The Taliban Enigma and the Polycentric World

The Benefits of Being Independent

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Abstract

Despite the general view on the Taliban¹ as a proxy actor, it has become capable of pursuing independent domestic and foreign policies. Two basic options for the Taliban's role in regional affairs are possible in the future. Under the Taliban's rule Afghanistan may become either a scene of rivalry between great and regional powers, or a neutral zone with a revived buffer function it performed long before the 1970s. The Taliban's independent policies make the latter option quite feasible. However, if global and regional actors with vested interest do not ensure necessary international conditions, Afghanistan's neutral role will not be possible. More broadly, the entitlement to an independent foreign policy granted by great powers as they abstain from imposing their influence over Afghanistan suggests a new feature of the current polycentric world. Instead of trying to enhance their costly influence on various regions, great powers may prefer to keep each other from doing so, thus creating new niches for small and middle powers.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, polycentric world, great power competition, Russia, U.S., middle powers.

Events in Afghanistan are unfolding so rapidly and dramatically that all attention is now riveted on their internal ramifications—the change of power, the fate of refugees, the rudiments of political and humanitarian crises, and the possibility of civil war. However, we must not forget that the Afghan situation has a wider regional and global impact. Will the external project launched for Afghanistan under the auspices of international organizations continue albeit in a modified form? Is this the case of classic rivalry between great powers, in which Pakistan, China, and Russia have simply pulled the country out of the American zone of influence? Will the United States and its allies fight for influence over Kabul or will they try to “poison” the joy of their rivals by turning the Taliban's Afghanistan into an outcast again? Will it become a partner in transnational transport projects or will its neighbors hesitantly fence themselves off?

Soon these and other such issues will likely gain more relevance on the agenda, with the situation inside Afghanistan becoming

¹ The Taliban, ISIS, and al-Qaeda are banned in the Russian Federation.

secondary. Either it will no longer get as much attention, or it will be subordinated to international issues that will determine the attitude towards developments in Afghanistan itself.

It is widely believed that external actors play a key role in Afghanistan. This article is based on the assumption that the Taliban will not only be the main force in the foreseeable future, but will also be the most independent actor of all. The latter could be crucial to the international dimension of events in Afghanistan. Moreover, current developments add new nuances to the discussion on the very foundations of modern international relations, especially in terms of major powers' interaction with small and middle powers.

THE TALIBAN AS THE MOST INDEPENDENT FORCE

For a long time, experts viewed the Taliban as a force lacking the ability to act independently. Investigative journalists and experts pointed to the Taliban's ties with Pakistan (Rashid, 2001). This gave it a reputation of Islamabad's "tool." However, many events did not fit into this concept.

For example, in the second half of September 2001, the Taliban declined all pleas from intermediaries who, with the approval of the United States, tried to negotiate the extradition or elimination of Osama bin Laden and his closest associates, as well as the takedown of the relevant military infrastructure.² Back then it was not perceived as a manifestation of independence. Rather, it seemed that either the intermediaries were not playing quite fairly, or the Taliban were so

² Regarding Pakistan, some of the related documents were declassified by the Barack Obama administration on the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Pakistan was against overthrowing the Taliban regime, but fully agreed that the United States should take decisive action against al-Qaeda (banned in Russia). Pakistani intelligence chief Ahmed Mahmud made several trips to Kandahar in the second half of September 2001, trying to negotiate with the Taliban an acceptable way out of the situation, which implied the extradition of Osama bin Laden. See recordings of conversations between the American ambassador to Islamabad, Wendy Chamberlin, and Pervez Musharraf and Ahmed Mahmud: *Musharraf Accepts the Seven Points*. United States Department of State, 14 September. Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc08.pdf>; *Mahmud Plans 2nd Mission to Afghanistan*. United States Department of State, 23 September. Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc11.pdf>; and *Mahmud on Failed Kandahar Trip*. United States Department of State, 29 September. Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc12.pdf>

tied up by al-Qaeda that they were unable to make their own rational decisions. Then the Pakistani Taliban came into play, starting a serious fight with Pakistan's government (Behuria, 2007). While the latter continued to cooperate with the Taliban in Afghanistan and their allies from al-Qaeda, the Taliban maintained ties with their Pakistani brethren. The manner in which Taliban maintained contacts with various foreigners after the opening of their office in Doha in 2013 obviously contradicts their being someone's puppets. Eventually, the United States entered into direct negotiations with them and signed an agreement (Machitidze, 2020), thus effectively reaffirming their high level of agency.

The story of how the Taliban has turned from someone's tool into an independent force is yet to be explored. What matters now is that the Taliban have gained a certain experience of relations, including non-public ones, with various regional and global players, and there are those whom the Taliban listen to and whose opinion they do not ignore, but take into account. But at the same time, they do not serve anyone. It is not unusual to be in a network of formal and informal contacts that affect behavior one way or another. This is a reality for most international players. No one has absolute autonomy and independence of action, or absolutely transparent agreements and obligations. In comparative terms, the Taliban can be considered more independent in their actions than the governments of very many small and middle powers in Europe and Asia.

In the Afghan context, even taking into account the aforementioned ties, the Taliban are much more independent in their decisions (although not fully self-sufficient and autonomous in actions) than other local players. Technocrats of the fallen central government and jihadist internationalists are typical examples of people lacking the ability to act independently, but the situation appears to be much more complicated when it comes to non-Pashtun ethnopolitical elements.

The "technocratic" part of the central government in Kabul consisted of people who had been educated in the West. Their thoughts were perfectly organized. They believed that the construction of a "new Afghanistan" was at an early stage, when it could not persist without

external support, primarily American. Therefore, the main task was to involve Westerners and the international community in general into Afghanistan as deeply as possible. These Afghans were relied on in large-scale “nation-building” projects with international support, which basically meant the restructuring of society along the Western lines (Dobbins et al., 2003; Khalilzad, 2010). Afghan technocrats opposed attempts of three American presidents to withdraw U.S. troops from the country, and until the very last moment hoped that the fourth one, Joe Biden, would not make such a decision—American bases were needed as a guarantee of U.S. involvement in Afghan affairs. They intended to build a regional power and knew that this was not possible without American bayonets and active geopolitical cooperation. The Afghan government sought to become what Turkey or Pakistan were for Washington in the second half of the 20th century, exchanging the geopolitical obligations for the American support inside Afghanistan. These people dreamed of building a significant regional power, which would become strong enough in the future to start its own “game” like other major regional partners of America did (Sucu, 2021). But before that, the government controlled by such people could only be a puppet government.

Jihadist internationalists represent a noticeable force in Afghanistan. They need the country as a basis for regional and global activities. They are in a state of constant struggle, which is tied to international ideologists and sponsors: in order to fight, they need encouragement from their ideologists and financial donations, and in order to receive them, they need to fight. Jihadists are inseparable from their external patrons, and the more they internationalize a local or regional conflict, in which they have intervened themselves or become drawn, the more successful they are. In this sense, jihadist internationalists are not independent despite all their desperation and eagerness to fight a bloody battle. Currently, the main jihadist force in Afghanistan is ISIS, whose fighters came into spotlight after 2014-2015. Al-Qaeda is also represented, but it is not the main player. It cannot be ruled out that, having failed in Syria, jihadist internationalists will try to make Afghanistan their new main front of the global “holy war,” drawing in more and more external interests and like-minded people.

Non-Pashtun ethnopolitical groups, the main of which are Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, have been gaining importance for almost half a century (Saikal, 1998). Non-Pashtun groups made up an important part of the rebel movement against the pro-Soviet regime in the 1980s. Their chiefs became military-political leaders who pushed for further ethnopolitical consolidation, with clientelism being their main tool, as it is often the case in traditional societies. In the early 1990s, after the fall of the Najibullah regime, non-Pashtun groups briefly gained key positions in the Kabul central government and subsequently became one of the many parties to the civil war. In the second half of the 1990s, they led the resistance against the Taliban. In the fall of 2001, non-Pashtun military units allied with the Americans, helping to overthrow the Taliban. As a reward, the leaders of these movements gained important positions in Kabul. Keeping them was their main task for the past twenty years.

Almost all this time, non-Pashtun groups actively interacted with external players. In the 1980s, they received help from Pakistan and Western countries for “jihad” against the Soviet Union and the pro-Soviet regime, and in the second half of the 1990s, they were assisted by Russia, Iran, India, and Central Asian countries in their resistance to the Taliban. The long foreign involvement led actors of Afghanistan’s domestic politics to develop a peculiar view on world affairs, according to which Afghanistan is in the center of literally all international intrigues. This worldview is particularly strong among non-Pashtun ethnopolitical leaders. They have become used to the rivalry between major players in Afghanistan and skillfully combined their own interests with those of the sponsors, without giving up basic autonomy in opinions and goalsetting.

However, after the central government had been formed as a result of the American military intervention in Afghanistan, the non-Pashtun military-political leaders faced a new reality. Their units were disarmed and dissolved as independent forces were recognized as destructive (Rashid, Rubin, 2003; Marten, 2007), and, to enter the new system of power, they had to accept this condition. Ethnopolitical factions wanted to remain an important part of the pan-Afghan

system, but for that they needed their own identity, which rests on an ethnopolitical basis. So, it turned out that they simultaneously needed regional autonomy (some non-Pashtun politicians even talk about the federalization of Afghanistan, which meets an extremely painful reaction among Pashtuns), and strong representation in the central government. While earlier they defended the right to their own identity using their own military units, after the disarmament they needed an external guarantor in order to retain influence in the political system. Needless to say, the guarantor was the United States, cooperation with which was also generously rewarded financially. Thus, non-Pashtun ethnopolitical leaders joined the race for attention and encouragement from Washington. On the one hand, they worked to maintain foreigners' involvement in Afghan affairs; on the other hand, they sought to prove their significance and usefulness for foreigners.

Over the subsequent fifteen years or so, non-Pashtun leaders largely lost their basic independence. This became finally clear in the spring and summer of 2021. The Taliban moved north and west, while the Ghani team in the central government took an odd stance, making bellicose statements but at the same time snubbing at regional leaders and denying them a free hand in conducting military activities, explaining this by the fact that the central government allegedly had a strategic defense plan for large cities, and it did not want to disperse efforts. As a result, the Taliban seized vast territories and besieged cities, while non-Pashtun military-political leaders did not dare break up with the central government backed by the United States. In the summer of 2021, the once fearless leaders of non-Pashtun ethnopolitical groups froze in indecision, not being able to make an unequivocal choice between the interests of external forces and the interests of their own communities. It turned out that the process of losing basic independence had gone too far.

A BUFFER OR A CONNECTING LINK?

Traditional rivalry between great powers means that many small and middle states fall under their influence. In a bid to overpower their opponents, great powers created military and political alliances. The

flexibility of the international environment gave small and middle powers room for maneuver. Great powers could lose a war or face internal problems, and alliances collapsed and reemerged, thus giving small and middle powers room for action. Apart from joining the “big” powers, they could also balance. In some historical periods, the concepts of neutrality and non-alignment gained popularity as they could be part of the abovementioned balancing strategy or contribute to a country’s role as a buffer.

Afghanistan is well known to all international relations experts precisely as a buffer. Historically, this country came into being because Russia and Britain sought to avoid direct contact between their zones of influence in the Pamir region. Afghanistan had been excellently performing this function until the late 1970s, when it itself turned into an area of rivalry between great powers. As a result, not only Soviet-American, but also other contradictions were brought into Afghanistan. The Soviet Union and the United States drew regional allies into their rivalry in Afghanistan, and the latter aggravated the conflict between the great powers with their own regional contradictions. The internal Afghan context turned out to be both linked to global political issues and regional tensions—South Asian and Middle Eastern (Harpviken, Tadjbakhsh, 2016). When in the early 1990s the great powers “forgot” about Afghanistan, regional ones continued to feud.

The rise of an independent force to power in Afghanistan, if, of course, it proves to be consistent, should reduce the influence of foreign players—both regional and global—on strategic decisions concerning Afghanistan’s foreign and domestic policies. In modern political terms, this can be called a movement towards international neutrality and autonomy, and in historical terms this can be described as the revival of the buffer role.

However, a state serving as a buffer today is not the same as before. There is a possibility of attempts to deter Russia from getting involved in the south too deeply and keep Pakistan from excessive presence in Central Asia. But most importantly, Russia itself will have to deter the Afghan regime from spreading to the post-Soviet space its ideas about how Muslim societies should be organized. The Taliban’s

expansionist aspirations can be realized only with foreign assistance and encouragement. Therefore, a safeguard against such a policy is the autonomy of the Afghan regime and its concentration exclusively on national tasks. It is even more important for Islamabad to keep the Afghan Taliban from seriously addressing the “Pashtun issue” inside Pakistan in order to avoid an existential crisis. So Pakistan needs to divert the Taliban’s attention from the Pakistani Pashtun issue, and Russia, from Central Asia. Afghanistan should become an area where the Taliban will be busy with their domestic agenda.

The purpose of a buffer territory is to separate the zones of influence and responsibility of strong players and thereby minimize the risk of their collision. The dividing nature of a buffer territory is at odds with the key element of the international narrative established over the last fifteen to twenty years, that is, that Afghanistan is important, since it can connect Central and South Asia via different infrastructure projects (Starr, Frederick, Kuchins, 2010). Perhaps there will be a way to combine the functions of economic connection and geopolitical separation. However, even if the latter prevails, since a buffer territory cannot be absolutely “sterile” and isolated from its neighbors, it will still be possible to carry out regional transport projects in Afghanistan (although probably on a limited scale).

NO ONE’S CLIENT

The practical polycentricity of the modern world does not just entail the absence of a world hegemon and the balance of power between major powers, but also implies a complex system of interaction between major, middle, and small actors.

Since the late 1970s, and particularly in the 1980s, researchers have been talking about favorable conditions emerging for small and middle states to gain more weight in world affairs. Neoliberals came up with the concept of complex interdependence: states and non-state actors are affected by events in other states or in the international system as a whole, and major players are believed to be more vulnerable to external impacts. This was meant to suggest that major powers were weakening, that is, they were losing control over world affairs (Keohane, 1984).

These conclusions furnished the basis for the “middle power concept,” which implied that those who used to be in the shadow of major powers had now much more freedom of action and a chance to prove their worth (Holbraad, 1990; Higgott, 1990).

Since the end of the Cold War two trends have coexisted. On the one hand, worldwide effort has been focused on the establishment of an international institutional structure, a basis for the post-hegemonic world order. On the other hand, hegemony became possible again. Many thought that it was a long-term reality, and its very scale generated a new quality and stability (D’Souza, 2002; Sardar and Davies, 2003). However, neither consistent realists (Kennedy, 1988; Mearsheimer, 2018), nor consistent liberals believed in it. The latter considered it necessary to use the period of American hegemony to establish the liberal world order and maintain it in the early stages. In the future they expected the U.S. to gradually retreat from its hegemonic positions and to pass its power to international institutions (Soros, 2004; Nye, 2003). In any case, after the Cold War, small and middle countries received additional opportunities. In fact, they benefited from rather long periods of historically high commodity prices and increased access to foreign markets as part of growing globalization. Not everyone was able to use this advantage: the problem of failed states serves as a perfect example for this (Harvey, 2003), and many scholars challenged the positive effects that globalization had on underdeveloped societies (De Rivero, 2003). And yet, some developing countries made a leap in economy and began to play a prominent role in world affairs (Denisov et al., 2019).

However, the crisis of the liberal world order, the absence of a “complex” hegemony at the global level (Safranchuk et al., 2021), and increased confrontation, similar to the traditional rivalry between great powers, dimmed prospects for small and middle powers. One could expect the great powers to once again build up military-political alliances, thus narrowing down the space for independent policies of small and middle powers. Some signs of that could indeed be observed. But at the same time, in some cases great powers were interested in not so much drawing middle powers into their orbit, as in not letting

them stray into someone else's. Such a model can be described by paraphrasing the famous remark "He's son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch" into: "He's son of a bitch, but he is on his own." It is quite appropriate in a situation where competition is asymmetric and does not fit into the traditional "zero-sum game" (Safranchuk and Lukyanov, 2021a, 2021b). The desire to build up one's own alliances, usually costly, may not be entirely justified since in the modern world it is often easier to deny an opponent's victory by raising the price to be paid for its actions to an unacceptable level instead of winning in the traditional sense. In this case, the existence of independent small and middle powers is not of any concern to the great powers.

The polycentric world, the way it is evolving, differs from the conceptual ideas officially presented in Russia, and from the theoretical constructs devised by Western realists. Russia sees polycentricity (multipolarity) not only as a natural state of the international system, but also as a harmonious system of international relations, where international law reigns supreme, cooperative principles prevail over confrontational ones, the diversity of human civilization is accepted, and so on. Western realists see polycentricity less idealistically. For them, it means primarily the state of the international system: the absence of a global hegemon—global in terms of its material capabilities and striving to make its regulatory settings universal—and the existence of several large players competing with each other, which implies the crucial importance of force. The practical polycentricity of the modern world is not as ideal as in the official Russian concept and is not as focused on major players and their direct competition as in Western realists' theories.

In the modern polycentric world, military and political alliances are being consolidated to meet the needs of great powers. But in some cases, the ability of a small or middle power to be independent becomes of value for the "big" ones. This may be a temporary phenomenon to last, for example, until great powers get enough strength to divide the world into zones of influence/responsibility, or until rivalry gains momentum to the point where great powers will try to keep escalation in check without tolerating small and middle powers playing on their

contradictions. This is why a “neutral” mid-level player is better than the one who provokes confrontation. But it is quite possible that middle powers will get a more stable role—to become independent players and reduce the influence of great powers on their foreign and domestic policies.

According to the middle power theory, some countries acquire greater independence due to structural realities (relative weakening of the “big” ones) and their own elevation. However, in practice, some countries that are considered classic middle powers, such as Canada or Australia, uphold their status by playing an active role in international affairs, but at the same time participate in a system of military-political alliances with a stronger power and therefore cannot be considered fully strategically independent. In modern conditions, the ability of a small and middle power to pursue an independent policy is determined not so much by its parameters as by the readiness of major powers to provide it with such an opportunity by allocating an appropriate niche in a particular region. This means that weak states can also be independent.

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The question that has recently been in the air and occupied the minds of political scientists and journalists in the summer of 2021 is why Russia has become so close to the Taliban? Many were inclined to give a simple explanation: anti-Americanism is the reason. Some believe that Russia is almost blinded by the idea of confronting America and underestimates the risks associated with the Taliban. Others claim that Russia has made a conscious and decisive choice in favor of an anti-American alliance with “bad guys” of all stripes. We will take the risk of assuming that the latter will soon become the main motif. It fits into the Biden administration’s overall concept that a historic confrontation between democracies and autocracies is unfolding in the modern world. Russia and China have already been included in the latter category. Pakistan will most likely join them as well. Eventually this will transform into a bigger picture where democracies protect small progressive countries, and autocracies cover up not only for

bloodthirsty dictators, but also for fundamentalists, that is, the advocates of anti-progress.

In reality, Russia has supported (although softer diplomatic language is used) the force in Afghanistan which is the most independent one in the local context. This is a rather consistent step towards building a polycentric and diverse world. There are still many uncertainties about further developments in Afghanistan, but in the international context, in the foreseeable future the country can become an example of traditional rivalry between the great powers or an example of a fundamentally different kind of interaction, where what matters is not that an actor in question is on “our” side, but that it is not on the rival’s side. In the latter case, Afghanistan will become another component of a polycentric world and a vivid example of a smooth change in Russia’s foreign policy impacting not only this particular region, but also the general principles of Russian diplomacy at a new stage of global development.

In a structurally polycentric world, with a group of quite independent middle powers standing out, one of the competitive advantages of great powers will be their ability to deal with such middle powers. The basic principle is to accept middle powers as they are with all their specificities and refrain from imposing internal and foreign policy patterns habitual for great powers. At the same time, independent (and in some cases, probably, idiosyncratic) middle powers will complicate international interaction, and great powers will get comparative advantages only if they do not try to change the situation in their favor by pressure and force, but show the ability to maneuver and subtly use the complex international environment by employing the entire range of tools offered by the art of diplomacy (albeit the use of power is also part of this art).

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