

INSIGHTS

 SYNERGIA FOUNDATION

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AFGHANISTAN : RETURN OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE



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ARTICLE NO



1

THE WILDCARD IN AFGHANISTAN

In seeking to play a larger role in Afghanistan, Turkey has adopted a pragmatic approach, based on ground realities

2

THE FINGER OF BLAME

The Afghanistan crisis was precipitated by a failure at the intelligence, policy, strategic and tactical levels.

3

CALL A SPADE A SPADE

Haunted by their collective historic memory, Afghans today have no illusions about the true face of the Taliban.

4

GREAT GAME REDUX

Given the upheavals in the AFGPAK region, India must look beyond transactional relationships to cultivate robust strategic partnerships.

5

HYPERPOWER ON THE WANE?

The U.S. policy of withdrawal has been concerning for allies in the Indo-Pacific, where China is flexing its muscles.

6

AN END TO THE AFGHAN SAGA

Despite a credibility crisis at the international level, most Americans support the policy of troop withdrawal.

7

ECONOMICS OF ROBUST DEFENCE

With an unstable Afghanistan, India must build up its economic capabilities to sustain military requirements.

8

WEB OF ISRAELI POLITICS

Besides its convoluted history, the political dynamics of Israel can be best understood through the “four tribes” framework.



AR. NO. 01

THE WILDCARD IN AFGHANISTAN?

As its fellow NATO members make a rather humiliating retreat, all eyes are on Turkey to see if it can play a stabilising role in the aftermath of Taliban victory.



Major General Ajay Sah, SM, VSM (Retired) is the Chief Information Officer at Synergia Foundation.

A Turkish Army contingent was to protect the final withdrawal of its NATO partners from Kabul airport, a sure sign of President Erdogan's efforts to wriggle back into the good books of the sullen Americans. The plan was optimistically based upon the presumption that the Taliban would be kept at bay for a reasonable period of time, while a NATO contingent (the Turks) would secure the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul.

However, the situation deteriorated at such a lightning pace that the Turks were found exiting the country along with other NATO forces. All the same, the Turkish President declared that his country will remain in touch with the new dispensation in Kabul and will offer to secure the Kabul civil airport to encourage international travel to the war-torn nation.

Notwithstanding the abortive rearguard action, Turkey has been striving to play a larger role in Afghanistan and is expected to continue doing, so once the dust of a Taliban takeover settles down.

A FLASHBACK

Even though Turkey does not share a physical land border with Afghanistan, its ties to the country stretch back across centuries. In the late 1800s, Turkey had aligned with the British Empire at a time when the great game was at its peak. Later, in the first decade of the 20th Century, the Ottoman Empire, under pressure from the Anglo Saxons, had worked with Germany to weaken the English influence

over Afghanistan. With the entry of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkish politics, Istanbul established close ties with Kabul, then under the genial King Amanullah Khan and was instrumental in raising educational standards and military training in Afghanistan.

The Saadabad Pact of 1939 was a highwater mark in Turkish-Afghanistan relations. As tremors of an impending conflagration spread throughout Europe, and Russia and China strengthened their grips in the periphery of Afghanistan, Turkey, along with Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran, had signed a non-aggression pact to keep the global conflict away from the region.

During the cold war, Pakistan rather than Afghanistan became central to Turkish foreign policy outreach in the region, since both were members of the UK-sponsored Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). However, despite their close relationship, there have been sharp differences between Turkey and Pakistan on the internal tribal dynamics of Afghanistan. The Turkic ethnic groups, like the Uzbeks, the Hazaras and the Tajiks, find favour in Turkish designs as natural allies, vis à vis the Pashtuns, who dominate the Taliban and have an avid mentor in the Pakistan military.

Turkey has willingly contributed to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which came into being in 2001. However, it sensibly kept out of combat duties, and its personnel were largely engaged in providing logistics to the ISAF and training to the fledgling Afghan National Army. Turkey also enthusiastically participated in the reconstruction boom financed by the West after the eviction of the Taliban, with a number of construction companies taking up projects in education, health, and agriculture.

A GUARDED APPROACH

Turkey has been a popular destination for refugees fleeing Afghanistan through Iran or Central Asia for some years now. With the Taliban back in power, Turkey fears a mass exodus that would ultimately end at its doors, at a time when the pandemic has played havoc with its economy and

its relations with the West remain, at best, strained. With nearly four million Syrian refugees already inside Turkey, it has no option but to shut its doors to a fresh influx from Afghanistan. Therefore, irrespective of who is in power in Kabul, it is in Ankara's interest to promote stability in the country and thus avoid a fresh flood of refugees.

It is for this reason that Turkey has adopted a pragmatic approach tinged with an understanding of the ground realities. Its foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, was quoted by Daily Sabah as saying, "Turkey would act in coordination with the international community on its position on the recognition of the new government in Afghanistan."

“Ankara would like nothing better than to earn the trust of the Taliban to act as an intermediary for the West.”

This would bring solid diplomatic dividends to it. However, as of now, the Taliban is extremely suspicious of Turkish manoeuvrings and has shown little inclination to accept any role from them as honest brokers. In fact, their message to President Erdogan was unambiguous- leave Afghanistan along with their NATO allies! Soner Cagaptay of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy says that "While Turkey wants to play a role in the rebuilding of Afghanistan, but the Taliban isn't really going for it." This was succinctly put by Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesperson, when he told TRT Arabi, a Turkish public broadcaster, "We want good relations with Turkey, Turkey is our brother, we have many points in common based on faith. We want Turkey to leave the past and return to the present and the future. After that, we can ask for dialogue."

GEOPOLITICAL MANOEUVRINGS

Turkey's geopolitical position had strengthened since 2020 when it started playing a more dominating and proactive role. Its success in bringing to a complete standstill the Russian-stiffened Syrian onslaught in Northern Syria and its support to the UN-recognised government in Libya, again in opposition to Russia, has greatly enforced its image as a credible power broker with the military muscle to back strategic ambitions. In short, Turkey has been very successful in altering the conflict management and resolution dynamics in these countries with a degree of success. Now, if it looks at Afghanistan through the same prism, it should not come as a surprise.

The Indo-Pacific has replaced Central Asia as the primary focus area for American foreign policy. Turkey is aware of the developing power vacuum, and while Russia remains the major player in the region, Turkey is gaining in confidence to challenge Russia in its own backyard; Nagorno-Karabakh proved to be a good testbed for this purpose. It is banking upon the support of the West in this endeavour.

China would play a crucial role in case Ankara is to make any inroads into Afghanistan. In the past, Turkey was a rabid critic of Chinese excesses upon the Xinjiang Uyghurs. However, as of 2020, with China-Turkey trade having grown to over \$24 billion, Turkey has considerably toned down its

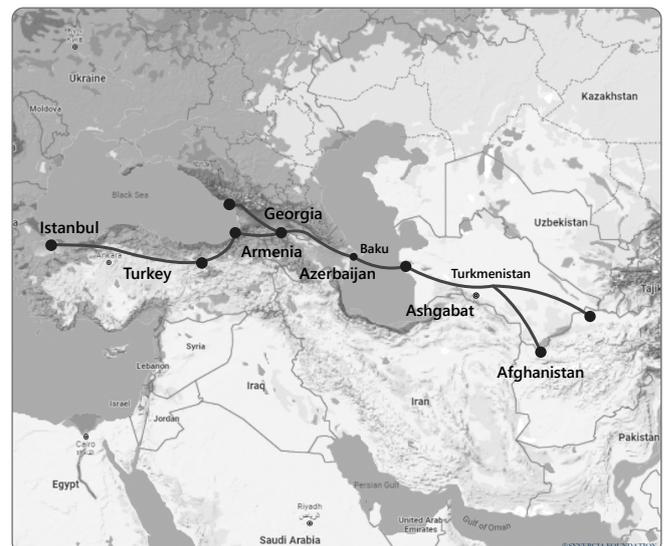
criticism. Mutual suspicions, however, continue to simmer. Turkey will have to offer China something substantial in order to win its tacit approval. One option is to ensure that the 45,000 Uighur refugees sheltered in Turkey retain a low profile and are not used as a pawn to expose Chinese human rights violations internationally.

There is yet another angle to Turkey's desire to play a meaningful role in Afghanistan -its growing rivalry with Saudi Arabia, with whom it has been competing for the leadership of the Sunni world. Turkey has confronted the Kingdom in different theatres, from Syria to Libya, the Qatar blockade, and the controversy over the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. Any ambitious moves in Afghanistan would be a part of this game plan.

It also banks upon its close friend and ally Pakistan to help it navigate the dangerous geopolitical minefields of Afghanistan. When Turkey was being designated by its NATO allies to act as the rear-guard in Kabul, President Erdogan had publicly sought Pakistani support for the mission. Pakistan, not to ruffle the feathers of its Taliban protégé, made a guarded response, with unnamed government officials promising logistical connectivity through its territory. With the Taliban viewing Turkey suspiciously as a stooge of the West, despite its Islamic credentials, Prime Minister Imran Khan is acutely aware of the slippery ground that he may be treading upon by overtly enabling any role for Turkey in Afghanistan, without the consent of its new masters.

India too should be concerned in case Turkey is successful in making credible inroads into Afghanistan, along with China and Pakistan already firmly ensconced with the Taliban leadership. Turkey has always been a diplomatic thorn on India's side, vociferously giving vent to anti-Indian rhetoric in relation to Kashmir and maintaining a close military relationship with the Pakistan military.

On its part, India has been endeavouring to respond to Turkish moves, albeit far more subtly. It started with threatening to ban imports from Turkey and has recently followed with a historic first-ever joint naval exercise with its arch-enemy Greece in the Mediterranean. India can also join many Arab countries in rejecting Turkish outreach calling it a replay of the hated Ottoman Empire.



AR. NO. 02

THE FINGER OF BLAME

While the Afghanistan crisis may represent a collective failure of the western coalition forces and their chosen Afghan political elites, the U.S. will have to share a greater degree of blame.



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A sombre atmosphere prevails in the international community as the Taliban moves to quell the last island of resistance in Panjshir Valley. The heart-wrenching images of Afghani civilians thronging the tarmac at Hamid Karzai International Airport and clinging to the departing U.S. military planes will not be easy to forget. However, even as the world comes to terms with the Taliban reincarnation, there is a heated debate about who is to be held culpable for this debacle.

Predictably, the Biden administration has received a lot of flak for failing to plan and execute a smooth exit. Others, however, have faulted the Afghan government and the military for not defending their nation and its much-vaunted constitution more stoutly, despite the considerable military assets placed at their command by the departing Americans. Amidst such high-octane political rhetoric, it is imperative that an objective analysis of the perceived failures be undertaken, especially at the intelligence, policy, strategic and tactical levels.

A FATAL INTELLIGENCE FLAW?

Despite grim predictions of a destabilised Afghanistan, a confident President Biden had assured his nation and the international community, as late as in July 2021, that the 300,000-strong Afghan National Army (ANA) would keep the Taliban at bay. Even when faced with rapid Taliban gains in the provinces, the U.S. continued to maintain that the Ghani government would last for at least another six months. However, this optimism proved to be tragically misplaced when triumphant Taliban fighters entered the presidential palace, barely ten days after the fall of the first provincial capital of Zaranj. Against this backdrop, many analysts have termed this a 'monumental' and 'cataclysmic' intelligence

failure, with some even comparing it to the information gap during the Tet Offensive in the Vietnam war. In the context of Afghanistan, however, intelligence agencies appear to have underestimated the speed at which the Taliban would seize the capital, thereby leaving little time for the U.S. forces to secure the airport and prepare for orderly evacuations. Having set an expedited deadline for troop withdrawal, the predominant view is that the U.S. should have been able to pre-empt the consequences, apart from tracking the real-time movement of Taliban fighters. Besides these glaring omissions, experts have pointed out that there was a lack of intelligence synergy between the U.S. forces and the ANA. While the former had access to technical intelligence, the latter was more proficient in collating human intelligence. It is unclear whether such information was effectively shared between the two, owing to existing cultural friction. Certain members of the U.S. intelligence community, however, have pushed back against the view that this was an intelligence failure. According to them, the U.S. government had been given adequate warnings about the fragility of the situation,

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Dr. Uzi Arad, Former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of Israel, 106th Synergia Forum: 'From Hyperpower to Declining Power'

“I would not be too hasty in placing the entire blame on the American intelligence community, as many are doing. In some ways, of course, this was a major intelligence failure –they should have had more advance notice of what the Taliban was doing. They should have known in real time that forces were moving. However, the prediction that this would not happen as soon as it did, this may be forgiven.”

well before the Taliban offensive. The U.S. State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in particular, had flagged the possibility of an impending collapse of the Afghanistan government. Ignoring this assessment, however, the Biden administration had proceeded with the expedited withdrawal of troops. When the situation spiralled out of control, the intelligence community was made a scapegoat to gloss over the mismanagement of this crisis. Only time will tell whether intelligence assessments were indeed willfully ignored by the present administration. Irrespective of this variable, however, there are those who posit that the unravelling of Afghanistan began many years ago, owing to strategic, tactical and policy missteps by the U.S. regime.

A CRISIS IN THE MAKING

Having ousted the Taliban from power in 2001, the U.S. had focussed its efforts on creating a stable regime with robust state institutions. However, in seeking to centralise power in a national government, there was a limited appreciation of the ground realities and cultural sensitivities in Afghanistan. The country continued to play host to numerous tribes, languages, ethnicities, and religious sects, failing to conform to the Western concept of a homogenous nation-state. In fact, certain experts believed a federal and inclusive structure accommodating the cultural plurality of Afghans would have been more sensitive to the local context, as opposed to a Presidential form of government. Moreover, mechanical transplantation of Judeo-Christian values and liberal ideals were not necessarily well-received by all sections of the Afghan population. In this veritable milieu, the Taliban militants had found themselves in a unique position to exploit these vulnerabilities and capitalise on their identity as Pashtuns - the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. They also had a better appreciation of tribal loyalties, local networks, and kin relationships, allowing them to strike deals with Afghan army commanders as their forces swept throughout the country. When viewed through this prism, the relatively swift and bloodless conquest of Taliban 2.0 is hardly surprising.

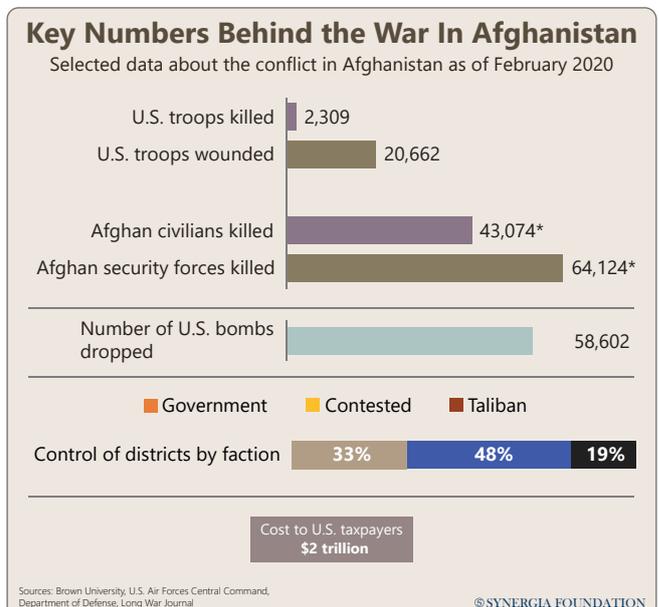
To make matters worse, the nation-building project was skewed by the deeply entrenched practice of corruption among the civilian government, political elite and the Afghanistan National forces. Impoverished army units, in particular, were infamous for taking apart their equipment and selling them as spares to other actors, including the Taliban. Even the U.S. encouraged corruption by liberally rewarding local warlords and doling out contracts at exorbitant costs. According to reports, the increased dependence on civil and military contractors to logistically support the ANA failed to deliver at the crucial moment. All these factors combined to ensure that the impact was devastating at the tactical level.

“When the dust settles in Afghanistan and blames are apportioned, both the bribe-taker and the bribe-giver will find themselves equally blameworthy.”

Apart from its obvious policy and tactical mistakes, the U.S. and other coalition forces are likely to be held accountable for a strategic oversight on their part, namely the inability to rein in Pakistani ambitions. Despite the overwhelming evidence of overt and covert ISI support to the Taliban after it had been routed from Afghanistan, the Americans did little to hold Islamabad accountable. The international community also lacked the political resolve to impose punitive sanctions against Pakistan. Trained, financed, and armed by the ISI, in safe sanctuaries across the Durand Line, the Taliban were able to regroup and emerge as a formidable force. As the Afghanistan crisis continues to unfold, the U.S. will find it difficult to live down this strategic failure.

ANA -THE WHIPPING BOY

As countries around the world take stock of the current situation, President Biden has been quick to point fingers at the Kabul government and the ANA. Having departed from the country in haste, President Ashraf Ghani or his cabinet colleagues were in no position to remonstrate or defend themselves. Echoing the words of his predecessor, President Biden had told his nation, “American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves. We gave them every chance to determine their own future. We could not provide them with the will to fight for that future”. Critics, however, point out that it is not fair to squarely place the blame on the Afghans. After all, it is the U.S. that went behind their back to negotiate peace deals with the Taliban. The country had also failed to uphold some of its commitments under the 2012 strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan, which was valid till 2024. Moreover, most of the U.S.-requisitioned private military contractors had chosen to depart with the U.S. troops, leaving behind a largely dysfunctional security apparatus. As it is, the Afghan fighting force had been crippled by years of corruption and a lack of basic support from the top levels of the civilian government. In this context, it did not take long for the front-line Afghan soldier to comprehend the futility of fighting for a lost cause.



AR.
NO. 03CALL A SPADE
A SPADE

Notwithstanding its grand proclamations, Taliban 2.0 is little removed from its original avatar.



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Flush with victory after its rapid military offensive, the Taliban leadership has been attempting to project itself as a 'moderate' regime. Through carefully managed press statements, it has publicly spoken of its intention to constitute an 'inclusive' government. However, if it stays true to its ideological roots, as it is wont to do, then there is little leeway for this reality to materialise.

BEGUILING THE WORLD?

Recognising the global abhorrence towards their extremist views, the Taliban has been quick to assure the international community that the rights of women and minorities will be protected, albeit within the framework of the Sharia law. As part of a massive publicity blitz, it has pledged to respect media freedoms and grant amnesty to those who had earlier worked with foreign powers. Equally importantly, the militants have reiterated their earlier commitment under the Doha peace deal that Afghanistan will no longer be used a haven for terrorists. Bolstered by viral images and video clips on social media that supposedly depict their more 'humane' face, these assertions have fuelled hopes that Taliban 2.0 is a more reformed and 'softer' version of the original band of religious zealots. However, those who are better acquainted with the militants tend to take all this grandstanding with a pinch of salt. Many of them remember that identical pronouncements had been made by the Taliban when it entered Kabul a quarter of a century back. Despite claiming to have no personal vendetta, it ruthlessly and methodically orchestrated a brutal reprisal against former enemies, culminating in the public stringing up of President Mohammad Najibullah from a lamp post in Kabul square. Not surprisingly, President Ghani has prudently opted for a flight to safety this time around, as opposed to trusting his fate to the tender mercies of his

Taliban captors. For the older generations of Afghans, it is not easy to erase memories of the dark and hopeless days under the previous Taliban regime. With women confined to their homes, public executions being the order of the day and modern forms of entertainment being deemed taboo, the entire country had retreated into the Middle Ages for an agonising period of time. Haunted by this collective historic memory, Afghans today have no illusions about the true face of this tyrannical regime. This was most evident in the harrowing images of thousands of civilians chasing after U.S. planes on the runaway of the Kabul airport, literally voting with their feet.

THE HARSH REALITY

Although the Taliban leadership has committed to upholding 'women's rights under Islam', ground reports trickling in from Afghanistan already contradict these claims. While Kabul, under the glare of the international media, has remained relatively unscathed, targeted attacks against women and girls have been recorded in other

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Amb. Shyam Saran, Former Foreign Secretary to the Government of India. 106th Synergia Forum: 'From Hyperpower to Declining Power?'

“If we are talking about whether this is Taliban 1.0 or whether it is Taliban 2.0, I think the answer to that is already evident in the thousands and thousands of Afghans who were chasing an American transport plane on the runway, literally voting with their feet. If you ask them, the resounding answer would be that this is certainly Taliban 1.0.”

parts of Afghanistan. Apart from being turned away from schools and universities, women have been ordered to not to leave their homes without a male guardian. In Herat, media agencies report that the houses of women members of parliament have been ransacked. There are also eye-witness accounts of forced marriages, flogging and public executions. Apparently, the Taliban's version of Sharia law, which legitimises highly misogynistic interpretations, has been invoked with full vigour on the hapless inhabitants of remote regions. Besides women, Shia minorities and the ethnic Hazara community are particularly vulnerable. Even ordinary civilians have much to fear, as reports emerge about Taliban fighters conducting door-to-door visits to hunt down those who had previously collaborated with foreign forces. Under the Doha peace deal, the Taliban had agreed to delink itself from terrorists' groups like the Al-Qaeda. Till now, however, there has been no evidence to suggest that the group has indeed walked the talk. In fact, a recent report by the Defence Department Inspector General's Office in the U.S. has suggested that the Taliban continues to provide Al Qaeda with a haven in Afghanistan while publicly denying that the terrorist group is in the country. Meanwhile, the responsibility of Kabul's security has been entrusted to the Haqqani network, a most rabidly extreme Taliban affiliate with deep ties to al-Qaeda. Against this backdrop, terrorist groups are expected to make a decisive comeback in Afghanistan, flush with funds and recruits. Taliban's triumphalism will only spur the global jihadist movement even further.

“To long-term Afghanistan watchers, the PR antics of the Taliban appear farcical as there is little reason to believe that the current regime will be any different from the earlier Islamic Emirate.”

As unambiguously articulated by Ambassador Shyam Saran, 'this is Taliban 1.0 pretending to be Taliban 2.0'.

A CALCULATIVE MOVE

While its ideological underpinnings remain unchanged, the new Taliban regime appears to have learnt from its past errors, when it had earned a great deal of bad press. Furthermore, the prospects of facing an empty treasury has prompted prudence while dealing with the rich western world, which holds the key to its future financial deliverance. As a result, the battle-hardened fighters, obviously guided by their wily foreign mentors, have deployed a combination of diplomatic strategies and PR campaigns to gain acceptance among the international community. As opposed to being perceived as 'rural and conservative mullahs', the current leadership have sought to project a veneer of moderation that that prevents the world powers from isolating the Taliban government. Although belied by reality, this explains the recent press statement that promises to honour human rights and presents a relatively soft image of the militants. According to some experts, the Taliban has also made a conscious effort to garner support beyond its traditional constituency of Pashtuns. They have reached out

to ethnic communities like the Tajiks and the Uzbeks, who have played a crucial role in gaining power in non-Pashtun areas like northern Afghanistan. However, it remains to be seen whether the militants possess the necessary skills to govern and administer a state, which arguably is far more complex than the Islamic Emirate that they once controlled. Moreover, the particularly radical elements within the group will be careful to ensure that their public façade of being 'flexible' and 'pragmatic' does not delegitimise the Taliban in the eyes of the global jihadist movement.

WILLING TO BE BEGUILLED

Surprisingly, global powers appear more inclined to believe that the new Taliban is different. Perhaps, this collective delusion is just a convenient pretext for legitimising the militant rule and covering up the lack of international will to do something about the changing equations in Afghanistan. To a certain extent, it may also be motivated by economic and geopolitical opportunism. Pakistan, for example, is perfectly poised to reap strategic rewards after having invested considerable capital in nurturing the Taliban. Apart from positioning itself as the primary diplomatic conduit between the militants and the global community, it can effectively side-line India's role in the region. For this to work, however, it will be important to ensure that the Taliban are not perceived as so brutal and repressive that they need to be internationally isolated. It is no surprise, therefore, that Prime Minister Imran Khan has endorsed the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan by remarking that "Afghans have broken the shackles of slavery". Similarly, countries like China, Russia and Iran may seek to legitimise the human rights propaganda of the Taliban to further their own security and economic goals, despite having no real interest in championing the cause of civil liberties. Even liberal democracies like the U.S. and Europe may be willing to give the militants a shot at redemption to stem the flow of refugees without attracting domestic condemnation. At the end of the day, however, the Taliban will view all of this as a vindication of its strategy, allowing it to carry out a reign of terror unimpeded.



AR. NO. **04**
GREAT GAME
REDUX

The emergence of the Taliban as masters of Afghanistan has created new equations for regional geopolitics with global resonance.



With the Taliban in supreme control of Kabul, the country has been given a new name - the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, doing away with the “Republic” in the earlier title. This goes beyond mere semantics as it portends serious outcomes for the Afghan populace, as also for the surrounding region.

TALIBAN VERSION 2.0

The prominent faces that have been in the forefront for the top leadership of the reborn Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan comprise a mix of the old and the new. Foremost is 53 years-old Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was one of the four founders of the Taliban and was captured in Pakistan in 2010.

Released in 2018 on American request, he headed the Taliban delegation in Doha during the talks leading to the U.S. exit. He is rumoured to be appointed the first Vice Emir once the Taliban formalises its government.

Next is Hibatullah Akhundzada, in the late 60s, who is the third supreme commander of the Taliban since 2016, when his predecessor fell victim to a drone strike.

Reportedly close to the “Quetta Shura”, he is likely to play a pivotal role in charting the rules governing civil society, especially those pertaining to women.

Another strong contender for the top slot would be Sirajudin Haqqani, who is relatively younger, being in his late 40s. He is the deputy leader of the Taliban and head of the Haqqani network.

His network, deeply aligned with the Pakistani ISI, has been proscribed as a terrorist group by the U.S. As its leader,

Sirajudin carries a US \$ 5 million bounty, placed on his head by the U.S. State Department.

Finally, it is expected that Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, son of the late Mullah Omar, the co-founder of the Taliban, would also find a place at the high table. Youngest at 30, he currently heads the powerful religious commission.

However, the Taliban is in no hurry to make a formal statement about the leadership, as they are still in negotiations to make the new government “inclusive”. According to Ambassador Shyam Saran, “There is certainly pressure in order to justify international legitimacy.

There is pressure on the Taliban leaders from Pakistan, from China, from even Russia to try and make this, at least for appearance’s sake, a somewhat more inclusive government by bringing in, perhaps, some of the other ethnic groups like the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, the Hazaras.”

GEOPOLITICAL BACKGAMMON

S **Expert Insights**



Lt. Gen PJS Panu, Former Deputy Chief of Indian Integrated Defence Staff, 106th Synergia Forum: ‘From Hyperpower to Declining Power?’

“We need to secure our borders first and not allow a direct threat to manifest from the disturbed AfPak situation. We also need to understand how to deal with America. If the U.S. is going to be untrustworthy, then how will the Quad relationship help India? There is considerable difference between a buyer-seller relationship in military equipment and a real military partnership.”



The triumphalism at the lightening outcome is patent amongst the well-known sponsors of Taliban, albeit somewhat subdued in consideration of the global horror at the return of the dreaded militants.

It is understandable considering that Pakistan has invested 20 years of its political capital and has, in fact, provided tremendous material and military support to this movement against heavy odds. Having made this investment, obviously, it believes that the time has now come to reap some interest on this capital and that interest, from the Pakistani point of view, is only vis a vis India.

Pakistan has not much other concern. They will certainly want to see that the Indian presence in Afghanistan is as minimal as possible, if not completely absent. As for India, New Delhi will wait for the new dispensation in Kabul to fully crystallise before it makes its move. Much will depend upon the posture that this dispensation adopts with respect to India and what the shape of the government is.

Lt Gen PGS Pannu has reflected upon a deeper understanding between Pakistan and China, over the upheavals that are now taking place in South Asia. As per him, it was a rare coincidence that both the countries have made softer gestures towards India, to cool down tensions that had gripped the region as an outcome of increased hostility by Pakistan along the LoC and the massive build-up along India's northern borders in Ladakh by the PLA.

The Pakistani Director General of Operations unilaterally offered an unconditional ceasefire all along the LoC in February, which obviously was accepted by India. Around the same time period, China agreed to a withdrawal and drawdown of forces, although not to the same extent as demanded by India.

This cooling of tempers should have indicated that something big was brewing, going by India's past experiences with both these antagonists.

Going back in history, it must be recollected that the last time the Taliban had been on the threshold of seizing power, the Pakistani Army and the ISI were deeply involved in fighting with the Northern Alliance, with the 75 Independent Infantry Brigade of Pakistan completely embroiled in the assault on the strategic city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

Lt Gen PJS Pannu also summed up the strategic advantage now enjoyed by a collusive China, saying that "The Chinese actually now have got a ground route, clearly available to them during the summer season, because after February the routes would open up at some point and the CPEC corridor can be seen as a military corridor. The Hindukush passes also would be open now for Pakistan to do better business with Afghanistan."

The AFPAC region has totally undergone a transformation with the departure of the U.S., the only external force that could act as a stabilising influence. Iran remains an unknown element, and the delicately balanced nations of Central Asia remain vulnerable.

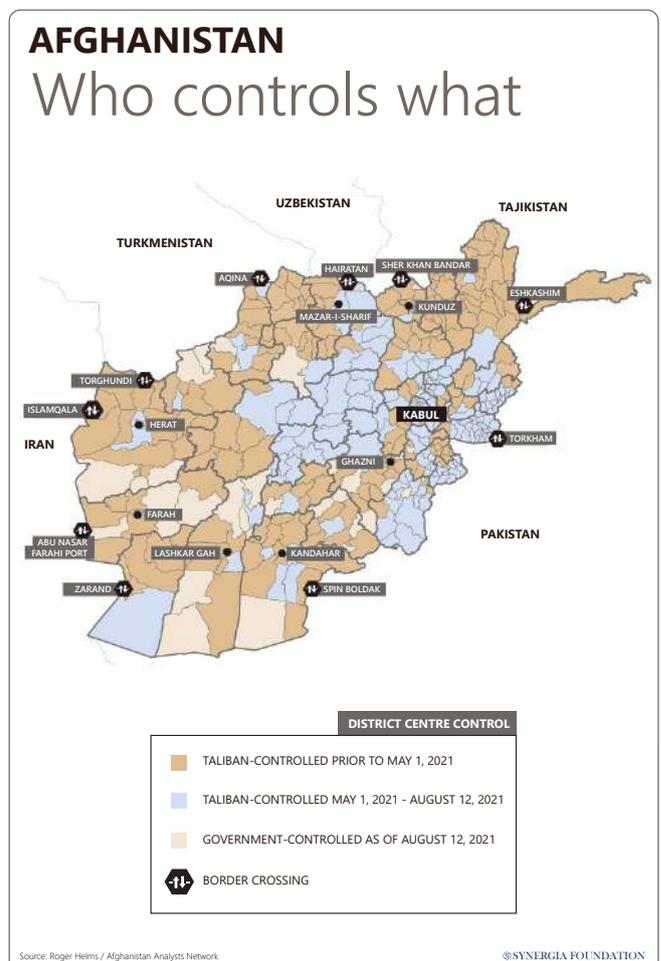
Economics will force the Taliban to allow entry to extra-regional countries to put their money in Afghanistan. Of course, the Taliban would prefer China to do the heavy lifting on this account. Beijing has economic interests in Afghanistan, and while their military interests may not be so obvious, they would like the country to remain tranquil so that their investments are not jeopardised.

More importantly, there is a genuine concern in China that Islamic fundamentalists could use the CPEC corridor to infiltrate into the restive Xinjiang province. China would be most unhappy if the Taliban genie that is now out of the bottle comes back to bite it.

However, as per Ambassador Shyam Saran, it would perhaps be wishful thinking to hope that the Pakistanis and the Chinese would embroil themselves in this 'graveyard of the empires'. Amplifying this, he said, "I think the Chinese will certainly not want to repeat the mistakes that they think the United States has been guilty of.

They will certainly want to see that their iron brother Pakistan is able to help them navigate a very complex geopolitical terrain in Afghanistan."

What is now most worrisome is that the manner in which India deals with this crisis. The country had banked a great deal upon the Americans when they established themselves in Afghanistan, even though it was not a very easy transition to democracy. But with the U.S. gone, there is a clear and discernible void.



A bolder China is bound to make inroads into this space, with Pakistan completely in its clutches. If Iran goes into their fold, along with Central Asia, then the situation will take a very serious turn for India.

With respect to China, at the end of the day, India is going to be facing China alone. It may receive some degree of support from the United States or other friends in terms of weaponry, technology and training.

“However, India must look beyond the U.S. to seek allies and partners, moving from mere transactions in military hardware to real military and strategic partnerships.”

Can the Quad mature in a manner that it becomes a reliable ally? The Japanese are too far from AFPAK, Australians have always gone very reluctantly into the Quad, and after Afghanistan, the American credibility is at its nadir.

THE BLOWBACK

As evident from the chatter on jihadi networks, the Taliban victory has been welcomed very gleefully. The humbling of the American “Crusaders” has given a huge psychological boost to terror groups around the world.

As per the Doha agreement, the Taliban would not have any truck with Al Qaeda and other such groups. However, U.S. intelligence has been reporting that these links still survive.

Therefore, the principal objective of the peace agreement has not been met.

If Sirajuddin Haqqani is a part of the new government and the Haqqani group has an important role to play, then that would be a matter of deep concern because the Haqqani group is the closest to the Pakistan ISI.

In fact, the two major attacks against the Indian embassy in Kabul were carried out by the Haqqani as agents, in a sense, of the Pakistani ISI.

Mike Mullen, in a deposition before the U.S. Congress, had said that the Haqqani group is a virtual arm of the ISI. Now, if there is going to be potential for that kind of a resurgence of cross-border terrorism, using Afghanistan as a base, naturally, this will be a matter of great concern to India.

The threat is both from land and sea frontiers, even if it is only an unconventional one. Gwadar, Djibouti and more worryingly, Chabahar could create a nautical nightmare for the Indian Navy to safeguard.

The threat is not so much a direct one. It would most likely be a hybrid threat where technology has got a huge role to play, largely in the form of information/ influence

operations.

If that happens, then there won't be any alternative, but for India to use whatever means it has to make certain that that potential threaten does not actualise, especially when you have a still unresolved federal situation in Jammu and in Kashmir.

INDIAN STRATEGY

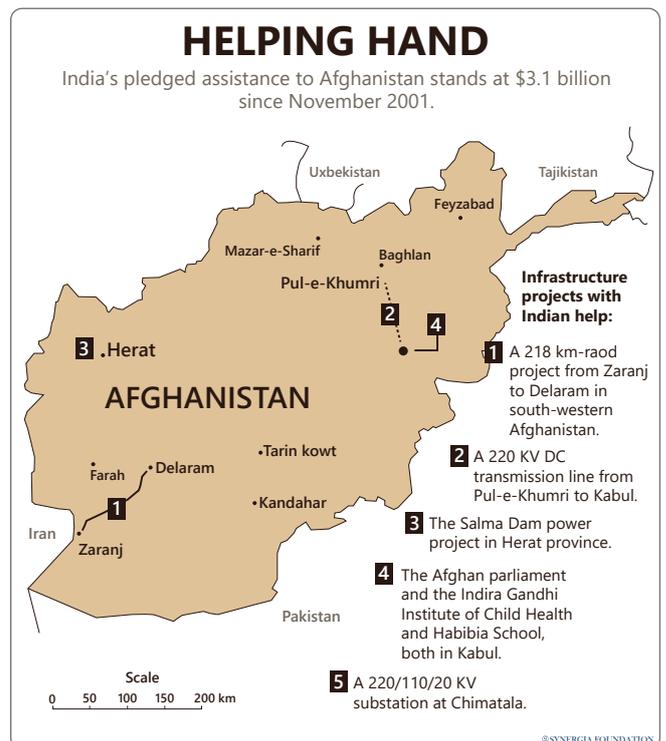
Even though the Taliban is a fully owned subsidiary of Pakistan, tactically engaging with the Taliban and whatever dispensation comes into power in Kabul is certainly something that would be worthwhile for India.

As articulated by Ambassador Shyam Sharan “It is a question of waiting to see the true nature of the political dispensation. I think it is always good to engage. That is how you get to know what the calculations and intentions of the other side are.

However, one should be under no illusion that the basic drivers of the Taliban policies have changed.”The one great advantage that India has, is the substantial amount of goodwill gained amongst ordinary Afghans over the last 20 years. Therefore, it is important for India to keep its faith with the people of Afghanistan because they remain its greatest asset.

They should not be treated as collateral damage. So, in practical terms, what does this entail? The large number of young Afghans, the post-Taliban Afghans who are studying in India, to whom the country has provided education and shelter should be supported going forward.

It is important that India is large-hearted enough to reach out to them in their hour of need. It remains to be seen if India can provide that ray of hope to them without falling into the realpolitik syndrome.





THE HAQQANI NETWORK



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RESEARCH TEAM

With the last of the U.S. troops having departed from Afghanistan, the leadership council of the Taliban is meeting at Kandahar to decide on the formation of a new government. According to reports, the Haqqani Network will play a key role in the new 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'.

Tracing the Roots

Founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, the Haqqani Network is a Sunni Islamist militant organization, which emerged in the backdrop of the anti-Soviet Mujahideen movement. Hailing from the Zadran tribe in South-Eastern Afghanistan and parts of Waziristan, the Haqqani family was initially associated with Younus Khalis of Hezb-e-Islami - one of the main jihadist groups resisting the Soviet occupation. As the rebel movement grew stronger, it was amply supplied with weapons and training by the U.S. and Pakistani forces. After the Soviet exit, however, the conflict between the Mujahideen groups intensified, causing the Haqqani network to crystallise as an autonomous unit under Jalaluddin.

In July 1988, it joined other tribal groups in Afghanistan to formulate plans for a new and 'inclusive' government by entering into talks with the UN-appointed Special Negotiator, Diego Cordovez. However, the much touted 'Cordovez peace formula' failed to take off, eventually driving the Haqqani network into the arms of the Taliban.

From 1996 to 2001, Jalaluddin became a minister in the Taliban government, holding the portfolio of Tribal and Border Affairs. Over the years, his ideology became aligned with that of the Taliban, which was to eradicate Western influence and establish a state based on Sharia law. During the prolonged Afghan war, the Haqqani network became infamous for orchestrating some of the deadliest terror attacks against high-profile targets. Apart from suicide

bombings against the Indian embassy in 2008 and 2009, the group is believed to have been responsible for the 2011 assault on the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel. They have also carried out attacks against U.S. Embassies in Kabul, the Afghan Presidential Palace as well as the office of the Afghan National Intelligence. Consequently, the group was designated as a foreign terrorist organisation by the U.S. government in 2012. Currently, the Haqqani Network is spearheaded by Sirajuddin Haqqani, the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani.

The Al-Qaeda Nexus

The Haqqani Network and the Al-Qaida share a long history with each other, dating back to the time of the anti-Soviet resistance. During the uprising against occupying Russian forces in the 1980s, the Haqqani had been one of the first insurgent groups to welcome foreign jihadists, including Arab fighters. In fact, Osama bin Laden - the founder of the Al-Qaeda movement was believed to have been trained in a Haqqani-administered camp.

Following the U.S. invasion in 2001, the Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda organised joint training camps in Pakistan's North Waziristan region to counter American forces. Ideological sympathies and intermarriage between the two groups had further bolstered these ties, causing the Haqqanis to emerge as a significant conduit between the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda.

Despite the Doha peace deal in 2020, whereby the Taliban promised to sever all links with foreign jihadist groups, intelligence analysts report that the relationship between the Haqqani Network and the Al-Qaida members have survived. This has caused much consternation among the international community.

If the Haqqani Network wields considerable power in the new Taliban government, it could prove to be a veritable breeding ground for foreign jihadists like the Al-Qaeda. Their elevation to power threatens to undermine the more 'moderate' face that the Taliban is trying to project.

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05

HYPERPOWER ON THE
WANE?

The U.S. has its work cut out to convince its allies that even after the embarrassment in Kabul, it remains a staunch and dependable strategic partner.



SYNERGIA FOUNDATION
RESEARCH TEAM

The graphic images streaming out of Kabul, which display utter confusion, despair and panic surrounding the American departure, do little credit to one of the world's greatest power. Stoically and almost singlehandedly, the U.S. under four different presidents had borne the cost and pain of this ugly war, trying to bring peace and democracy to a populace accursed by their destiny. Only time will tell if they have succeeded or failed in this endeavour. But for now, their enemies are joyfully rejoicing their humiliation, while their friends, allies, and dependents look at the developing situation with increasing concern.

CHANGING TACK

Speaking on behalf of Israel, a long-term ally of the U.S., Mr Uzi Arad says, "Despite the international backlash, the U.S. administration will not reverse the policy of disengaging from the Middle East. This will not bring about a decision that withdrawals by themselves are bad".

It is evident that President Biden is quite firm in his policy of withdrawal from the Middle East at large, and from Afghanistan specifically. For this, there is considerable bipartisan public support in America. There is no criticism of this policy, although there are questions on the aspects of intelligence and operational management of troop withdrawal.

“The drawdown marks an important inflexion point in how America perceives its cherished role as the guardian of democracy across the globe.”

Ambassador Shyam Saran observes, "If we look at the U.S. attitude not merely with respect to Afghanistan, but also

in relation to its commitments elsewhere, since the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-2008, there is a general drawback of U.S. external engagement.”

However, with respect to Afghanistan specifically, the United States of America had a strategic partnership agreement with the country, which was concluded in 2012.

As a result of that agreement, there was also a bilateral security arrangement which provided for the combat role of the U.S. forces and international troops to come to an end by 2014. After that, the U.S. was only supposed to act in a supporting and training role.

Therefore, it may be fair to conclude that along with the huge amount of treasure expended by the U.S. on building up the Afghan National Army (an endeavour in which India



Expert Insights



Dr. Uzi Arad, Former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of Israel, 106th Synergia Forum: 'From Hyperpower to Declining Power?'

“Speaking mostly from the vantage point of one of America’s allies, clearly, this has been a serious blow to American credibility. When the new Israeli Prime Minister travels to Washington, the role of America in various issues pertaining to the Middle East will come to the fore. In particular, he will press on the American President to spell out how credible his statement is, that he will do all that has to be done to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear under his watch. He would like to have this reassurance, particularly when the likelihood of withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to embolden the Iranians.”

pitched in by training officers in its military academy), the Afghan leadership had over six years to prepare for the eventual American pull-out. That they neglected this crucial element has been starkly revealed by the events of the last few weeks.

A weary war nation, beleaguered by a pandemic that continues to claim a large number of lives, is in no mood to fight others' wars.

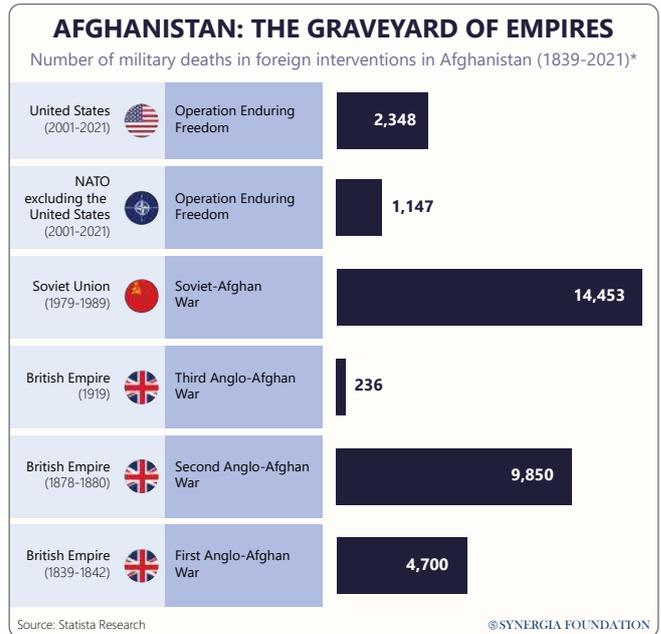
As observed by Mr Uzi Arad, "Given the pressure on resources, the domestic sentiment is not in favour of increasing commitments or projecting power.

I don't see in the president's stance and temperament, or even in his colleagues within the government, the willingness to fight."

A PROGNOSIS

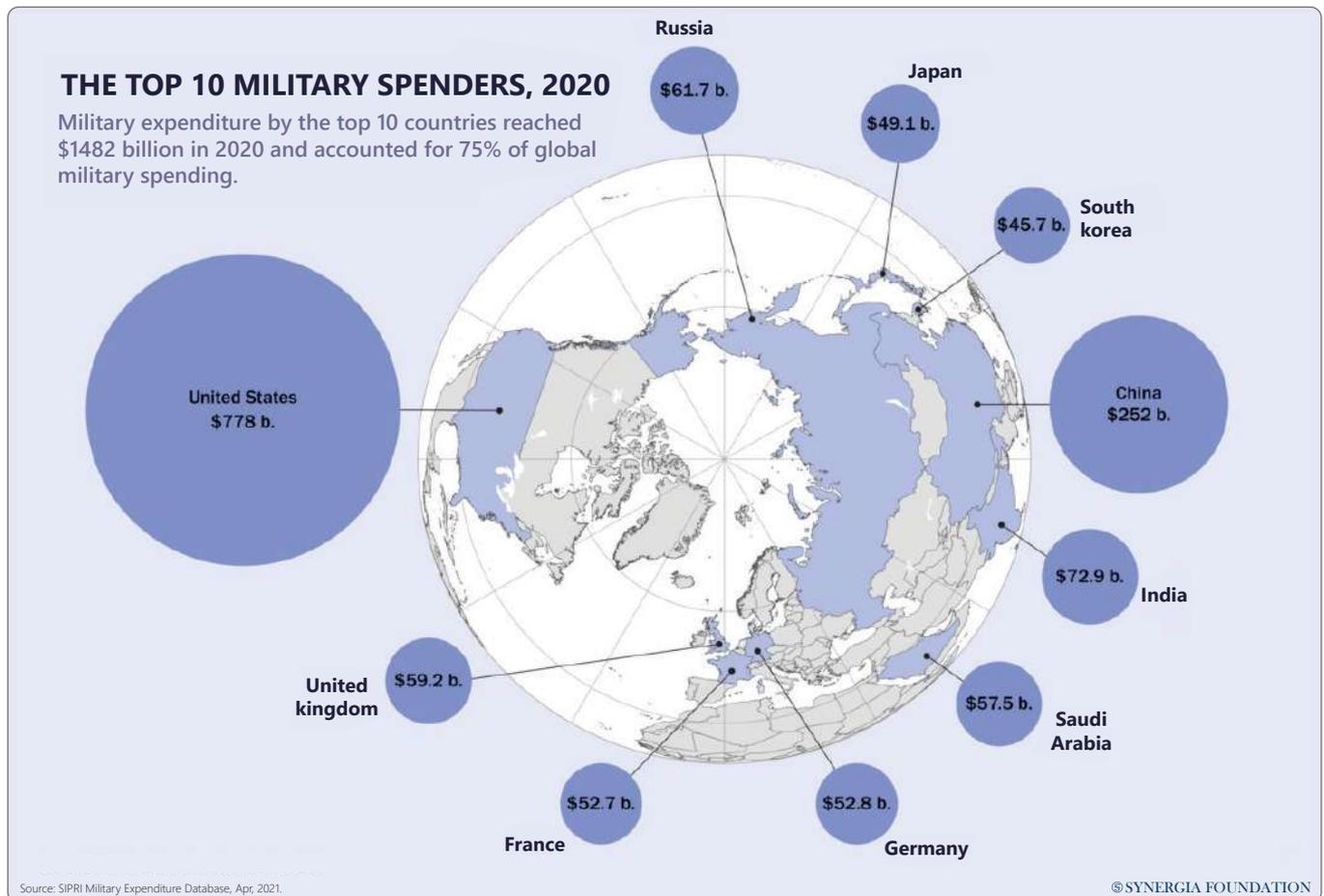
Despite the events of the last few days, the U.S. remains the most powerful nation in the world, both militarily and economically.

Afghanistan is a mere blip on its vast achievements and, if faced with further challenges, there could be some prioritisation of areas in which the the country invests more—for example, trying not to depart from the Middle East as quickly as was proposed earlier. Clearly, the theatres of Iraq and Syria, where the threat of terrorism and jihadism continue to prevail, will receive some attention. However, in other areas, there may be further withdrawal, rather than an increase in commitments. This will be of extreme



concern for U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific, where China has been increasingly flexing its muscles with great vigour and aggression.

The U.S., therefore, faces a crisis of credibility. How will the events in Afghanistan impact countries bordering the South China Sea? Will it embolden the PRC in Taiwan and Hong Kong? How will Japan and South Korea accommodate for the U.S.'s declining influence in the region? These are important questions that will have to be answered, not only by America, but also by other nations that have a stake in peace and stability within the Indo Pacific.



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AN END TO THE AFGHAN SAGA

Despite accusations of mismanaging the final chapter of the Afghanistan imbroglio, most Americans endorse the strategic decision to withdraw.



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RESEARCH TEAM

U.S. President Joe Biden finds himself caught in the eye of a political storm, following the messy withdrawal from Afghanistan, precipitated by the rapid advance of Taliban forces. Domestically, Accusations have been flying thick and fast from all quarters, calling for scapegoats to be held responsible, given the obvious failure in anticipating the course of events and taking timely corrective action.

Large sections of the international community have also joined the chorus of criticism, expressing their diminishing confidence in the global stature of America. Equally relevant are the genuine concerns of countries like Taiwan and Ukraine, which may now be constrained to recalibrate their strategic postures.

Despite this simmering credibility crisis, however, there appears to be widespread support for the general policy of withdrawal amongst the domestic U.S. electorate.

It remains to be seen how the White House factors this public opinion into its larger Middle East policy.

THROUGH A DOMESTIC PRISM

In the aftermath of the horrendous 9/11 attacks on American targets, there was overwhelming support for the military invasion of Afghanistan. As can be recalled, “smoke ‘em out their caves” was the common refrain during those times.

However, this ardour rapidly cooled when it became clear that the ‘graveyard of empires’ had eminently lived up to its reputation. After Osama Bin Laden was liquidated in Pakistan, this anti-war sentiment crystallised even further, with the conflict now assuming the appearance of a never-

ending grind.

Beginning with the Obama administration, popular opinion veered towards an exit from the “Afghanistan mess”. This continued throughout the Trump and Biden regimes, eventually prompting the latter to expedite the withdrawal of U.S. troops by 31st August 2021.

Of course, the manner in which this drawdown was executed has been scathingly criticised by American observers. The mismanagement of evacuation procedures, along with a failure to plan for the rehabilitation of Afghan collaborators, has come under increasing scrutiny. For the Republicans, led by Mr Trump, the crisis has also come as an ideal stick to beat the current administration with.

It is no surprise, therefore, that President Biden’s approval ratings on foreign policy have dropped by a few points. According to the CBS News/YouGov survey, conducted between August 18 and August 20, 44 per cent of Americans believe that the removal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan was executed ‘very badly’, while another 30 per

Expert Insights



Amb. Shyam Saran, Former Foreign Secretary to the Government of India. 106th Synergia Forum: ‘From Hyperpower to Declining Power?’

“Since the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-2008, we have generally seen a drawing back of U.S. external engagement. So what has happened in Afghanistan is very much in line with a certain kind of restrained posture.”

cent believe that it was executed ‘somewhat badly’.

Notwithstanding this development, however, opinion polls indicate overwhelming support for the larger policy of U.S. withdrawal. For example, in an NBC News poll taken between August 14 and 17, 61 per cent of Americans opined that the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting.

As explained by analysts, a majority of them appear to have given up on the rather naïve notion that the U.S. military can mould a deeply fractious country into a stable democracy. The financial and opportunity costs of maintaining troops abroad have been deemed to be too exorbitant.

“Therefore, even though the chaotic nature of the exit has somewhat tempered the vociferous support for withdrawal, it continues to be the prevailing domestic sentiment.”

LOOKING AFRESH

Given this discernible exhaustion with fighting ‘forever wars’ in the Middle East and West Asia, the U.S. is unlikely to engage in massive power projections in the area. Irrespective of a backlash at the international level, it will not reverse the policy of disengaging from the region.

Indeed, the Biden administration is preparing to end its combat mission in Iraq by the end of this year, apart from disentangling itself from Riyadh’s involvement in Yemen. Of course, to prevent the spread of terrorist movements, it may continue to prioritise specific theatres within Iraq and Syria.

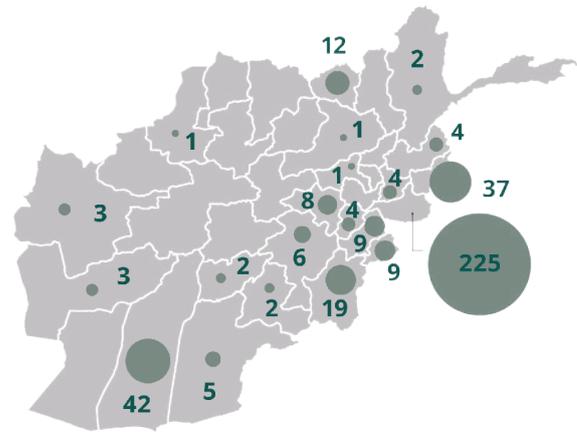
The larger policy direction, however, is to cut its losses in the region and pivot to other strategic areas like Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. Climate Change and the COVID-19 pandemic are other areas that will preoccupy the U.S.

While this broader reorientation may be in line with domestic expectations, it is pertinent to note that the American population is divided on the strategy for combatting terrorism. For example, a Fox News poll in April 2021 had indicated that 50 per cent of the general public favoured the retention of some troops in Afghanistan

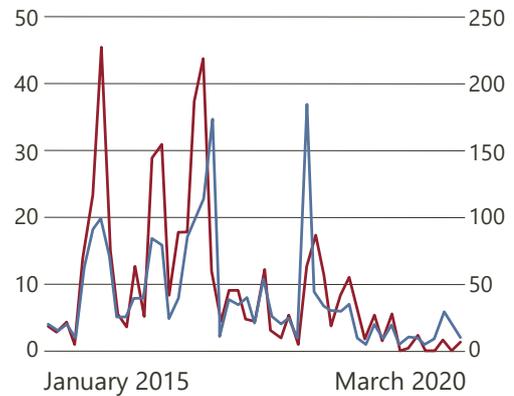
US DRONE STRIKES IN AFGHANISTAN

2015-2020

● Number of strikes by region



Strikes | People killed



399 Total number of strikes

2411 Total number of people killed (including at least 52 civilians)

Source: Bureau of Investigative Journalism

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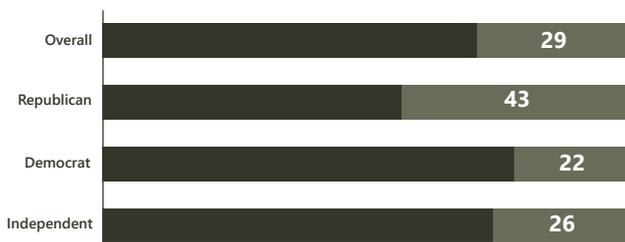
to aid counterterrorism operations. Similarly, a Morning Consult/Politico poll in August 2021 had found that voters were less supportive of a withdrawal if the same could potentially create an opportunity for terrorist groups like Al Qaeda to establish operations in Afghanistan. Against this backdrop, President Biden would be well-advised to take a deeper look before he withdraws post-haste from Iraq or abandons Afghanistan entirely to its fate, like it did the last time. He can ill-afford to repeat the mistakes made by previous administrations in places like Iraq, where the U.S. was forced to intervene for a second time to curb the rabid Islamic State movement.

Indeed, the recent bombings executed by the ISIS-Khorasan outside the Kabul airport should serve as a cautionary lesson for the U.S. administration. If terrorist entities do indeed make a comeback in Afghanistan under his watch, all the political capital that he has hitherto garnered will swiftly dissipate. In foreign policy matters, public memory is not just short but also highly fickle.

US WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

Do you support or oppose the decision to withdraw U.S. combat forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021? (%)

■ Support ■ Oppose



Source: Chicago council surveys

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07

ECONOMICS OF ROBUST DEFENCE

Strategic alliances apart, India must look at its security needs through the prism of self-reliance, bolstered by robust economic growth.



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RESEARCH TEAM

As the American involvement in Afghanistan has crossed its culmination point, India will no longer be comforted by the presence of democratic forces in the wildlands of this ungovernable nation.

For centuries, the Indian subcontinent has been plundered by forces debouching from the Hindu Kush, and the future holds more such dire threats. In short, India must secure its western borders far more robustly, and the sooner it does so, the better it is.

ECONOMIC REVIVAL IS THE CRUX

'Butter versus Guns' is a truism that has confronted all nations faced with threats on their frontiers since centuries past. Echoing this, Mr Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the renowned economist, says, "There's no way that you can disagree with the view that our situation has worsened.

The external security environment confronting India has significantly deteriorated. So, what does all this imply on the economic side?"

Even with its credibility brought down by several notches, the U.S. remains a dominant economic power. However, it is not really clear how it views the world.

It is certainly true that in the area of trade, the new administration has not given any political signals different from what was given earlier.

Therefore, in a highly uncertain world, India would be well-advised to keep its powder dry and its options open.

Putting it very succinctly, Ambassador Shyam Saran adds, "You may get support from the United States or your

friends in terms of weaponry, in terms of technology and training. But at the end of the day, this is a fight you have to fight yourself. That requires you to actually strengthen your own capabilities." Of course, this means that India will require a considerable amount of funds.

The answer lies in a growth rate of 8-9 per cent per annum. Of course, taking into consideration India's tremendous potential and its demographic dividend (which is not going to last very long), this growth rate is eminently achievable.

“The building up of economic and military capabilities has to progress simultaneously, side by side.”

Defence spending, in particular, will need to be increased. However, the percentage of defence expenditure to the GDP has been declining over the past few years.

Expert Insights



Dr. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Economist and Former Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission of India, 106th Synergia Forum: 'From Hyperpower to Declining Power'

“Quite frankly, given the geopolitical situation that we now face, which is not going to change in the near future, we will have to spend more on defence. Our internal challenge really is to jack up the rate of growth. This will give us the much-needed strength and ability to finance the expenditure we need.”

Mr Montek Singh cautions, “Quite frankly, given the geopolitical situation that we now face, which is not going to change in the near future, we will have to spend more on defence. Our internal challenge really is to jack up the rate of growth. This will give us the much-needed strength and ability to finance the expenditure we need.”

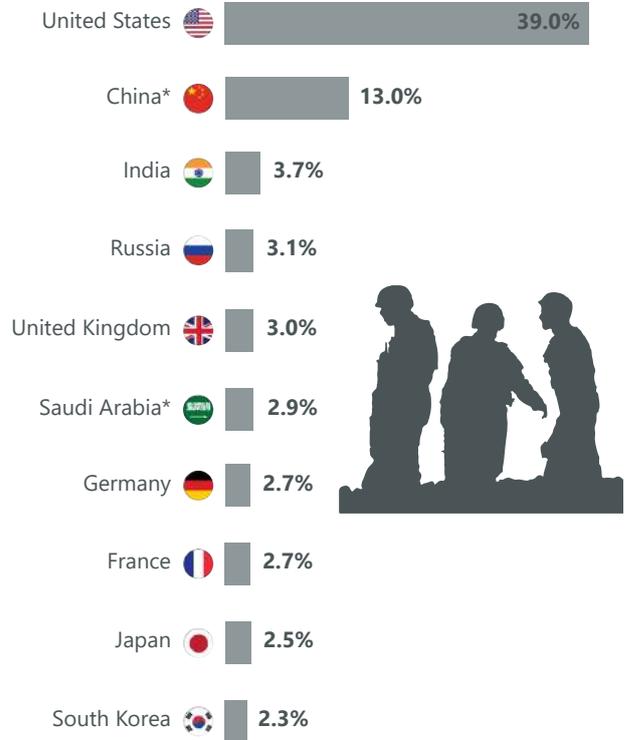
PROSPECTS AHEAD

Economists have been projecting a growth rate of 7-8 per cent for India for quite some time. This may appear reasonable now, as the country is digging itself out of the hole created by the pandemic.

However, the important question is, as we start a new year (2022-23), are we just going to revert to the growth rate we had in the pre-pandemic period, which would be somewhere around four percent? Or are we going to attain a higher growth path like the kind we had earlier? As per Mr Montek Singh, India can very easily aim at 7-8 per cent

THE COUNTRIES DOMINATING GLOBAL MILITARY SPENDING

Countries with the largest share of global military expenditure in 2020



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)

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growth for a couple of decades, if it gets its act together and optimises its productivity levels.

However, the real issue is whether India can attract investments in technology and secure the support needed to create such an environment? One of its biggest problems is that it has not been very successful in raising the quality of skills imparted to younger generations.

Although these are not easily attainable goals, they need to be part of the country’s long-term agenda, as advised Mr. Montek Singh. Reiterating this sentiment, Mr Uri Arad says, “In light of the inevitable observation that American credibility has taken a hit after the Afghanistan crisis, the logical derivative for countries is to build up their own capacities, as opposed to appealing to greater U.S. support.”

These thoughts are finding resonance in Israel, which has greatly depended upon American power to survive as a nation. “Diplomacy has its own place,” says Mr Uri Arad, “But to some extent, self-reliance is called for, in terms of domestic capacities.

Now, this sentiment is also being expressed in Israel. There is a line of thought that the country should be self-reliant, that it should develop its own independent capacities, that it should have sufficient military capabilities, that it should grow economically, not only because it is nice to do so, but because it is necessary to sustain its defence in light of pressures from the outside.”

BIG BUCKS FOR KILLER MACHINES

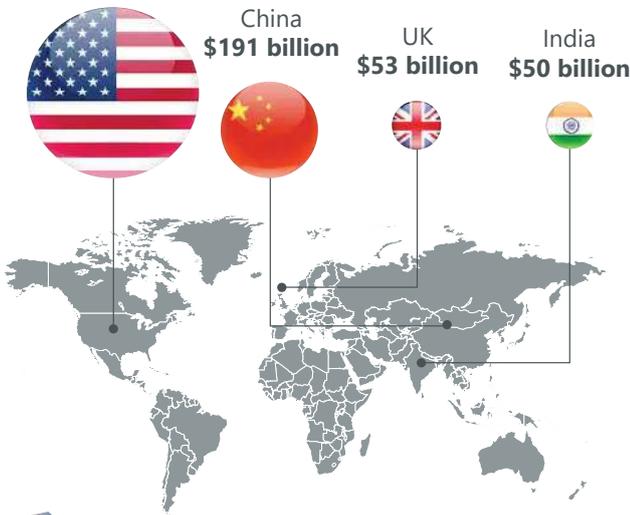
Fearsome Foursome Fire: Top four defence spenders of 2016

United States
\$622 billion

China
\$191 billion

UK
\$53 billion

India
\$50 billion



INDIA'S BIG PUSH

Overtakes Russia and Saudi Arabia in defense expenditures for the first time

If pound continues to weaken, will overtake UK by 2018

Shift from territorial defence to power projection aiding spending rise

Source: IHS Jane's Defense Budgets report

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AR.
NO. 08

THE WEB OF ISRAELI POLITICS

Israel, despite its small population and a compact landmass, is a bewilderingly complex nation to comprehend.



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Israel, a country with just 9 million citizens (slightly more than Bangalore City), owes the byzantine nature of its politics to, perhaps, its convoluted history.

The Jewish people stake claim to having inhabited these lands throughout the history of the region, since biblical times. This they validate with the available archaeological evidence proudly displayed in Israel's national museum. Traces remain of two Jewish temples in Jerusalem that were burnt down by the Romans.

It is claimed that even when the lost tribe of Israel went into exile, some Jewish people continued to live in Israel.

The return home of the Jewish people started in the late 19th Century when many parts of the world where they had sought shelter turned anti-Semitic.

Zionism (after a hill named Zion in Jerusalem), the Jewish nationalist movement, had begun to take root in eastern and central Europe with the goal of creating a Jewish national state in Palestine.

During these intervening 2000 years, the various occupiers of the land of Israel changed depending upon who was the dominant power in the region at a particular time.

Islamic rulers took control during the 6th and 7th Centuries and built the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, making the site one of the holiest places for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

As the First World War was ending, the victorious powers Great Britain and France divided the spoils of the Ottoman Empire between themselves, and Palestine came under a British Mandate for the next 30 years. In 1947, post-

World War II, UN resolution 181 called for a partition of British mandated Palestine into Arab and Jewish states with the city of Jerusalem as a "corpus separatum" (a separate entity) to be governed by an international regime.

The Zionists launched their war of independence in 1948, thus giving birth to the modern state of Israel. The seven decades since then saw the dramatic gains of the 1967 Six days war (when Israel tripled its territory), with control over the West Bank having two million Palestinians and an equal number in the Gaza Strip. Thus, the seeds of an intractable conflict had been planted.

History has ensured a very special situation for Israel surrounded by hostile states, fighting for its economic and political survival.

However, investment in high tech has taken the modern state of Israel into a prosperous future. Yet, internal disputes continue to tear at its integrity and threaten its stability.

THE "FOUR TRIBES"

“The political dynamics of Israel can best be understood through the “four tribes” concept.”

At the 15th Herzliya Conference in June 2015, President Reuven of Israel defined the socio-demographic structure of modern Israeli society as four growingly equal-sized “tribes” -secular, national religious, ultra-orthodox (Haredi) and Arab. In his view, the future lay in a ‘new concept of partnership’ among these four tribes.

The first tribe is the liberal, traditional, left-wing population usually living in Central Israel in the areas of Tel Aviv, which is usually academic and in high tech professions.

They are more left-wing in their economic and political tendencies and support peace negotiations with the

Palestinians. They do not regard the occupied territories as 'holy land'.

The second tribe are the Jewish Orthodox which comprise nearly 15 per cent of the population. They are very Orthodox but do not define themselves as Zionists and live in Jerusalem and in areas around Tel Aviv.

They involve themselves in the day-to-day life of Israel in a very limited way as they live in their own internal communities dedicating their lives to studying the holy books. Only the women work, and the men, who are exempt from military service, dedicate their lives to Jewish learning.

They wield considerable political influence as they can bring their relatively high numbers to play in any elections.

The Jewish Zionists form the third tribe who are religious but not like the Orthodox Jews. They are generally right-wing in politics and economics and live in North and South of Israel and in Jerusalem.

Many live in West Bank and adopt a very aggressive posture towards all of Israel's enemies. They do not believe in negotiations and call peace agreements benefitting only Israel's enemies. They advocate a complete Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

The fourth tribe would be the Arabs, who too are citizens of Israel, forming approximately 20 per cent of the population. They do not define themselves necessarily as Palestinians; they are mostly Muslims, and a small minority are Christians living in Nazareth or Bethlehem.

They have their own sharp internal disagreements on negotiations with the Israeli government. They don't always vote or use their political potential. Till the new coalition was founded recently, they were never part of any political coalition in Israel. There is always an ongoing internal debate whether to act like Israeli citizens or take the sides of

their Palestinian brethren.

THE MAZE OF ISRAELI POLITICS

Israel is a parliamentary democracy with the executive powers with the Prime Minister. The government is elected by the Knesset (ancient Hebrew for Assembly), which has 120 members.

While the government may come from the Knesset but it is also the govt that controls the Knesset. Once there is a coalition majority in the Knesset, such coalition builds the govt which in turn has the power to control the Knesset.

This is not a very good situation because usually, parliaments in other countries supervise the executive. The judiciary is independent; however, like in many other countries, there is the usual Conflict between the judiciary and the parliament, especially concerning laws that may contradict human rights or privacy rights in general.

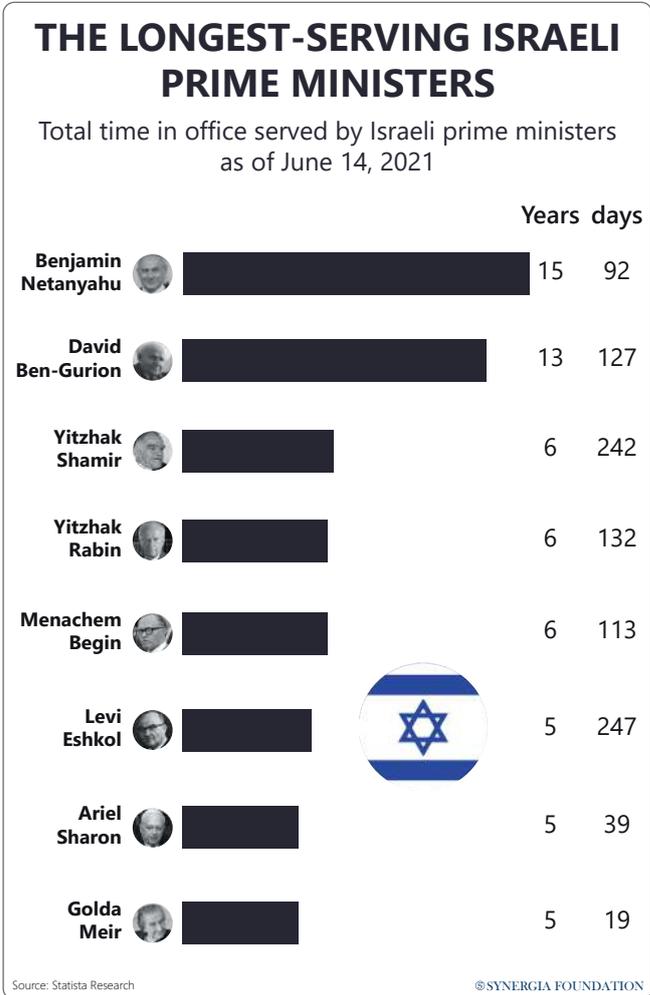
Unfortunately, Israel does not have a constitution because, at the time of its chaotic birth, the situation was too complex to enact one. So, there is no legal definition of the relationship between the judiciary and the executive and the legislature.

Basic laws are enacted from time to time to create the foundations of a functioning democracy. This perhaps is a source of some of the internal conflicts.

“ We cannot sit aside, we need to move on, we need to be brave, we need to find a solution, we need to have a Palestinian state, we need to believe that humans are eventually good and they do not want to take terror as a way of life, that eventually they will want to have a healthy population and healthy society, that they will succeed in building a country for themselves. ”



Nadav Weisman,
Partner at Meitar Law Offices, Israel.



Elections to the Knesset are held every four years, and the Knesset elects the Prime Minister and the President. In the last two years, four elections were held. In the three elections between 2019 and 2020, no party was able to establish a coalition. There are no limits on the number of tenures of a prime minister. Benjamin Netanyahu was the Prime Minister for 12 years since 2009; he was also the PM during the late 1990s.

His coalition was typically founded on the second tribe and the third one- his supporters being mainly the right-wing religious Zionists and orthodox Jews being opposed by the first and the fourth tribe- the left-wing liberals and Arabs. In the last 12 years, Netanyahu was able to build a coalition even though they were relatively small, like 61 out of 120 of 62 at the most, but it was enough in order to hold on to power.

In 2017, the Attorney General started an investigation against Netanyahu, which eventually ended with an indictment referring to alleged bribery and corruption. This turned the tide of popular support against Netanyahu.

There followed a series of elections. In April 2019, Netanyahu failed with 60 supporters. In the second election, he was able to get only 55 supporters, but the other side, with 65 seats, also could not arrive at a consensus.

In the third attempt, Netanyahu, with 58 supporters, remained a minority, and again, the opposition with 62 seats failed to come to a compromise. Netanyahu was able to cobble together a disparate coalition in June 2020 with the support of a fringe party that was equally in support of Netanyahu and his opposition. Not surprisingly, this shaky coalition collapsed in a year.

The fourth election this year saw Netanyahu being beaten with a margin of 59 to 60. The new government under Neftali Bennet is a unique govt where there is a representation of all the tribes but no representation of the Orthodox Jews, which is a pity. However, for the first time, the Arabs are represented, which is a very encouraging thing.

In order to survive, the members of this coalition must be very careful not to step over the toes of their partners, and the price they must pay is that many of them will not be able to practice their ideology to the full extent but will need to make great compromises.

THE PALESTINIAN QUAGMIRE

Israel gained control of more than 2 million Palestinians in the six-day war in 1967, and more than 54 years later, there is still no solution to the Palestinian conflict.

The left-wing in Israel advocates a two states solution with the Palestinians having their own independent state.

This is the position of the U.S.; this was the position of some prime ministers of Israel, most notably of Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated in 1995 after achieving a peace treaty with the Palestinians.

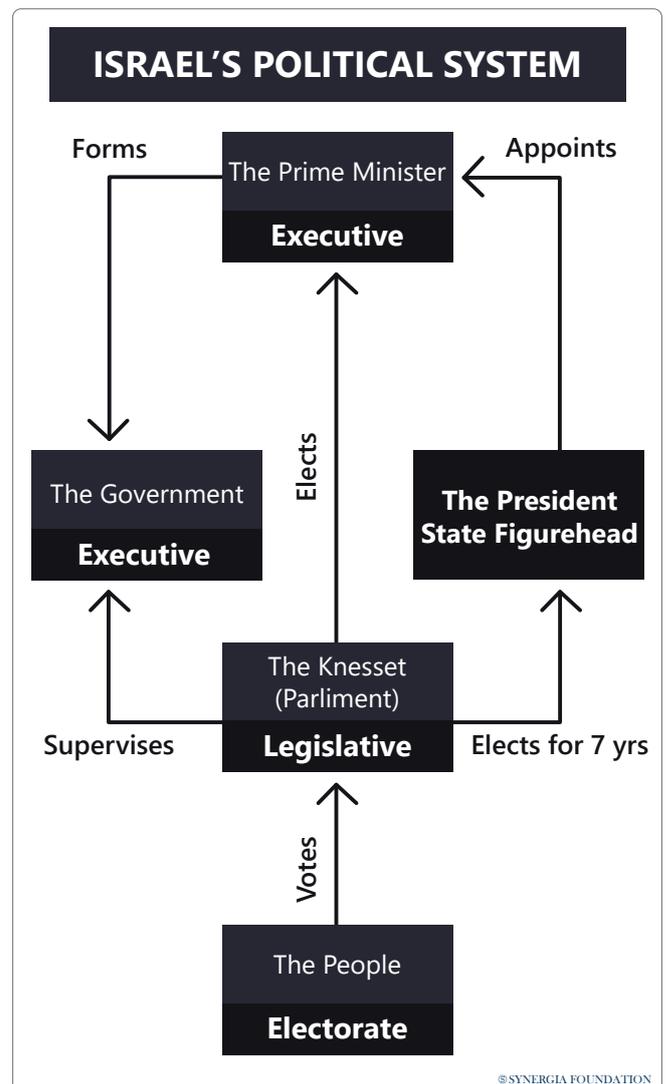
Netanyahu has been speaking about the two-state solution but has done precious little to move it forward.

Israel is deeply divided over the Palestine issue. Some support the two-state solution, but others say there is no distinct entity to negotiate, and in the end, any surrender through negotiations will only weaken, or worse, ruin the state of Israel.

Right-wingers advocate annexation of all or part of West Bank, which was part of the plan presented by President Trump. Annexation brings up the question of the civil rights of the Palestinians in the annexed territories, whether they would enjoy equal rights as citizens.

There is another school of thought which supports ‘doing nothing’ – let things lie, and this, in fact, was the policy being followed by Netanyahu.

Nadav Weisman, a prominent Israeli lawyer, vehemently disagrees with this policy, saying, “We cannot sit aside, we need to move on, we need to be brave, we need to find a solution, we need to have a Palestinian state, we need to believe that humans are eventually good and they do not want to take terror as a way of life, that eventually they will want to have a healthy population and healthy society, that they will succeed in building a country for themselves.”





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