



IRAN'S PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT WITH THE TALIBAN AFTER THE U.S EXIT: CHALLENGES AND DETERMINANTS

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Abstract

The withdrawal of United States forces from Afghanistan in august 2021 led to a dramatic shift in the Afghan political landscape. The aim of this study is to analyze the Iranian foreign policy towards Afghanistan. The main questions being: What are the challenges between Iran and Taliban? And what are the determinants of Iranian foreign policy towards Afghanistan after the U.S. exit? Whereas, the motivating factors for Iran are both Internal such as economic uplift to counterweight western sanctions through bilateral and multilateral trade guaranteeing national security and territorial integrity by neutralizing Extremist Islamic radical offshoots (IS-K) and separatist organizations (Jaish-Ul-Adl). Further part of this study also highlights the external factors trying to fill the vacuum left by the United States, and in the meanwhile analyzing Iran's role as well. In order to analyze the problem the assistance of current literature available on the web was opted where the tool of thematic analysis was utilized to generate codes leading to construction of proper themes potential of providing the outcomes of the research problem. Although various researches have been carried out in this area, but their findings were restricted to the explanation of Iran's potential security vulnerabilities associated with the change in Afghanistan's



political landscape. This study also seeks to analyze the benefits Iran may procure from Afghanistan under the new administration while keeping into account the potential barriers as well, while considering the role of other regional actors as well. This study has the potential of having political and academic implications as it leads to further questions that would pave ways for conduct of further studies in this area with the primary anchoring point being modes of security for instance Iran's economic security with respect to Afghanistan.

Keywords: Iran, Taliban, Policy, Sectarianism, Economy, Narcotics, Refugees, Islamic State-Khorasan, Bi-lateral relations.

Introduction

The relations between Iran and Taliban have always been through crests and troughs, mainly due to doctrinal differences between them. As far as the directive principles of The Afghan Taliban is concerned it is rooted in the *Sharia* laws which extracted from the *Deobandi* sect of Islam which greatly opposes the teachings of *Shia* Sect of Islam and the extremist factions within the *Deobandi* sect considers *Shia's* as infidels. Whereas, the 1979 revolution's political transformation made "Shia" Islam as the directive principle of Iran. These differences has often landed both in bloody tugs of war against each other, with the worth mentioning event being the *Mazar-i-Sharif* incident of 8-August-1998 , A city accommodating millions of "Hazara Shias", During their capture Taliban massacred hundreds of *Shias* and as a part of this operation they also attacked the Iranian Consulate of *Mazar-i-Sharif* which resulted in killings of ten Iranian diplomats and an Iranian Journalist which intensified the temperatures between Iran and Taliban. After the 9/11 attacks , In the wake of U.S. war on terror against Taliban in Afghanistan , Iran supported "The Northern alliance" in toppling the previous Taliban government in 2001. But even after the complete takeover of Afghanistan by the U.S , Iran refrained from opposing the Taliban if not directly supporting them, and when the Democratic government of Afghanistan and the U.S. signed "The Joint Declaration of United States and Afghanistan Strategic Partnership" allowing more access to NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan's military bases, Iran as a counter policy measure started covert negotiations with the Taliban.

As mentioned above, the revolution of 1979 made Iran in opposition with the region's main state actor "Saudi Arabia" the main candidate for the leadership of the Muslim world. Whereas, Iran following the religious line and having the largest "Shia" Muslim population also became an aspirant to this race therefore, main concern for Iran regarding the Taliban is their doctrinal proximity and similar mode of governance with Saudi Arabia, Alongside security, Economy is also a crucial determinant for Iran , the American/western sanctions from decades have been crippling Iranian economy making Afghanistan, Iran's only viable option for bilateral trade and "elixir" for Iranian economy , reports projects that \$2 billion worth of trade is carried out between Iran and Afghanistan and Iran exports 1 tons of fuel to Afghanistan (Rasmussen, 2021).



Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan took everyone by surprise including Iran, Soon after the takeover, Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi emphasized the main "focus" of Iranian foreign policy on it's eastern neighbor [Afghanistan] (Bolourchi, 2021). The recent power transformation in Afghanistan is considered as a power vacuum left by the United States which the major powers such as China, Russia and the regional powers will be tending to fill, therefore, Iran also holds primary significance due to its support of Taliban prior to the U.S. exit from Afghanistan. The unaddressed question is about the future prospects of engagement between Iran and the Taliban (Larose, 2021).

This paper attempts to study the prospects of Iranian foreign Policy towards Taliban , while the main question of this study is to study the "challenges" that are potential of mounting barriers between both and what are the "motivating factors" for Iran for opting pragmatic engagement with the Taliban. In order to shed light on this issue, references to the guiding principles of Iranian foreign policy hold vital significance. Secondly, brief historical account of engagement between Iran and the previous Taliban will serve of a guiding light in providing the glimpse of problems lying before them, the Third section of this study will highlight the Internal determinants of Iranian foreign policy, Whereas, the fourth section of this study will tend to identify the external determinants of Iranian foreign policy with special reference to Afghanistan. However, the main argument of this study is that Afghanistan holds vital significance for Iran and the common enemies of Iran and Afghanistan and the incentives that this bi-lateral relation holds, strengthens the prospect of cooperation between Iran and Taliban.

This Study of foreign policy analysis requires the Utility of Qualitative research method as the Nature of the research area requires the analysis of perceptions, opinions, behavior and attitudes and "events" from the Collected data (Potter, 2010). The study would be mainly relying upon the secondary data from websites, journals, books, research articles published interviews and the statement of the stakeholder of both the political actors available on the internet and television as according to feasible way to gather an enormous amount of data that would lead to a logical conclusion. And it is comparatively more channeled and less time consuming (Alchemer, 2021).

As per the Scrutiny and Analysis of Data Thematic analysis would be utilized, The construction of specific codes were opted from the Data set which further assisted in construction of "Themes" as through inductive thematic analysis, As (Opperman and Brommer, 2014) states that themes allows the analysis of state's foreign policy overtime.

This Study possesses policy Implications as (George, 1993) states that the connection between academics and foreign policy decision makers through research based studies tend to produce better policies m On the other hand these contributions from the academia is a "meaningful public service".



However, this article also has certain limitations, Due to the broad nature of the subject, specific aspects of Iranian foreign policy challenges such as the “Water” problem for Iran due to construction of “Dams” and the Rise of Salafist motivated Baloch Insurgency and its Afghan prospect requires further scrutiny.

Literature review

Afghanistan irrespective of its government or the governing structure is a significant state for Iran. Primarily, due to Afghanistan’s close proximity with the Islamic republic (Haji - Yousefi, 2012), In addition, after the 1979 revolution, Iran has been acting extra precautions of its neighborhood specially Afghanistan (Kaura, 2020). The importance of Afghanistan for Tehran can also be deemed from the fact that in the wake of U.S. presence Iranian authorities have fostered interactions with the Taliban and provided financial and logistic support to the Taliban and Office for Taliban in Iran’s holiest city “Mashhad” (Marjani, 2020).

The 1979 constitution of Iran portrays the foreign policy sources of Islamic republic is derived from its ideology derived from the “Shia” Islam, whereas the Objectives of Iranian foreign policy is the “Preservation of Iran’s territorial Integrity” and “The defense of rights of all Muslims without allying with hegemonic powers (Iran through its politico-religious discourses have always portrayed U.S. as a neo-Imperial power)” (Feizi, 2018, pg108), Furthermore, Identity also plays an Important role in shaping the Iranian foreign policy, after the 1979 revolution the “Persian” identity has been replaced by the “Islamic” one and the objective for using Islam as an identity is to provide Iranian foreign policy makers with the pliability “drawing a pan-Islamic idea” which they could not have enjoyed with the former one, (Feizi, 2018, pg114).

The Objectives of Iranian foreign policy are preserving regimes existence (through territorial integrity), economic uplift, Rejection of externals (Hegemonic powers) and promotion of Islamic government (Feizi, 2018, pg118), As far as Afghanistan is concerned the main objective of Iranian foreign policy is “Rejection of external powers” other objectives are segregated as “Promoting political Islamic mode of governance” and the discourse of “sameness/brotherhood”, As Iran enjoys cultural and historical links with Afghanistan more than any other country.(Feizi, 2018, pg136), keeping in view the cultural discourses Iran have been utilizing in Afghanistan is to protect the ethnic “Tajiks” and “Hazaras” with the former Iran shares cultural links whereas religious/sectarian links with the latter (Kaura, 2020).

As Far as Iran is concerned, theoretical frameworks describing Iran's engagement with the Taliban are the “Realist Approach” and the “Constructivist” approach of International relations theories. As the revolutionary Iran after 1979 has become a rational actor of the international political arena behaving in a calculated manner keeping in view the cost and benefits of its interaction in the international political arena (Akbarzadeh, 2014, p 65).



The decisions of Iran are based upon the “Strategic gains” of the state necessary for its survival. Therefore, Iran has been utilizing the tool of “Shia” identity for influence in Afghanistan (among the Hazaras) (Akbarzadeh, 2014). Relations between Iran and Taliban to a larger extent is fostered by the identity of Islam which could be deemed from the Iranian support to the Afghan mujahedeen (the predecessors of the Taliban) in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The constructivist theory further elaborates the Iranian foreign policy using the concept of a state based upon the constructed identity (Islam/Shia Islam), constantly demonstrating the antagonism towards perceived enemies (the west and U.S) keeping in view the Iranian strategic culture and their post-revolutionary engagements (Akbarzadeh et al., 2021).

Sectarian Rifts

In order to understand the politics and the political culture of Afghanistan it is necessary to understand the division on ethnic and religious lines that are shaping up Afghanistan's political landscape ever since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Afghan population is composed of four major ethnic groups, The residing in the south eastern geographic units of the country are the “Pashtuns” which makes the 45% of the population of Afghanistan and belongs to the Sunni sect of Islam, following the Pashtuns are the “Tajiks” which makes the 30% of the Afghan population this ethnic group is Persian speaking and have cultural links with the Persians (residing in Iran) Pashtuns and Tajiks have one thing in common, the Tajiks are also Sunni, After the Tajiks there are the “Uzbeks” the ethnic group belonging to the Sunni sect of Islam and composes 15% of the population of Afghanistan. The final major ethnic group residing in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan is the “Hazaras” this ethnic group makes only 10% percent of the Afghan population and belongs to the “Shia” sect of Islam and their religious beliefs have been the root of conflict between the Hazaras and the Taliban (Sinno, 2021).

The Hazaras share close socio-cultural proximity with Afghanistan’s western neighbor Iran and in the midst of the civil war in Afghanistan the Hazaras were being supported by Iran, moreover Iran hosts hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees among whom the Hazaras are the largest ethnic group (Kaura, 2022), In the same year when the political landscape of Iran was witnessing transformations and uncertainties Iran’s eastern neighbor had also undergone a massive public upheaval against the monarchy and still was tacking with uncertainties in the political sphere. Moreover, according to (Toumaj et al., 2021, pg. 22) when the Iranian revolution became a success story, the government structure of “Velayat-e-Faqih” (government of the jurist) inspired the Hazaras of Afghanistan as well. Iran even sent Envoys to the “Hazarajat” (region of Afghanistan where the Hazaras were located) known as “khat-e-Imam” and the primary objectives were the preaching of the Shia school of thought in Afghanistan (Toumaj et al., 2021, pg. 22). The tensions between the Taliban and Iran continued as Iran was very much concerned of Taliban’s attitude marginalizing the Tajiks and persecuting the Hazaras in Afghanistan alongside this, the “Mazar-i-Sharif” incident still haunts Iranian perceptions of the Taliban (Torfeh, 2021).



The Sectarian issue still remains a major challenge on the ways of strong relations between Iran and Taliban as the factions within Iran are optimistic of the Taliban and are hoping for a “Changed Taliban” with respect to the treatment of non-Sunni minorities in Afghanistan. But many of the hardliners and other political factions in Iran criticize the Taliban. Therefore, “Sectarian divide” is still going to be the paramount hurdle between Iran and Taliban in their relations. And in worst case, if sectarian complications increase Iran may opt the pre-9/11 Taliban Policy which would be problematic for the Taliban regime to a greater extent (Durrani, 2022).

Border Security and Skirmishes

Border security is another major challenge in the ways of friendly relations between Iran and Taliban (Durrani, 2022). Iran shares a massive 938 km border with Afghanistan on its east; however, in the previous Taliban rule it was a severe headache for the Iranian Regime for security and management. Even before the takeover of Kabul on August 2021, when Taliban managed to secure the major border crossings of Afghanistan with Iran namely the “Islam Qela” border crossing in the north western province of Herat, alerted the Iranian forces and resulted in the deployment of the revolutionary guards. (Al Jazeera, 2021). Soon after the “Islam Qela” border crossing fell to the Taliban, the Afghan security forces and customs officials deployed at the border crossing crossed the borders to Iran. Another instance is the “Zaranj” border crossing which witnessed influx of thousands of Afghan refugees to Iran (Aman, 2021).

Border security proves to be a menacing factor potentially widening the gulf between the Taliban and Iran. As (Motamedi, 2021) notes that on December 2021 an armed clash took place between the Iranian forces and Taliban on the Hermand country sides bordering Iran, clash commenced when Taliban forces mistook Iranian farmers as infiltrators and opened fire on them. Retaliation from the IRGC (Iranian revolutionary guard corps) was swift. However, after the incident the Iranian foreign ministry stated the border skirmish as a “misunderstanding” but was initiated by the Taliban on the Afghan side of the border. Similarly, another event of border skirmishes between the Taliban and the Iranian forces took place in the Nimruz province of Afghanistan bordering Iran on 7 March 2022, as the Iranian border security forces opened fire on the Taliban on the suspicion of digging a “canal” resulting in casualties of four Iranian forces personnel which caused intense tensions between both the actors (Crisis24, 2022). The recent border skirmishes between the Taliban and Iran have given rise to the possibility of re-emerging hard feelings between Tehran and the Taliban (Intelbrief, 2022).

Refugees

Iran is hosting hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees that fled the Taliban regime in the 1990's. In the wake of the crisis in Afghanistan by the takeover of Taliban, Pakistan and Iran would be the countries who would be facing the intense pressure from massive numbers of



refugees in fluxing their respective territories (Aman, 2021). According to the UN refugee agency UNHCR 2.8 million of Afghan refugees are expected to flee their homeland by the end of the year 2020 and Pakistan and Iran were requested to accommodate the refugees.

But the problem is not housing the refugees; it is the Iranian tactics of using the refugees for its strategic gains. E.g. “Liwa Fatemiyoun” brigade which is composed of the Afghan refugees who fled Afghanistan (Hazara Shias) from the Taliban's previous government Iran is said to be utilizing their vulnerabilities and the provision of incentives to the Afghan refugees to equip them and deploy them in the battlefields of Syria for the objective of backing the Bashar-al-Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. (Karataş, 2021, pg.. 41-42). With the Fatemiyoun brigade present in the Iran’s proxy arsenal this aspect poses great challenge to the Taliban-Iran relations as with regards to the Fatemiyoun brigade Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi has expressed his vexation in the following words (Rasanah, 2021, p4)

“Inside Afghanistan All Hazaras are Fatemiyoun, I will kill Fatemiyoun and all others who are key players in the civil war in Afghanistan. I will kill thousands of Hazaras” (Rasanah, 2021, p4).

Narco-trafficking

Another challenge in the pathways of relations between the Iranian state and the Taliban is the menace of illicit drugs flows from the Afghan border, According to United nations office on drugs and Crimes (UNODC) “60%” of opium produced in Afghanistan flows into Iran, and This issue poses serious threats to the Iran’s internal security against drugs and has affected the Iranian society at large (Ameri, 2010). During the previous Taliban regime the main source of Taliban’s resource generation was heavily dependent upon the narcotics smuggling, despite being skeptical of the use of drugs as it is prohibited by the Sharia law, In order to cope up with economic hardships they opted a way for generating financial revenues from the opium harvesting and smuggling by regulating and imposing 10% of zakat (religious tax) on opium production which proved to be a remedy for the crippling Taliban economy, with the passage of time the tax was hiked to 20% helping Taliban collect a whopping amount of \$45 million to \$200 million annually. However this step paved ways for Taliban regulating other drugs as well such as taxing the heroin labs in Afghanistan where poppy production in Afghanistan rose from 3400 metric tons in 1994 to 4600 metric tons in 1999 (Brown, 2021).

Therefore, keeping in mind the huge amount of drugs flowing into Iran raises the Alarms in Tehran as (Choksy, 2021) states that There is a growing fear among the Iranian leadership that the Taliban administration might opt for the “Narco” as source of wealth, Despite announcing a crackdown against illicit harvesting and trafficking of drugs by the Taliban, this issue still serves as a potential distrust among the Taliban and Iran.

Economic Uplift



In the contemporary era of complex interconnectedness, Primary goal of the state's foreign policy is its survival, However this survival of the state is not only physical security but economic security and the enhancement of economic capabilities also have an important role to play (Dura, 1995, pg. 6), Economy in this regards plays a crucial role in a nation's foreign policy as no state in the world can survive without taking the factor of economic prosperity into consideration.

As far as Iranian economy is concerned, due to sanctions by the United States, Afghanistan holds a vital role in the running of Iranian economy as the Afghan markets are considered to be a viable option for Iranian exports , The importance can be deemed from the fact that before the takeover of Taliban Iranian export to Afghanistan were worth \$3.5 Billion which makes 40% of Afghanistan imports from its western neighbor and in return the hard capital received from Afghanistan is what Iran requires badly (Iran International, 2021). Iran has been the closest trade partner of Afghanistan the major portion of Iranian oil was imported by Afghanistan despite the ban, An agreement signed in 2019 between Iran and Afghanistan resulted in 20% rise in Iranian exports to Afghanistan, The year 2020 witnessed a booming trade between Afghanistan and Iran worth \$1,264,000,000 which includes petroleum, textile goods and construction materials. It is worth mentioning that Iran-Afghanistan trade was shockingly worth more than Afghanistan's trade with other regional countries such as China and Pakistan (Rasanah, 2020).

As Afghanistan is geographically a landlocked state which makes Afghanistan heavily relying on Iran and Pakistan for its trade and other economic activity as far as Iran is concerned the harsh economic isolation leave Afghanistan as the only suitable option for Iran in this regards Iran is using every possible means to use the Afghan dependency (Ignatiev, 2015, p1, p48). Chabahar port is not only a blessing for Iran but it also serves as a helping hand for the landlocked Afghanistan, the barriers in the ways of trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan makes the chabahar port as a much more suitable option (hence on the other hand increasing dependence on Iran) (Sawhney, 2019). After the withdrawal of United states from If China includes Afghanistan in "Belt road initiative" by Increasing more and more investments in Afghanistan with the intent of integrating central Asian markets, Iran would be deemed as a "beneficiary" as Iran would become the regional hub of such economic Initiatives (Khajehpour, 2021). This factor once again sheds light on the significance of Afghanistan on Iranian economy.

National Security

National security and the Urge to keep the geography of the State Intact and is one of the most important goals of a nation's foreign policy therefore it also stands as a vital Internal determinant of a state's foreign policy (Political Science, 2018). Violent non-state actors have posed a serious threat to the modern Westphalian states and in the globalized world terrorism with the global reach has the capability to undermine national security as the new form of terrorism has become more lethal and more indiscriminate (Gloannec et al., 2013, p13).



Iran after the 1979 revolution has opted the policy of expansionism not in physical terms but on the ideological terms by forming a “Pan-Shi’ism” a state based on the teachings on Shia Islam led by the “Velayat e faqih” (Supreme leadership) in this regards Iran throughout the history have been opting militancy in order to expand its Ideological reach specifically in the middle east (Golkar & Arabi, 2017). However, these expansions have also resulted in extreme dissatisfaction among the Sunni population both Inside Iran and Outside Iran. The dissatisfaction of the Sunni Muslims population residing in Iran can be exploited by fundamentalist terrorist groups such as ISIS , as (Karmon, 2017) noted that the terrorist groups in a propaganda video accused the Iranian regime of marginalizing the Sunni population both in Iran and Outside Iran through the ideology of “Exporting the revolution”. The Islamic State is still the major concern of the administration in Tehran as far as national security is concerned the perceptions of the Sunni Muslims and the other ethnic groups residing in Iran of being oppressed by the “Shia-dominated” theocratic regime of Iran have led to major armed conflicts and attacks against the Iranian regime (Karmon, 2017, p7). In this regards the biggest menace to Iranian security is Iranian nationals joining the terrorist groups such as ISIS, through their media tools and other propaganda options ISIS is exploiting the marginalization of the Iranian Sunni population and hold the view of “Takfir” Excluding other Muslims from the religion (Kadivar, 2021, p1). Iranian citizens who are in conflict with the regime (over grievances mentioned before) have been active in IS-K, An attack on journalists in Kabul on 30 April 2013, IS-K claimed the responsibility and portrayed the suicide bombers in a Propaganda video under the name of “Al-Kurdi” which was later identified as a Kurdish resident of Kermanshah, Iran (The suicide bomber of 2017 and 2018 attacks also belonged to Kermanshah) (Hawramy, 2018). As Far as Afghanistan is concerned, the most vulnerable target for IS-K would be Iran and the driving force would be the “sectarian Slash” the threat would not only be “restricted to Iranian interests in Afghanistan “but the threat also encompasses the Iranian homeland” (Clarke, 2021, pg., 3).

Another dynamic for the national security is the Baloch insurgency inspired by the repression of Shia regime, Baloch composes only 2% of Iran’s 8 million population and Majority of the Baloch population in Iran lives under poverty line (70%) and all these grievances have led to armed revolts against the regime by the Baloch insurgent groups namely “Jandullah” The active presence of the group lasted from 2003 till The execution of its Founder Abdul Malik Rigi in 2010, Afterwards, further splinter groups namely “Jaish-al-Adl” (The Army of Justice) became most prominent and the most notorious successor group committing some of the deadliest tactics to force the Iranian regime throughout the Years with One of the most worth mentioning is abduction of IRGC border guards from a military outpost in 2018. (Notezai, 2016) noted that the probability of ISIS (in Afghanistan composed of the hardliner Taliban fighter who deserted the Afghan Taliban) and the Jaish-Ul-Adl shaking hands with IS-K against Iran is much higher.

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, Iran is opting the pragmatic line while its interaction with the Taliban is due to the fact that Iran’s south and east areas have a Sunni population which are also partisans to Taliban and Al-Qaeda and the jaish al adl, Any irresponsible move from Iran,



deemed as antagonizing by the Taliban may result in the outbreaks of conflict in the region where Iran shares border with Afghanistan (Bolourchi, 2021) as on the same day when Taliban declared their victory a major influx of jaish-ul-adl fighters were observed from Pakistan to Herat and Nimrouz (The Bordering region between Iran and Afghanistan) (Guistozzi, 2022).

The Saudi factor

The International political structure and the behavior of the actors of international space contributes a lot in directing the foreign policy behavior of a state as it cannot act unilaterally without taking the Other states into proper consideration. As far as Iran is concerned, The revolution of 1979 Iran due to the radically motivated ideas oriented towards making sphere of influence based on Tehran's directions has made Iran a significant actor of Middle Eastern politics (Aliyev et al., pg. 1158) Similarly the historical baggage of "Rivalry with the other Empires" also holds vital significance in the Iranian foreign policy alongside the "Shi'ism" factor, is a credible principle of Iran's regional policies extending beyond its territorial limits (Aliyev et al., pg. 1159) the war on terror episode of Afghanistan due to the invasion of the United States has paved pathways for Iran to exercise its influence in the region (including Afghanistan) (Aliyev et al., pg. 1156).

The commence of the Saudi-Iran Rivalry dates back to the 1979 revolution when Iran's revolutionary Leader Ayatollah Khomeini expressed his opposition of the monarchical Saudi Arabia and the predicaments of Saudi Arabia in protecting the holy mosques, Moreover, in the Iran-Iraq war, Saudi Arabia was supporting Iran's adversary Iraq led by Saddam Hussain. In addition, Saudi Arabia has been active against Iran politically, e.g. in OIC and other Platforms (Ali, et al., 2020, pg. 589-599).

With reference to Taliban, the glimpse of Saudi-Iran rivalry could be traced in the previous Taliban government in mid-1990's, when the primary requirement of the Taliban government back in the 1990's was the formal acknowledgement of the Taliban government as the representatives of the Afghan people. Pakistan, UAE (United Arab emirates) and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was the first of the regional states which recognized the Taliban's government in Afghanistan, the primary motivation of recognizing Taliban government by Saudi was restricting growing Iranian influence in Afghanistan (Malik, 2021, pg. 12).

But tables turned after the September 11 attacks, the relations between Riyadh and the Taliban were witnessing a nosedive after Taliban's reluctance of rendition of Al-Qaeda leader and alleged preparatory of the attacks on world Trade center "Osama bin laden", Riyadh's relations with the Taliban witnessed gradual antagonism when Saudi Arabia after the re-emergence of the democratic government in Afghanistan wholeheartedly supported it in terms of assistance in reconstruction attempts and financial aids (Steinberg et al., 2013). Saudi Arabia in the wake of liberalization visions may have doctrinal distances with the Taliban, but Kingdom' status of the



spiritual leadership of the Muslim *ummah* is still influential in the Afghan political landscape, moreover, Distancing from the Taliban may foster crucial engagements between Iran (Saudi's Arc rival) as evidences depicts the significant progress in the re-strengthening of Taliban is due to IRGC's assistance (Karim, 2021). The doctrine of "Sharia" keeps Taliban in close proximity with the Kingdom and any stalemate with the Kingdom may result the strain of Capitals that Taliban may earn from the religious rituals that would have crippling effects on economy of Afghanistan which is on the verge of collapse (Karim, 2021).

China

The US exit from Afghanistan has created a power vacuum making Afghanistan an arena of regional power politics and main station for actors adhering to anti-western narratives resulting in a nexus between Russia, China, Taliban-led Afghanistan and Iran (Synovitz, 2021). As China is looking forward to pursue the status of major power and takeover of the Taliban has potential of becoming a catalyst for the Chinese designs and the China-Iran and Taliban nexus holds vital importance in this regards (Dwivedi, 2021). China and Taliban are getting closer due to Chinese economic and political interests in Afghanistan, Soon after the Taliban's control of Afghanistan out of the fears of a "Humanitarian crisis" China was one of the countries who have raised their concerns regarding United States sanctions on the Taliban and demanded for the unfreezing of Afghanistan's assets in American foreign reserves , even before the Taliban's victory Chinese foreign ministry hosted talks between Chinese and Taliban delegation (Kaura, 2022).

As far as Iran-China Bi-lateral relations are concerned, after the withdrawal of US Iran will enjoy a significant degree of influence which Iran can utilize to pursue its immediate and long terms interests and forging regional alliances (Russia and China), moreover The Iran-China strategic Partnership deal will have implications on Afghanistan therefore Iran-China both have similar interests in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of United States forces and the capture of Afghanistan by the Taliban (Sakhi, 2021).

Findings

The Issue of Border skirmishes serves as a paramount hurdle in ways of better relations between Iran and Taliban and is potential of reviving the grudges of the past, in similar manner, sectarian issue is also an irritant which requires to be overcome by Tehran in order to sustain its influence among the Taliban.

The western sanctions have left Iranian economy with very little option; therefore the project of Iranian economic progress will be heavily dependent on Iran's pragmatic line with the Taliban. In addition, the previously mentioned pragmatic behavior with the Taliban also possesses the potential of neutralizing a common enemy for both Iran and the Taliban "IS-K". Moreover, the strategic partnership between Iran and China may also serve as a force multiplier for Iran by



Inclusion of Afghanistan under the Taliban's rule.

Conclusion

The takeover of Kabul by the Taliban regime was, early but not unpredicted, as the Afghan armed forces expected to demonstrate resistance resilience failed to hold the tides of the Taliban. The most vulnerable actor to this power transition is the western neighbor Iran that is in a constant struggle for its economic development, revival of its diplomatic support in the international political arena, keeping in view the regime as the main flag bearer of anti-west and anti-American rhetoric is left with few options to sustain the survival of the regime. The stationing of American and western troops in Afghanistan indeed posed grave menaces to the Islamic republic however, this must also be kept in mind that the Iranian regime is also at odds with the new power holders of Afghanistan which is the “sectarian” barrier.

Historic accounts portrays a completely different glimpse of engagements between both the actors which was haunted by violence based on the underpinnings of sectarianism, In addition, the Utilization of Afghan refugees and narco trafficking were and still serves as a challenge, But the existence of a common enemy U.S. left both with no choice other than unwilling mutual cooperation and acted in the light of the famous proverb “*The enemy of my enemy is my friend*”, Alongside, The challenges between Iran and the Taliban led Afghanistan internal encouraging factors and external determinants also play key role in the foreign policy measures of Iran like any other country, which are, The economic incentives through bilateral trade, the participation of Iran in regional connectivity initiatives also heavily depends upon its better ties with the Taliban due to the significant geo-strategic position of Afghanistan.



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