

Among the key officials the Taliban reached deals with at this time were Daoud Laghmani, the provincial governor of Ghazni, who exercised immense influence on the southern and eastern approaches to Kabul; and Rohullah Khanzada, the provincial governor of Qandahar, who oversaw a web of complex negotiation with the powerful Popolzai tribe. In Herat, the Taliban reached a deal with Ismail Khan - one of the most venerable leaders of the anti-Soviet Jihad since early 1978. Indeed, on 14 August, Ismail Khan would be the nominal leader of the first Taliban delegation to the Presidential Palace in Kabul.

This process culminated in a secret conference in Tehran on 8-9 July, and a follow-up gathering ten days later.

The Iranian decision to actively support the Taliban in order to hasten the US withdrawal and topple the pro-US government in Kabul was made by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself between 20 and 25 June. The decision was top secret as the Iranian media was encouraged to continue attacking the Taliban for their staunch anti-Shiite positions. However, on 27 June, *Kayhan* - the Iranian newspaper funded by the office of the Supreme Leader - published analysis by Jafar Bolouri of the situation in Afghanistan. "The Taliban today is different from the



Taliban that used to behead people,” he wrote. Bolouri argued that “the Taliban have not committed any crime against the Shia population of Afghanistan.” He warned that the US withdrawal could “give a hard time to Iran” if not properly addressed. The US is fermenting widespread armed resistance to the ascent of the Taliban that, if left unchecked, would evolve into “a bloody civil war” that would then “turn into a Shia-Sunni conflict”. Bolouri implied that it is the vital interest of Iran to prevent this scenario from happening. Bolouri’s article was drowned in the continued anti-Taliban rhetoric in the Iranian media.

Iran’s road to preeminence in the eviction of the US/NATO from Afghanistan and the ascent of the Taliban has been long and largely unknown. The Iranian effort has been run mainly by the IRGC’s Qods Force. Significantly, the current commander of the Qods Force, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, rose in the 1990’s as the chief of intelligence and paramilitary operations in the Khorasan Province (that borders Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Pakistan). Qaani focused on furthering Iranian priorities in the east - including providing support for the Northern Alliance in its fighting with the Taliban. Qaani’s main contact man in dealing with the Northern Alliance was Abdallah Abdallah, who now leads Afghanistan’s High Council for National Reconciliation. After becoming Deputy Commander of the Qods Force in 1997, Qaani and Qassem Soleimani divided responsibilities: Soleimani focused on the areas west of Iran while Qaani remained responsible for the areas north and east of Iran.

Moreover, the Qods Force has been building Iran-controlled Shiite forces in central Afghanistan since 2011-2 in order to protect the Hazara from both the Government and the Taliban forces. These forces became larger and more professional starting 2015 in the aftermath of a deal with the Taliban signed by Soleimani and Qaani. The Taliban promised to stay out of the Hazarajat in return for weapons, funds and training to be provided by the Qods Force. At the core of the revamped Shiite forces are veterans of the Liwa Fatemiyoun (Fatemiyoun Brigade) - an Afghan Shiite militia formed in 2014 to fight in Syria. Although later joined by Pakistani Shiite recruits - it is still 2/3 to 3/4 Afghan. Members of the Liwa Fatemiyoun undergo thorough training by the IRGC in Iran and Syria. As of late 2017, the unit numbered between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters (depending on the intensity of fighting in Syria and Iraq). Rotations of the troops last anywhere between three months and two years. The trained and combat tested Hazara fighters return to Afghanistan with Iranian financial support, and join the local force run by the Qods Force. In Spring 2021, Qaani dispatched to Afghanistan a group of Iranian and Shiite-Iraqi trainers to form the Hashd ash-Shia militia that is tailored after the Iran-controlled Hashd ash-Sha’abi militias in Iraq. They are better trained and better equipped than the local forces based on veterans of the Liwa Fatemiyoun.

Significantly, the Iran-sponsored build-up was done with a tacit acknowledgment of the Taliban. Mullah Abdul Raziq, the Taliban top commander in Herat and Farah provinces, has been responsible for the cooperation with Iran. He accepted the Iranian build-up in the Hazarajat in return for massive supplies of weapons, ammunition and training from Iran for his own forces. Taliban fighters are sent to Iran for advanced military training in Qods Force camps. Gradually, the Taliban-Iranian cooperation intensified to the point that Iranian Qods Force fighters were participating in combat in support of the Taliban. In early July 2021, Mullah Abdul Raziq noted that “IRGC forces” in Afghan uniforms “fought alongside Taliban [forces]” in western Afghanistan. As well, he said, “Iran-backed operatives” set up field clinics to treat wounded Taliban fighters in two villages in Farah province. Badly wounded Taliban fighters were then transferred to Iranian hospitals for further treatment.

Meanwhile, the Iranian political involvement also intensified. The Iranians played a crucial role in the secret intra-Afghan talks on 8-9 July and 18-19 July. The Iranian official position was that the crisis in Afghanistan must be resolved by the Afghans themselves, with foreign powers providing help only if requested. Seyed Rasoul



Mousavi, Director General of the Department of South Asian Affairs at the Iranian Foreign Ministry stressed that Tehran “considers peace to belong to the Afghan people and believes that the only way to achieving that is through intra-Afghan dialogue and that the role of foreign countries should only facilitate this process.”

Significantly, these conferences were originally planned for Islamabad where the ISI planned to closely monitor the discussions and manipulate the outcome. However, the conferences were moved to Tehran because the Pakistani and Iranian security personnel in charge decided that Tehran was the only place where US intelligence would not be able to spy on the events and attempt to manipulate their outcome.

The primary objective of the 8-9 conference was to firm up and reconfirm the validity of the myriad of “arrangements” reached between the Taliban emissaries and their local interlocutors. The Taliban representatives came from the Military Shura. “All influential and powerful tribes in Afghanistan participated in this meeting, and it was not only the Government and the Taliban, but also various other groups and movements,” explained Hossein Akbari, the Deputy Secretary-General of the World Assembly of Islamic Awakening (that was the formal sponsor of the conferences). Since the bulk of the deals were reached between individual Kabul Government officials and their blood-relations speaking for the Taliban, the Tehran venues, for the first-time, enabled Taliban seniors to confirm the validity of these deals to emissaries of their interlocutors. The Taliban also announced their impending march on Kabul.

In the second conference on 18-19 July, representatives from Afghanistan’s neighbors and regional states - including Pakistan, China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Iran - discussed with emissaries of the Taliban and their “arrangements” interlocutors the character of the future relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors. Ultimately, everybody - both Afghans and foreigners - agreed and committed to expediting the non-violent surge of the Taliban and the march on Kabul. The Taliban were forthcoming and promised leniency and no strict Islamist regime. “The Taliban of 2021 is not the Taliban of 2001,” was a point repeatedly made by the Taliban leaders.

Concurrently, at the urging of Islamabad, the Political Shura launched a campaign to convince key powers - starting with Russia and China - to support the Taliban’s surge. Official Islamabad was a direct participant of this campaign.

First, a Taliban delegation traveled to Moscow on 8-9 July mainly to assure Russian senior officials and area experts of the Taliban’s sincerity. They emphasized their intent to adhere to the policies the Pakistanis discussed with Lavrov. The Taliban also repeated the commitment to prevent foreign Jihadists from operating across Afghanistan’s borders into Central Asia. They specifically promised to not support foreign Jihadists from Central Asia, Russia and China. Although the Russians remained skeptical about the Taliban’s willingness and ability to prevent Jihadist activities - at the end, Taliban rule of Afghanistan was deemed preferable to a continued US/NATO presence.

Second, and far more important, was the Pakistani and Taliban interaction with China - the would be primary financial and political sponsor of any Taliban regime. Islamabad’s initiative came at a very awkward time. On 14 July, a martyr-bomber blew-up a minibus near Dasu, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Nine Chinese working on the Dasu hydropower project were killed. The perpetrator was identified as a mujahid of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (The Taliban Movement in Pakistan) - a Pushtun Jihadist group that is ISI-sponsored and very close to the Afghan Taliban and other Jihadist groups in Afghanistan-Pakistan. However, in meetings with Chinese senior



security officials, the ISI insisted that the bombing was a plot of the Indian and Afghan intelligence services launched from Afghan territory.

Beijing swallowed the ISI's claims and, on 24 July, held in Chengdu the 3rd round of the China-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue. The delegations were led by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Pakistani counterpart Shah Mahmood Qureshi. Both sides had "in-depth exchange of views on international and regional issues of common concern." Wang Yi and Qureshi agreed that "the Afghan situation has come to a crucial juncture", and that the hasty US withdrawal is turning Afghanistan into "a new security black hole". Both concurred that it was imperative to "prevent Afghanistan from spiraling into a full-scale civil war" and that only the Taliban could achieve this. However, the Taliban must commit to "political reconciliation and building a broad-based and inclusive political framework" if they want Chinese and foreign support. China insists on a Taliban commitment to "combat terrorism" and especially ETIM. If the Taliban deliver on their part, China would "promote coordination and cooperation among Afghanistan's neighboring countries [and] explore the building of Afghanistan-related cooperation platforms" leading to "lasting peace" and the "stability of Afghanistan".

Although Qureshi insisted that he could guarantee things in the name of the Taliban, Wang Yi insisted that he wanted to hear everything directly from the Taliban. Hence, on 28 July, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar led a nine-member Taliban delegation to meet Wang Yi and his team in Tianjin. In an intentional affront to Washington, Wang Yi met Baradar in the exact room where he had just hosted US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

Baradar told Wang Yi that the Taliban consider China as a "friend" of Afghanistan. The Taliban want from China not only economic aid to rebuild Afghanistan, but also help in attaining "international legitimacy" for their government. Baradar reiterated in very clear terms the promise of "never allowing any force to use the Afghan territory to endanger China." He assured Wang Yi that the Taliban would break relations "with all terrorist organizations including ETIM." In response, China agreed to "play an important role in the process of peace, reconciliation and reconstruction" in Afghanistan. China also pledged to support "the Taliban's role in Afghanistan's reconstruction". Wang agreed to "bring the Taliban back into the political mainstream" of the international community. All, provided the Taliban deliver on their promises.

In early August, with the US withdrawal nearing end, the Taliban's march on Kabul started to pick up pace. Between 7 and 14 August, it turned into the final sprint. During this week, the Taliban captured virtually all the provincial capitals, the border crossings, and the key military bases of Afghanistan. There were no fighting and no resistance. The negotiated "arrangements" were honored by both sides. Indeed, large units of the Afghan National Army surrendered and handed over their US-supplied arsenals - thus enabling the Taliban forces to increase their pace of advance. On 13 August, the Taliban encircled Kabul, and negotiated a "peaceful handover" with the acting Interior Minister Abdul Sattar Mirzakawal. Once the order to enter was given, it took the Taliban forces eight hours to complete the capture of the city. All over Kabul, the arriving Taliban forces were aided by several hundred of activated in-place clandestine cells. Kabul was also taken without a fight.

On 14 August, Ismail Khan led the first Taliban delegation to the Presidential palace. The real leaders were key members of the Political Shura - Amir Khan Muttaqi and Anas Haqqani. They started discussions about the handover of power and the possible forming of an interim government. Ismail Khan also delivered a Taliban ultimatum that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani must leave Kabul immediately. The key interlocutors from the Kabul "establishment" are Abdallah Abdallah, former President Hamid Karzai and former mujahedin leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar - all of whom are anti-American. On 15 August, Baradar flew from Doha to Qandahar - overflying Iran. Baradar told confidants he would not go to Kabul until the negotiations are over. However, he



tightly controls everything from his old house in Qandahar. Meanwhile, as demanded, Ghani escaped Kabul for Uzbekistan and an exile in the UAE. By day end, the Taliban declared that the “war is over” and that they controlled the entire territory of Afghanistan.

On 17 August, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid announced a moderate, inclusive policy. Mujahid reiterated publicly all the promises made by the Taliban to their foreign interlocutors. He stressed the Taliban’s commitment to moderation and tolerance. The Taliban “seek no revenge” and “everyone is forgiven,” Mujahid stated. He also announced the Taliban’s intent to form “an inclusive government” - albeit “within the bounds of Sharia Law.” Taliban seniors negotiating the handover of power did not rule out the forming of a “transition administration” with a non-Taliban interim president. The front runner is Ali Ahmad Jalali - a former Interior Minister who is a US citizen. Back in 2014, Jalali was barred from running for president because he refused to renounce his US citizenship. Abdallah Abdallah, who is mediating the administration forming, is convinced that the Taliban are sincere. Throughout, the real power will be in the hands of Baradar who will ultimately become the head of government.

However, the Leadership Shura in Quetta has different ideas about the future government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. On 19 August, one of the Shura’s top advisors, Waheedullah Hashimi, articulated the Shura’s plans. Afghanistan will be ruled by a “ruling Shura” that will be placed above the government. Hashimi expects Akhundzada to be the head of this Shura. While everyday governing and state affairs will be handled by the government - the Shura will supervise and guarantee the Islamic character of the country. Hashimi expects Baradar to be the head of the government. Hashimi emphasized that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will be an Islamic state and that there will be no compromises on this issue. “There will be no democratic system at all because it does not have any base in our country,” Hashimi stated. “We will not discuss what type of political system should we apply in Afghanistan because it is clear. It is Sharia Law and that is it.” Hashimi stressed that the promises made by Mujahid are valid within the framework of Sharia Law.

On 21 August, Baradar finally arrived in Kabul at the head of a high-level Taliban delegation comprised of members of the three Shura councils.

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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 geoeconomic 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 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.³ 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 Faseehuiddin, 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 under-

³ For analysis of the Doha agreement see: Yossef Bodansky, The Road to Ho Chi Minh City, Afghanistan, ISPSW Issue No 675, March 2020.



takings 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.



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.

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