

# Future of Afghanistan in Rough Terrain with Foreign Troops Withdrawal and Taliban Return to Power

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**Abstract:** Afghanistan had been a disturbed nation in the history of a memorable time. The historical timeline is laden with clash, violence, foreign invasion, insurgency, and bloodshed. The local populace faced enough strife and conflict from British rule in the 19th century to Taliban resurgence in the 21st century. The country was ravaged by civil war and militancy for decades. Political instability, natural disaster, surging violence, stalled peace talk, rising poverty, and rampage of COVID 19 put the country into a grave humanitarian crisis in 2020. Since the declaration of withdrawals of troops and handing over security system in the hands of the Afghan security force, extremist group Taliban started flexing muscles and ended up in appropriation of the whole country in August 2021. Since June 2021, the Taliban made advances with renewed vigor, vanquished the Afghan military, and captured one province after the other. Normal economic activities, business, trade, and commerce faced a severe jolt. There was the imposition of Shariat law and restrictions on social life. Women were worst affected as their freedom was repealed and safety came under a question mark. During the previous Taliban regime from 1998-2001, education got restricted by Taliban diktat and women's education faced a ban. Media also faced sanctions and freedom of journalism was abrogated. Afghan people were scared of impending torturous times and started to flee the nation. An alarm bell was sounded in neighboring nations and other parts of the world as the rise of militant extremists can be a looming threat to global peace and stability. Afghan economy and social life have faced a rough patch as foreign aid stalled and upstart extremists lack economic prudence to run the country.

**Keywords:** economic turmoil, pandemic trouble, political instability, social agony, Taliban militancy, troop withdrawal, women's insecurity.

## 1. Introduction

Afghanistan, officially known as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is one of the disturbed nations situated in south Asia. Afghanistan's economy is shaky and war-torn. The economy depends heavily on foreign grants. The presence of the private sector is minuscule. As per World Bank estimate, about 44 percent of the workforce is engaged in agricultural activities which account for the source of income for 60 percent of households. The landlocked nation is mostly sprawled by a rugged mountain range. Population clustered around foothills

and on the fringe of Hindukush Mountain. The Eastern part is densely populated and the south is sparsely settled. A harsh arid climate and bitterly cold winter don't offer comfortable living for inhabitants. In this Islamic nation, Sunni Muslims dominate over Shia counterparts. Impoverished nation deals with high infant mortality rate, low life expectancy, and low-slung literacy rate. Economic diversity is less and constricted by existential insecurity, political unsteadiness, frail institutional facility, insufficient infrastructure, pervasive malpractice, and problematic business ambiance (World bank, 2020). As per the Ease of Doing Business Survey of 2020, Afghanistan held 173 ranks out of 190 countries. It improved by a decent mark in starting a business parameter. But fared abysmally concerning dealing with construction approval, getting access to power supply, property registration, access to the credit facility, payment of taxation, cross border trade operation, and enforcement of contracts. As per the survey report, it improved marginally in insolvency resolution. The feeble competitiveness and unfavorable business environment perpetuated a trade deficit that went up to 30 percent of GDP and was mostly funded by the inflow of grants. About 75 percent of its public spending was financed by foreign grants. Security expenses were unusually high (hovering around 28 percent of GDP) in comparison with other low-income countries where it is barely 3 percent of GDP. The unaccounted illegitimate economy is reasonably well functional and offers production, export, and livelihood opportunities through poppy cultivation, drug trafficking, illegal mining. Afghanistan tops the world in opium production which gets processed into heroin and exported overseas with an estimated value of \$1.5- \$3 billion annually. As per the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) record 2020, opium cultivation in this south Asian nation accounted for 11 percent of national income and 80 percent supply in the world market. Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan was influenced by several political and socio-economic factors such as deteriorated rule of law, fragile political stability, insurgency-driven insecurity, insignificant job availability, dearth of quality education, and slim scope of market accessibility. In the context of worsening

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security concerns, lack of rule of law, and undermined governance, the Afghan economy is mired with abuse of power and persistent corruption. Afghan territory is heavily endowed with mineral resources although it remained mostly unexploited. The mineral reserves are copious with copper, cobalt, coal, and iron ore besides ample deposits of oil, gas and precious stones. Moreover, lithium availability is substantial and has the potential to take the economy on a higher trajectory of progress as lithium metal is applied in batteries of digital devices and electric cars. Neighboring China has shown interest in Afghan mineral reserves of late with the exit of western power. But China is also doubtful about the extraction of industrial inputs in the worsened security situation and pervasive corrupt practices. Taliban will not be able to run the economy on its own unless it wins public support, foreign assistance, and systematizes the financial system along with several productive facilities. World didn't approve withdrawal of troops by US and its allies and its aftermath effect of Afghanistan became stronghold of extremist group. Several analysts apprehended that security of the world would be at stake.

## **2. The Evolving Scenario of Trouble Ridden and War-Torn Afghanistan**

Afghanistan as a nation recounted troubled moments in the past, and got into a fresh predicament with the declaration of troop withdrawal by the US, NATO, and other foreign authorities. The bilateral talk was initiated in late 2018 between the Taliban and the US with the hope of peaceful resolution to troops withdrawal, and political solution for the ongoing crisis. A peace agreement between US forces and Taliban was struck in February 2020 in which the former committed to taking back its troops and later provided assurance of restraint on its combative tendency. Taliban also gave words of disallowing al-Qaeda or other militants to run operations in territories under their command. Former US President Donald Trump issued an order on 17th November 2020 to reduce US troops in Afghanistan from 4500 to 2500 by January 2021. The peace negotiation process was organized in Doha, Qatar on 12th September 2020 between members of the Afghan government and Taliban leaders which was deferred by more than 6 months owing to political turbulence in Kabul and raging violence in Afghanistan. Doha process turned sluggish due to the approaching US election scheduled in November 2020. All parties involved waited to see who would win the US election. Later, Doha negotiation participants wanted to know whether the new administration of the US would adhere to the previous deal or suggest some changes in the settlement process. Biden administration made it clear that it would focus on counter-terrorism and reduce military presence in Afghanistan. Biden avoided warning of a possible resurgence of militancy in Afghanistan which could be similar to the withdrawal of troops from Iraq in 2011 and the subsequent surge of Islamic State groups that led to the costly comeback of the American military in 2014. Biden made a declaration on April 14, 2021, about bringing back US troops by the 20th anniversary of the 11th September attack of 2001. North Atlantic Treaty Organization

(NATO) which worked closely with US troops in the war against terrorism felt the need for withdrawal of armed forces from Afghanistan soil. Under Biden's leadership, the Afghan military started losing US air support and necessary military maintenance support. American abandonment dented psychological injury for Afghan security forces. Islamic extremist groups have waited for the moment for a long time and since May 2021 they have advanced with reinvigorated strength. They kept on advancing and capturing one territory after the other without major resistance on their way. In August 2021, they gained control over the majority of Afghan provinces and also swept into capital Kabul to entrench their authority. President Ashraf Ghani presumably fled to Uzbekistan to avoid the deluge of bloodshed. The abrupt departure of the state head hastened the crumble of the US-backed government in Afghanistan. US and UK forces arrived in Afghanistan, not for a face-off but to cooperate in ignominious evacuation. The security situation deteriorated abysmally as the Taliban established its dominance over Afghanistan. Although Taliban forces vowed to disallow Afghanistan to be a base for terrorists which would target western nations, uncertainty looms large about its honesty and credibility. The plight of women under newly developed Taliban rule remained a matter of serious concern as it opposed the education and freedom of women in Afghan society. Taliban earlier issued the threat of extermination of girl's schools in the Herat region and eliminated formal education for girls in Helmand province. Although Taliban extremists made a promise about safeguarding women's rights complying with Sharia law, many female journalists and activists are apprehensive about being stoned by unruly militants. Women were not allowed to move about without a senior male escort. Women had earlier been tortured for error in the length of the burqa, painting their nails, and for their sexual orientation. The assistance of the United Nations, the international community, and local organizations are sought to protect sexual minorities, displaced citizens, and vulnerable groups. For about 20 years, the Taliban was sidetracked by the US-led military coalition. In July 2021, the Taliban made an aggressive move and captured Kandahar, Herat, Mazhar-e-Sharif, and other cities gradually. Taliban militants appropriated a few areas from the Afghan National Army uncontested. By the 16th of August, the Taliban gained control over the majority of Afghan provinces. About 400 Afghan districts came under the purview of Taliban rule. US forces located at the outskirts of Afghanistan launched an airstrike but failed to dismantle invading insurgents. Thousands of US troops and allied forces assembled at Kabul Airport as it was the official exit route since border crossings fell under Taliban supervision. Helpless civilians also arrived at Kabul airport in great numbers and it became chaotic evacuation as all wanted to take the first flight out of the militant-ridden nation. In August 2021 end suicide bombers and gunmen caused twin blasts and attacked congregated crowds at Kabul airport which rendered about 100 Afghans killed and 13 US troops dead. In retaliation, the US army made a drone attack to send the befitting response as bomb blasts at Kabul airport unnecessarily hampered the evacuation process.

The economy of Afghanistan is in terrible shape. As per World Bank data, the annual GDP growth rate of Afghanistan reduced to -1.9 percent in 2020. The shadow of uncertainty grew longer with the announcement of troop withdrawal by the US and its allies like NATO and the UK who fought for 20 years to wage a war against terror and to fortify Afghan defense outfits. But the departure made a dent in an already ramshackle economy that is heavily dependent on foreign aid. As per the World Bank report, Afghanistan receives foreign aid worth about 40% of its GDP. Sudden change in the situation brought a knee-jerking effect for regular activities of Afghanistan. Taliban extremists didn't take much time to invade territories and regain their control over Afghanistan. The resurgence of radical Islamic group in Afghanistan didn't bid well with western power and there was the suspension of aid from the US and Germany. Even aid from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) got stopped as they didn't want the fund to fall into the hands of the terror group. The US administration under Joe Biden will ensure that assets of the central bank of Afghanistan would not be handed over to the Taliban. Afghan citizens are scared to sustain in the extremist-led nation as they had a horrific experience in the past. Besides foreign aid, the country also relied on remittances which amounted to about 4 percent of GDP as per the report of the World Bank. The banking system faced a severe setback as people queued up outside the bank to withdraw their deposits. Although the Taliban spokesperson assured about the safety of lives and property of bank proprietors, foreign exchange dealers, traders and shop owners, trust of people in banking facilities and the financial system plummeted to rock-bottom level. The employment of women remained shrouded in uncertainty in Afghanistan with the rise of radical hardliners. Struggle for existence and race to escape the terror-laden nation grew intense. In first news conference in mid-August 2021, Taliban spokesperson clarified that rights of women would be safeguarded within the framework of Islam, media freedom would continue and amnesty would be issued to government officials. Taliban echoed assurances that Afghan territory would not be allowed to launch an attack against any nation but Indian intelligence service remained worried about security concern when Afghanistan would be funded by China for extension of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Pakistan would continue its support for Taliban's future course of action. As India has border issue with both China and Pakistan, resurgence of extremist Taliban is cause for concern for Indian territorial integrity.

### 3. Discussion

Afghanistan is one of the troubled nations in South Asia which underwent severe political turmoil, social distress, and economic hardships over the decades. The people of Afghanistan have suffered a horrendous humanitarian crisis with decades of unending warfare and tormenting militant regimes. The reform in Taliban mindset is highly needed to dismantle their sadist behavior and misogynist attitude. Afghanistan is one of the poorest nations in the world. It fared

badly on most economic and human development parameters. Since the Taliban took control over Kabul on 15th August, 2021 economic prospects appeared dismal in world view. The dire straits of Afghanistan's economy are portrayed in the following diagrams.

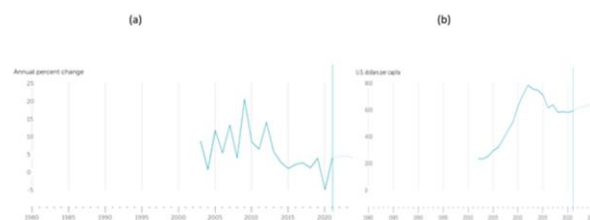


Fig. 1. a) Annual percent change of real GDP growth rate, b) GDP per capita in current prices (in US dollar term)

Source: IMF data mapper, Afghanistan datasets (April 2021)

In the above figure 1(a), the economic contraction of Afghanistan became evident when economic deceleration caused an annual percent change of -5 in real GDP growth. Afghanistan's economy was ravaged by severe drought and pandemic onslaught. As per United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), about 2 million Afghans were affected by the worst drought scenario in 2020. There was an acute food crisis and news of the humanitarian disaster spread in every nook of the world as the dire situation grabbed media and public attention. The Afghan economy was ill-prepared to face the pandemic blow as its healthcare infrastructure was inadequate and trained medical staff was insufficient. Productive enterprises were deprived of public and private investment. The economy relied enormously on foreign aid which was channelized to fulfill basic humanitarian requirements. The economy got saddled with vices like misgovernance, corrupt practices, inept policy measure, the threat of terror strikes, illicit opium dealings, and intermittent food scarcity and inflation. Poppy cultivation was ended in 2000 by the Taliban but its production restarted post topple of Taliban in 2001 and scaled record production in 2017. Rather than farmers, poppy production filled the coffers of tainted govt. officials and Taliban rebels. In diagram 1b, GDP per capita in current price shows the impoverishment of people. As per IMF record, it is recorded as \$591.67 in 2021 whereas for western developed nations GDP per capita in the current price is about 50-60 thousand or more. There is a possibility of a decline in income in the foreseeable future when the nation is taken under siege by the extremist group. Prolonged war and terror strike left agriculture neglected, irrigation dilapidated, and road transport facilities battered. The economy lacks good governance, reform measures, institutional facility, and infrastructural support. Under Taliban rule, uncertainty looms large over economic performance, improvement in law and order, business climate, and inflow of foreign grants.

### 4. Conclusion

As Panjshir valley fell under the control of the Taliban after the defeat of Northern Alliance forces on 6th September 2021, the future of Afghan economic and social life appeared blurred.

Pakistan has been blamed by Afghanistan residents, Iran, and western power for its constant support and vested interest. Taliban rebels received immense support from Pakistan in terms of arms, ammunition, and hideouts in the last 20 years when troops of the US and its alliance drove them out and continued western dominance. Taliban made a great comeback and recaptured their lost territory after prolonged hiatus. Afghan people went through trouble and turmoil for decades and generations. The south Asian economy had long been poverty-stricken and at the mercy of foreign aid to fulfill its humanitarian needs. It had its first brush of misfortune when the Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and established communist rule there. Millions of Afghans had to pay the price with their lives. Soviet troops left Afghanistan in 1989 after a bloodletting civil war when mujahideen fought to drive out the Soviet-installed Afghan ruler being supported by the US- and Pakistan. The Taliban uprising happened in 1996 and rolled out stringent Islamic diktat upon their arrival. Women and minorities had a horrific time under Taliban leadership. Media and journalists came under attack on numerous occasions. After the 11th September attack on the US in 2001, the Taliban was dethroned, and the US-led govt. was posted in power. NATO assumed responsibility in 2002 for security in a tension-packed arid region. The Constitution was laid out and elected govt. started functioning in 2004 with Hamid Karzai as elected president. In 2014, Ashraf Ghani took over the presidency but the situation turned grim as NATO terminated its combat mission and handed security responsibility to the Afghan force. Henceforth, insurgency started raising its ugly heads and it got accentuated with the declaration of troops withdrawal by the US in 2020. After 20 years of US support and military presence, Afghanistan retrogressed to a deplorable time with the dreadful return of the Taliban. Economy and social life stared at a bleak future when foreign aid dwindled, pandemic wreaked havoc; drought lingers due to environmental harshness and normal activities dither under the tyrannic rule. There are many challenges for the Taliban-led govt. of Afghanistan. The arduous task is to set right the infrastructure of conflict-torn country, stabilize the economic condition and gain international recognition. It's to see how the Taliban is keeping the inclusiveness promise despite their hardliner approach guided by Sharia and Islamic law. As per UN World Food Program, about 14 million people of Afghanistan were in dire need of food assistance at the beginning of August 2021. Drought dealt a mortal blow to the livelihood of about 7 million local inhabitants. Pandemic aggravated living conditions of masses

and surging conflict since July 2021 caused many displacements. As per Asian Development Bank, 47 percent of people live below the poverty line with daily expenses less than \$1.90 per day. The unemployment rate was recorded at 11.7 percent in 2020 in the pre-Taliban period. Taliban invasion caused many to flee the nation and women get dismissed from jobs. In precarious economic conditions, Afghan currency Afghani tends to depreciate further, inflation to soar high and food crisis to worsen. It is hard to predict how the Taliban would regulate fiscal measures and the central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank would devise monetary policy under their guidance to safeguard the economy tottering on the brink of collapse. The fate of millions of Afghans is reeling under the shadow of risk and uncertainty.

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