

The Taliban Advance: A Saigon Moment in the Hindu Kush

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“The Hindu Kush is an 800-kilometre-long mountain range that stretches through Afghanistan, from its centre to Northern Pakistan and into Tajikistan”

And it's all over

For the unknown soldier

It's all over

For the unknown soldier

- The Doors, The Unknown Soldier

Let's start with some stunning facts on the ground.

The Taliban are on a roll. Earlier this week their P.R. arm was claiming they hold 218 Afghan districts out of 421 - capturing new ones every day. Tens of districts are contested. Entire Afghan provinces are basically lost to the government in Kabul - de facto reduced to administer a few scattered cities under siege.

Already on July 1st the Taliban announced they controlled 80% of Afghan territory. That's close to the situation 20 years ago, only a few weeks before 9/11, when [Commander Masoud told me in the Panjshir valley](#), as he prepared a counter-offensive, that the Taliban were 85% dominant.

Their new tactical approach works like a dream. First there's a direct appeal to soldiers of the Afghan National Army (ANA) to surrender. Negotiations are smooth - and deals fulfilled. Soldiers in the low thousands have already joined the Taliban without a single shot fired.

Mapmakers cannot upload updates fast enough. This is fast becoming a textbook case on

the collapse of a 21st century central government.

The Taliban are fast advancing in western Vardak, easily capturing ANA bases. That is the prequel for an assault on Maidan Shar, the provincial capital. If they get control of Vardak they will be literally at the gates of Kabul.

After capturing Panjwaj district, the Taliban are also a stone's throw away from Kandahar, founded by Alexander The Great in 330 B.C. and the city where a certain mullah Omar – with a little help from his Pakistani ISI friends – started the Taliban adventure in 1994, leading to their Kabul power takeover in 1996.

The overwhelming majority of Badakhshan province – Tajik majority, not Pashtun – fell after only 4 days of negotiations, with a few skirmishes thrown in. The Taliban even captured a hilltop outpost very close to Faizabad, Badakhshan's capital.

I tracked the Tajik-Afghan border in detail when [I traveled the Pamir highway](#) in late 2019. The Taliban, following mountain tracks on the Afghan side, could soon reach the legendary, desolate border with Xinjiang in the Wakhan corridor.

The Taliban are also about to make a move on Hairaton, in Balkh province. Hairaton is at the Afghan-Uzbek border, the site of the historically important Friendship Bridge over the Amu Darya, through which the Red Army departed Afghanistan in 1989.

ANA commanders swear the city is now protected from all sides by a five-kilometer security zone. Hairaton has already attracted tens of thousands of refugees. Tashkent does not want them to cross the border.

And it's not only Central Asia; the Taliban have already advanced to the city limits of Islam Qilla, which borders Iran, in Herat province, and is the key checkpoint in the busy Mashhad to Herat corridor.

The Tajik puzzle

The extremely porous, geologically stunning Tajik-Afghan mountain borders remain the most sensitive case. Tajik **President Emomali Rahmon**, after a serious phone call with **Vladimir Putin**, ordered the mobilization of 20,000 reservists and sent them to the border. Rahmon also promised humanitarian and financial support to the Kabul government.

The Taliban, for their part, officially declared that the border is safe and they have no intention of invading Tajik territory. Earlier this week even the Kremlin cryptically announced that Moscow does not plan to send troops to Afghanistan.

A cliffhanger is set for the end of July, as the Taliban announced they will submit a written peace proposal to Kabul. A strong possibility is that it may amount to an intimation for Kabul to surrender – and transfer full control of the country.

The Taliban seem to be riding an irresistible momentum – especially when Afghans themselves were stunned to see how the imperial “protector”, after nearly two decades of de facto occupation, [left Bagram air base in the middle of the night](#), scurrying away like rats.

Compare it to the evaluation of serious analysts such as [Lester Grau](#), explaining the Soviet

departure over three decades ago:

When the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, they did so in a coordinated, deliberate, professional manner, leaving behind a functioning government, an improved military and an advisory and economic effort insuring the continued viability of the government. The withdrawal was based on a coordinated diplomatic, economic and military plan permitting Soviet forces to withdraw in good order and the Afghan government to survive. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) managed to hold on despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Only then, with the loss of Soviet support and the increased efforts by the Mujahideen (holy warriors) and Pakistan, did the DRA slide toward defeat in April 1992. The Soviet effort to withdraw in good order was well executed and can serve as a model for other disengagements from similar nations.

When it comes to the American empire, Tacitus once again applies:

“They have plundered the world, stripping naked the land in their hunger... they are driven by greed, if their enemy be rich; by ambition, if poor... They ravage, they slaughter, they seize by false pretenses, and all of this they hail as the construction of empire. And when in their wake nothing remains but a desert, they call that peace.”

In the wake of the Hegemon, deserts called peace, in varying degrees, include Iraq, Libya, Syria - which happen to, geologically, harbor deserts - as well as the deserts and mountains of Afghanistan.

That Afghan heroin rat line

It looks like Think Tank Row in D.C., between Dupont and Thomas Circle alongside Massachusetts Avenue, have not really done their homework on *pashtunwali* - the Pashtun honor code - or the ignominious [British empire retreat from Kabul](#).

Still, it's too early to tell whether what is being spun as the US “retreat” from Afghanistan reflects the definitive unraveling of the [Empire of Chaos](#). Especially because this is not a “retreat” at all: it's a repositioning - with added elements of privatization.

At least 650 “U.S. forces” will be protecting the sprawling embassy in Kabul. Add to it possibly 500 Turkish troops - which means NATO - to protect the airport, plus an undeclared number of “contractors” a.k.a mercenaries, and an unspecified number of Special Forces.

Pentagon head **Lloyd Austin** has [come up with the new deal](#). The militarized embassy is referred to as Forces Afghanistan-Forward. These forces will be “supported” by a new, special Afghan office in Qatar.

The key provision is that the special privilege to bomb Afghanistan whenever the Hegemon feels like it remains intact. The difference is in the chain of command. Instead of **Gen. Scott Miller**, so far the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, the Bomber-in-Chief will be **Gen. Frank McKenzie**, the head of CENTCOM.

So future bombing will come essentially from the Persian Gulf - what the Pentagon lovingly describes as “over the horizon capability”. Crucially, Pakistan has officially refused to be part of it, although in the case of drone attacks, they will have to overfly Pakistani territory

in Balochistan. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also refused to host American bases.

The Taliban, for their part, are unfazed. Spokesman Suhail Shaheen was adamant that any foreign troops that are not out by the 9/11 deadline will be regarded as – what else – occupiers.

Whether the Taliban will be able to establish dominance is not an issue; it's just a matter of when. And that leads us to the two really important questions:

1. Will the CIA be able to maintain what Seymour Hersh initially, and later myself, described as the [Afghan heroin rat line](#) that finances their black ops?
2. And if the CIA cannot continue to supervise opium poppy field production in Afghanistan as well as coordinate the subsequent stages of the heroin business, where will it move to?

Every thinking mind across Central/South Asia knows that the Empire of Chaos, for two long decades, was never interested in defeating the Taliban or fighting for “the freedom of the Afghan people”.

The key motives were to keep a crucial, strategic forward base in the underbelly of “existential threats” China and Russia as well as intractable Iran – all part of the New Great Game; to be conveniently positioned to later exploit Afghanistan's enormous mineral wealth; and to process opium into heroin to fund CIA ops. Opium was a major factor in the rise of the British empire, and heroin remains one of the world's top dirty businesses funding shady intel ops.

What China and the SCO want

Now compare all of the above with the Chinese approach.

Unlike Think Tank Row in D.C., Chinese counterparts seem to have done their homework. They understood that the USSR did not invade Afghanistan in 1979 to impose “popular democracy” – the jargon then – but was in fact invited by the quite progressive UN-recognized Kabul government at the time, which essentially wanted roads, electricity, medical care, telecommunications, education.

As these staples of modernity would not be provided by Western institutions, the solution would have to come from Soviet socialism. That would imply a social revolution – a convoluted affair in a deeply pious Islamic nation – and, crucially, the end of feudalism.

“Grand Chessboard” Brzezinski's imperial counterpunch worked because it manipulated Afghan feudal lords and their regimentation capacity – bolstered by immense funds (CIA, Saudis, Pakistani intel) – to give the USSR its Vietnam. None of these feudal lords were interested in the abolition of poverty and economic development in Afghanistan.

China is now picking up where the USSR left. Beijing, in close contact with the Taliban since early 2020, essentially wants to extend the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – one of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) flagship projects – to Afghanistan.

The first, crucial step will be the construction of the Kabul-Peshawar motorway – through the Khyber pass and the current border at Torkham. That will mean Afghanistan de facto

becoming part of CPEC.

It's all about regional integration at work. Kabul-Peshawar will be one extra CPEC node that already includes the construction of the ultra-strategic [Tashkurgan airport](#) in the Karakoram highway in Xinjiang, only 50 km away from the Pakistani border and also close to Afghanistan, as well as Gwadar harbor in Balochistan.

In early June, a [trilateral China-Afghanistan-Pakistan meeting](#) led the Chinese Foreign Ministry to unmistakably bet on the "peaceful recovery of Afghanistan", with the joint statement welcoming "the early return of the Taliban to the political life of Afghanistan" and a pledge to "expand economic and trade ties".

So there's no way a dominant Taliban will refuse the Chinese drive to build infrastructure and energy projects geared towards regional economic integration, as long as they keep the country pacified and not subject to jihadi turbulence of the ISIS-Khorasan variety - capable of spilling over to Xinjiang.

The Chinese game play is clear: the Americans should not be able to exert influence over the new Kabul arrangement. It's all about the strategic Afghan importance for BRI - and that is intertwined with discussions inside the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), incidentally founded 20 years ago, and which for years has advocated for an "Asian solution" for the Afghan drama.

The discussions inside the SCO regard the NATO projection of the new Afghanistan as a jihadi paradise controlled by Islamabad as not more than wishful thinking nonsense.

It will be fascinating to watch how China, Pakistan, Iran, Russia and even India will fill the vacuum in the post-Forever Wars era in Afghanistan. It's very important to remember that all these actors, plus the Central Asians, are full SCO members (or observers, in the case of Iran).

Tehran plausibly might interfere with potential imperial plans to bomb Afghanistan from the outside - whatever the motive. On another front, it's unclear whether Islamabad or Moscow, for instance, would help the Taliban to take Bagram air base. What's certain is that Russia will take the Taliban off its list of terrorist outfits.

Considering that the empire and NATO - via Turkey - will not be really leaving, a distinct future possibility is a SCO push, allied with the Taliban (Afghanistan is also a SCO observer) to secure the nation in their terms and concentrate on CPEC development projects. But the first step seems to be the hardest: how to form a real, solid, national coalition government in Kabul.

History may rule that Washington wanted Afghanistan to be the USSR's Vietnam; decades later, it ended up getting its own second Vietnam, repeated as - what else - farce. A remixed Saigon moment is fast approaching. Yet another stage of the New Great Game in Eurasia is at hand.

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Featured image: Afghanistan in Badakhshan province, seen from the Pamir highway in Tajikistan during my November 2019 Central Asian loop. This district, not far from Ishkashim, is now under Taliban control. Photo: Pepe Escobar

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