



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Pakistan, the Taliban, and the future of Afghanistan

Description: Afghanistan's Taliban is poised to take the reins in Kabul with the looming withdrawal of US troops. Although dependent on Pakistan in the past, the Taliban are now more geopolitically savvy. So what influence would Islamabad have in a new Taliban-led Afghanistan? And what can the world expect from a Taliban 2.0 government? South Asia observers Associate Professor Matthew Nelson and Dr Zahid Ahmed join Ali Moore to discuss Afghanistan's possible futures. An Asia Institute podcast.

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Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Matthew Nelson:

You know for a long time, in Afghanistan, we have thought of regional powers as interlopers, as spoilers, as sustaining proxies in an ongoing war. But there's another way that regional powers could remain involved which is to engage the Taliban but also moderate the Taliban.

Zahid Ahmed:

In the past, the Taliban were mainly dependent on Pakistan when they were running the government but in the post-9/11 context we see the Taliban having relationships with Iran, with China, with Moscow. I think the group has evolved in many ways. They're playing the time game, and very smartly and very diplomatically. And I think they're not giving any easy clues to anyone.

Ali Moore

In this episode, Pakistan, the Taliban and a future for Afghanistan.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

After the longest war in American history, it seems increasingly certain the US military presence in Afghanistan is coming to an end. While timelines around a full withdrawal are being argued about, there are likely to be stark changes to who has the reins in Kabul, and while the powerful Taliban appears to have the upper hand in ongoing negotiations with Afghanistan's National Unity



government, what will be the influence of other big actors in the region and in particular, Pakistan with its long history of intervention in its crisis prone neighbour to the north west.

Pakistan has been on the receiving end of harsh criticism from Western powers over its covert support for the Taliban, both when the Taliban was in power in the five years to 2001 leading up to 9/11 and since as it's successfully rebuilt and regrouped to challenge for power once again. Yet Pakistan has also taken an active role in dragging the militant Islamist organisation to the negotiating table over Afghanistan's future. So what are Pakistan's real goals for Afghanistan? How much influence can they or dare they exert? And how will Pakistan contend with the interests and activities of other players in the region namely India, China, Russia, and Iran. Joining me to discuss these questions are research fellow Dr. Zahid Ahmed from the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University and South Asia Islam and politics researcher Associate Professor Matthew Nelson of Asia Institute. Welcome back Zahid and welcome Matthew.

Zahid Ahmed:

Thank you Ali.

Matthew Nelson:

Thank you very much.

Ali Moore:

Let's start with 2021, which is shaping up as a very significant year in the history of Afghanistan. The US is reviewing a May deadline to withdraw troops. The peace talks are underway but it seems with very dubious progress. Take us through the current moment in Afghanistan, Matthew.

Matthew Nelson:

Well, it's an incredibly important year. About a year ago, a little more than that, we had some talks in Doha and they produced a negotiated agreement between the United States and the Taliban that had a few different key elements. One of course was this May 1st withdrawal deadline for foreign troops that you mentioned in the opening. And as you said, that's currently being discussed again in Washington. There was a second element, which was the possibility of intra-Afghan talks, which of course involved talks between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government. There was another element that involved the Afghan Taliban sort of providing assurances that other international terrorist organisations like Al-Qaeda or Islamic State would not be allowed to use Afghan territory to plan attacks on the United States. There were further dimensions concerning the lifting of UN sanctions on certain Taliban leaders talks about releasing prisoners and so on.

So these different dimensions in this deal between the Trump administration and the Taliban has set the stage for the last year and as the US has continued to draw down its troops towards this May 1st deadline, the Taliban have largely honoured part of their agreement, not to attack US troops since they're withdrawing, but the other key part of this agreement which is the intra-Afghan talks between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government have stalled, completely stalled.

And so in recent weeks really, we've seen the new Biden administration really trying to light a fire under that process of talks and really expanding the group of people who might be involved beyond just the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban to bring in, as you said, some regional players and perhaps even some other key regional actors within Afghanistan. So what we're seeing right



now is the tail end of what was agreed about a year ago and an effort to figure out what to do next as that withdrawal deadline arrives and the regional powers are looking forward to what happens next. And some of the instability that could follow if the US simply leaves.

Ali Moore:

So that's a terrific sense of the environment that we're in the background to our conversation. The key regional players that Matthew has just mentioned Zahid, is Pakistan key here? Perhaps the most key regional player because they are credited aren't they with bringing the Taliban into this peace process?

Zahid Ahmed:

Yes, I absolutely agree. I think Pakistan and its engagement and relationship with the Taliban should be looked at through the lens of its national interests. So in terms of its national interest in Afghanistan, historically they have focused on Islamabad efforts to have a pro-Pakistan government, and also to have good relations mainly with the Pashtuns, the majority of ethnic group in Afghanistan as well. And as the Taliban are largely Pashtun organisation, I think Pakistan has just felt comfortable with them. And now, unlike in the past, I think Pakistan is quite open about it so the relationship with the Taliban.

In the past of course, they used to hide all of that influence but now in the last year or so Islamabad hosted Taliban delegations three to four times. Every time at Pakistan foreign office. And they were pictures taken, they were all like officials hugging Taliban delegations and so on. So there is already this recognition not only in the US but also in other important countries, for example, China and Russia that Pakistan has this influence on the Taliban and can play a productive role in terms of bringing the Taliban to the dialogue forums and also in a way to use that leverage to convince them on certain important aspects.

And we have recently seen that the Biden administration also reached out to Pakistan to sort of discuss this extension in terms of the peace deal or the withdrawal. And then the statement came from Pakistan that they are supportive of the US troops staying in Afghanistan for a little longer than what was agreed in the peace deal. So considering that I think there is already enough evidence to suggest that there is recognition of the role of Pakistan. Of course, there are two sides to the situation and the role can also be negative. And I'm sure we'll discuss that later on.

Ali Moore:

So from Pakistan's point of view, you say that it's no longer covert support. It's very overt support. They're prepared to own their backing at the Taliban. What's changed with that? Is that because now the Taliban is at the table, then Pakistan wants to be seen as a great influencer here?

Zahid Ahmed:

I think the key aspect is that the Taliban have been recognised by especially the US as legitimated actors in Afghanistan, and that's how they have been brought to the dialogue table. So in the past, of course they were labelled as terrorists. And I think the whole narrative has changed around the Taliban and they are seen as a legitimate actors who can play a role in the future of Afghanistan. And that's how when the US signed this peace deal that Matthew also talked about in detail, the Afghan government was not party to the deal. And perhaps the US knew it very well, that they Afghan



government were perhaps seen as spoilers to the peace deal, and they were not involved in the signing of the agreement as a party.

So I think the whole narrative has changed and Pakistan feels more comfortable in terms of its now world support and they're quite open about it. Of course, there are a lot of still hidden elements of the support that also involved, for example, giving refuge to the Taliban members, leaders and their families in Pakistan, giving them free medical aid and many of them travelled on Pakistani passports, for example. So there is all that support but I think Pakistan is quite open about its engagement in terms of the peace dialogues and it's trying to show to the world that it has a positive role to play in Afghanistan as well.

Ali Moore:

And if we first step back a bit Matthew, if we look beyond both Pakistan and Afghanistan being Muslim majority countries, how much of a cultural or religious or well religious obviously but ideological fit is there between Pakistan and Afghanistan? How close are the ties that bind?

Matthew Nelson:

The ties that bind are multi-dimensional and I think complex. So it's difficult to say that Pakistan and Afghanistan are friends or Pakistan and Afghanistan are foes. There are multiple dimensions there. I think that what Zahid was just saying about Pakistan feeling comfortable recognising the role that the Taliban might play is a really important point because the Taliban have craved international recognition. And so to the extent that they feel themselves to have been recognised by the United States in their deal with the Trump administration

And this has allowed the Pakistan government to sort of return to a position that they had when the Taliban were in power before September 11th when Pakistan was one of the very few States that actually recognised the Taliban government. And now is in a position to work with a Taliban that increasingly sees itself as a mainstream political player, overtly and other countries in the region will also begin to appreciate the possibility of recognising the Taliban whilst calibrating that recognition.

Matthew Nelson:

I think that that's really important to keep in mind. And I just wanted to pick up on what Zahid had said, but returning to your question about the Pakistan Afghanistan relationship and its closeness, its dimensions, whether they're religious or ethnic or political or historical, it is worth looking at this, I think in a few different ways. On the one hand, Pakistan has a slightly different relationship with the Pashtun population in the Southern part of Afghanistan because of course Pakistan has its own Pashtun minority. So there's an ethnic group that bridges the border.

Matthew Nelson:

And then a slightly different relationship with the groups in northern Afghanistan. So during the anti-Soviet jihad, for instance, some of the key Mujahideen groups were led by figures from the Northern part of Afghanistan and Pakistan has that history, but some of the ethnic groups in Northern Afghanistan - Tajik, or Uzbek, or Turkmen, they don't have a corresponding ethnic group in Pakistan. So the ethnic ties aren't there in the same way that they are with southern Afghanistan. And of course it's impossible to address the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan without mentioning the contested status of the border between them. This border is known as the Durand



line, and Afghanistan has always hesitated to recognise that as an international border and Pakistan has not hesitated to recognise that international border.

And one of the reasons that Afghanistan has hesitated is precisely because of this Pashtun population that crosses the border. And that has always been a point of contention and Pakistan is concerned about the ethnic solidarities that cross the Afghanistan Pakistan order. As we all know, Pakistan has a history of difficult relationships with ethnic groups that do not feel a close tie to the Pakistani state beginning all the way back with the Bengalis who of course in East Pakistan, separated to form Bangladesh, then we have the Balochi and the Pashtuns, all of these are ethnic groups that have from a Pakistani perspective, had an ambivalent relationship with the state. So Pakistan and Afghanistan maintain a certain tension when it comes to the Pashtun population that crosses their contested border.

Ali Moore:

Zahid can we even I suppose, talk of an Afghanistan crisis without talking about Pakistan? How integral are they to everything that happens with Afghanistan?

Zahid Ahmed:

I think Pakistan's role in terms of peace in Afghanistan is inevitable in many ways, especially through the lens that Pakistan uses. So in the security circles in Pakistan, there is always this talk of Pakistan strategic depth and if we see that other than those five years when there was the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan or the Taliban regime, Pakistan has never enjoyed a friendly government in Kabul. So I think we have to look through that lens and Pakistan's longterm desire to have a pro Pakistan government there.

And when Matthew talked about the Pashtun and the ethnic elements, I think there is also this historic mistrust as well. Pakistan's historic mistrust of non Pashtuns who were part of the Northern Alliance supported by Russia and India for example, and largely and many scholars have written about this, that largely Pakistan's foreign policies are India-centric, and here I think the India factor plays a key role because since 9/11, India's engagement in Afghanistan has expanded a lot. It has a three consulates in addition to its embassy in Kabul and economic investment as well, and influence on the media and the government in Kabul, I think is visible.

And that adds to Pakistan's insecurities and when there is a talk of, let's say peace in Afghanistan or its future, Pakistan's interest is to have a regime that could serve its interest or decreasing India's influence in the country because that affects a strategic depth. It already has to secure its long borders with India. And if they have to also secure the Durand line against Indian involvement or attack central Pakistan through Afghanistan, I think that would create more insecurities, and that has already created more insecurities in Pakistan.

Ali Moore:

And we will return to both, I suppose, the role of India and also some of those other key countries but Zahid what does the broader Afghan population think of Pakistan and vice versa?

Zahid Ahmed:

I think one of the weaknesses of Pakistan's foreign policy has been to really invest in its goodwill in Afghanistan and goodwill among the Afghan population. So I think that's where Pakistan has really lost this competition because if you talk about the Afghan population, the perceptions about



Pakistan are very negative. I did a study on this aspect and interestingly, a lot of Pakistani participants blame India's influence on Afghanistan for this negative perception, but there is another aspect that all those three to five million Afghan refugees who lived in Pakistan also share the same feeling.

So this is mainly because they see that Pakistan is responsible for all the troubles in Afghanistan, especially Pakistan's intelligence agency. And they label it as their double games supporting the Taliban, even when the war on terror, Pakistan was one of the key allies with the US and did handover where some of the Taliban leaders who were in Pakistan, so Pakistani authorities, they arrested them and they handed them over to the US but many of them still kept on living in Pakistan and of course, there's the example of the Quetta Shura, the Taliban that still exists and started operating soon after 9/11. And that in a way is one example of how the Taliban were allowed to operate in Pakistan and re-energise and then counter the US-NATO troops in Afghanistan. So I think that's the understanding of the larger Afghan population and they see that the chaos in their country is also because of Pakistan support for the Taliban.

Ali Moore:

Matthew, what do you agree with that and particularly the perception of the double game by the broader population?

Matthew Nelson:

Yeah, one of the complicating factors of course, is that many of the Afghans who are in Pakistan have been in Pakistan for decades and one of the challenges with the refugee population that is present for such a long time is the difficulties that that refugee population finds normalising its situation. So Afghans in Pakistan will find it difficult if they're outside of refugee camps to integrate into the Pakistan economy while simultaneously of course, pursuing livelihoods that involve them in the Pakistan economy. So you will have, for instance, the transport sector in Pakistan has a lot of Pashtun influence that overlaps with Pashtuns from Pakistan backgrounds and from Afghan backgrounds. And you will have other linkages with forms of trade that Pakistan would like to see much less of for instance, drugs trade and the Afghan population will then be demonised for being involved in illicit forms of trade.

And of course the opportunities for them to join licit forms of trade are also restricted. And so these patterns of what I'll call non integration for refugee populations, frustrate and challenge the perception that Pakistanis will have of Afghanistan and Afghans generally. And then of course, those patterns of discrimination, feed the stance on the part of Pakistanis that Afghans can be hostile and unfriendly to Pakistan. So when you have long-term refugee populations, some of these cycles of misperception and demonization sort of feed one another and escalate over time, and that makes it very difficult at a popular level to achieve what Zahid mentioned as some of the public diplomacy goals of Pakistan with reference to Afghans or Afghanistan itself.

Ali Moore:

So Matthew, we said earlier that the intra-Afghan talks have effectively stalled. When we look at the options that are on the table, even if there is a delayed, but still inevitable withdrawal of US and NATO troops, will the Taliban ultimately prevail in Afghanistan? Certainly if you listen to their rhetoric, they clearly think that they've won. Is it hard to dispute that they do have the upper hand?



Matthew Nelson:

Yeah, there was just a piece that came out, I think in the New York Times saying that the Afghan Taliban rhetoric is very much the rhetoric of the victor. I think what we will see is a slow accommodation of an increased prominence for Afghan Taliban in mainstream politics. Now I'm hesitating to call that a Taliban takeover and the reason I'm hesitating to call it a Taliban takeover, lock stock and barrel is because I think that that increased prevalence of Taliban influence will be checked by other forces. So for instance, within Afghanistan you will have regional powers in the Western part of Afghanistan. You have people like Ismael Khan in the northern part of Afghanistan, you have Uzbek warlords like previously general, now Marshall Dostum.

These other powers are not simply going to slip away as the Afghan Taliban become more and more recognised in their political role. They will be in constant negotiation, constant tussles with the Afghan Taliban to moderate whatever new recognised presence that the Taliban have. And this is also true outside of Afghanistan with regional powers. We've spoken about Pakistan. They will, of course maintain ties to the Afghan Taliban but they are themselves, if you will, concerned about too much Taliban too quickly and some of the spillover effects that that could have inside Pakistan. So recently Pakistan has said that they have no favourites in Afghanistan. I think this is what we're going to see more of.

Ali Moore:

But Matthew is that credible, is it? I know too that they said that they don't support the restoration of the Islamic Emirate and that comment regarding no favourites, is that a credible comment?

Matthew Nelson:

In my opinion, it is credible. And it's credible in the following way, that basically if there is too much Taliban too quickly, that will embolden and energise or encourage some of the similar Taliban type movements that Pakistan leaders struggle with inside Pakistan. And so they want to make sure that the relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan is not so encouraging for their own domestic Taliban threats, that they face some ongoing concerns. So they will try to maintain multiple links in Afghanistan, including the Taliban but other parties as well.

This is why you see Pakistan in recent events in Moscow and sort of engaging other leaders in the Afghan political context to make sure that they have ties and connections to lots of different actors. I think that's what we'll continue to see. The analogy I've been thinking of lately is with the post pandemic growth being too quick and therefore risking inflation. So in Pakistan, you'll see the arrival of the Taliban as a recognised political actor but too much of that too quickly could actually undermine the peace that comes with that.

Ali Moore:

Zahid is that how you see it playing out?

Zahid Ahmed:

I think Pakistan is trying to show that it has relationships with all actors in Afghanistan, including the Afghan government but still, I think a lot of that is symbolic. So for example, when Abdullah Abdullah visited Pakistan recently, he wasn't given a kind of a red carpet reception that another state should give to a very predominant leader from a state like Afghanistan let's say, in the case of Pakistan. And when he came even prime minister Imran Khan didn't go to receive him at the airport. He was



received by, I think someone from the foreign ministry. So on the surface if we look of course, Pakistan is showing this interest in having relationships with all the non-Pashtun groups and political factions in the country. I think a lot more work is still needed to be done from Pakistan's perspective and I think there is still a deep rooted mistrust within Islamabad of these non-Western actors who are still largely seen as pro-India, for example in Pakistan.

And if we look at also the general perception now also in Pakistan, the general perception in Pakistan of Afghans is also very negative. There is a term in Urdu which is “Namak Haram”, and in English that is translated as 'thankless people'. So if you talk to most of the policymakers, they talk about Pakistan doing a lot for Afghanistan, hosting millions of refugees and they say that in return, all they get is this behaviour that is largely pro India. So the perception is very negative and that plays a role in all this like Pakistan treatment of various actors from Afghanistan and why Pakistan is more lean towards the Afghan Taliban than other groups.

Ali Moore:

Do you think though Zahid, in the end, however it plays out that it will be a Taliban government in the future in Afghanistan, that they will ultimately prevail?

Zahid Ahmed:

Yes I see that as going to be the very likely outcome. If you look at how they have kept on their offensive and despite their war fatigue and war fatigue the among all actors engaged in the war there, they see that as their strong point that they can pressurise the Afghan government to really implement the peace deal and they, in a way forced them to release the Afghan Taliban prisoners that initially the Afghan government was hesitant to release those people. I see this as going to be ultimately one of the outcomes that maybe in the beginning, that is a kind of a shared government between the current Afghan government and the Taliban. But in future, I think the Taliban are going to dominate and of course this all is dependent on the withdrawal of international troops. And if we look at the regional actors, most of them have this convergence of interests.

So if you talk about Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran, they all want the US troops to withdraw. And the ones who want the US troops to stay there, okay Pakistan is now having mixed feelings, but India and Afghan government perhaps the only actors that want the US troops to stay in Afghanistan. But if you look at the broader picture, everyone wants the US troops to leave and in a way, I feel that they also understand that Afghan Taliban are going to be important actors in terms of the future of Afghanistan.

Matthew Nelson:

Can I jump in on that? Which is to say that I broadly agree with Zahid that we are going to see a very prominent role for the Afghan Taliban, but I think that Pakistan, all the regional actors within Afghanistan and regional actors outside of Afghanistan, are not looking forward to simply saying, "Welcome aboard Taliban. We will work with you. You have free reign." I think instead of the conversation is shifting towards what it would look like for the Taliban to have free reign and some of the resistance that that will face. So I think the conversation will sound a little bit more like, "What does a prominent role with the Taliban look like and how will that be moderated, constrained both within Afghanistan and regionally?"

So the Taliban takeover narrative, I think deserves moderation.



Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Associate Professor Matthew Nelson of Asia Institute and Dr. Zahid Ahmed of the Alfred Deakin Institute and we're talking about what role for Pakistan in a changing Afghanistan and the future for Afghanistan. Let's go to those other regional actors now because we have focused a lot on Pakistan. Clearly India is key. Let's start with India. Zahid, what is at stake for India here?

Zahid Ahmed:

I think India, a big thing at stake is that it has invested more than ever before in terms of reconstruction in Afghanistan, in terms of its economic and investment and also diplomatic relations and security relations for example. Indian armed forces they've trained have gone security forces and they have also intelligence sharing agreement and all that. So if we look at, from India's perspective, they must be looking at all these developments involving the Afghan Taliban with much scepticism. Initially India had declined to discuss anything with the Afghan Taliban, but there are some recent developments that they are also showing interest in having some contact or engagement with the Afghan Taliban. So from India's perspective, I think it just wants to make sure that it doesn't lose an important ally in South Asia and Afghanistan has really, or the current of non-government in many ways has supported India's policy in South Asia, policy linked to for example, isolating Pakistan in South Asia. Afghanistan was one of the countries that joined India in this move against participating in the SAARC Summit.

The SAARC is the ASEAN-like a version of a regional organisation in South Asia, it's called South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and it was going to hold its summit in Islamabad in 2019 and Afghanistan, India, Bhutan and Nepal were the key countries that made this decision to not to participate in the conference held in Islamabad and basically blamed Pakistan for the cross border terrorism into other countries like India and also Afghanistan. So from India's perspective, I think it's important to have a kind of a government in Kabul that still opts for good relations with India.

Ali Moore:

To what extent, Matthew, is Afghanistan inextricably linked to how India views Pakistan?

Matthew Nelson:

I think Afghanistan is very important to how India views Pakistan. I think everything that Zahid just pointed out is absolutely right. I also think that India sees both Pakistan and Afghanistan as standing between India and some of its energy aspirations in Central Asia and trade and transit aspirations. We have to keep in mind that India and Afghanistan have long sought to enhance their trade relations. So it's not just a case of India imposing its interests inside Afghanistan. Afghanistan also reaches towards India for trading relations and so on and we see this across the region. We see Saudi Arabia and the Emirates also enhancing their trade relations with India.

And so when India and Afghanistan are looking for ways to trade, both of them feel a little frustrated by the barriers that are put in place by Pakistan. And so you increasingly see, for instance, a port in Southern Iran known as Chabahar, which allows for Afghan trade to not pass through Pakistan on its way to India. Instead that trade simply crosses the Afghan border into Iran, arrives at the port on the Southern coast of Iran and then by sea goes towards India. India is very, very keen to maintain some of these points of access to Afghanistan. And I think that this is true for regional countries generally. Their ability to work with the Taliban will hinge on the ability of the Taliban to facilitate



opportunities for those countries inside Afghanistan. So all the countries are prepared to work with the Taliban but I think the relationship will, again, hinge on the Taliban's ability to play well with others.

Ali Moore:

And Matthew, you mentioned Iran there, they are also a key player, aren't they? And they're actually Afghanistan's biggest trading partner.

Matthew Nelson:

Absolutely. That relationship between Afghanistan and Iran has, I think been underappreciated or received less focus than it deserves. And of course what's interesting is the relationship between Afghanistan and Iran on multiple levels. Many Afghan refugees are in Iran just as they are in Pakistan. The relationship between Afghan Shia and Iran is very close. The Taliban of course have had a presence in Iran for quite some time. Iran's, not only trading relationships, but also natural resource relationships with Afghanistan are very important. A lot of South Eastern Iran's water passes through or comes from Afghanistan.

So Iran-Afghan relations are extremely important. And as Zahid I think mentioned earlier, lots of regional countries like Iran, would like to see US troops withdraw and that's certainly true, but I think even as they would like to see US troops withdraw, they also want stability in Afghanistan so they don't see another avalanche of refugees, they can maintain these trade ties. And so that in the case of Iran, the Shia within Afghanistan has some security. So that's one of the things that Iran will be watching.

Ali Moore:

And Zahid I suppose, Russia is definitely one of those countries that would be one of the biggest beneficiaries of any US and indeed NATO withdrawal, wouldn't it?

Zahid Ahmed:

Yes, of course. I think we have seen examples of how Russia has been deeply involved in the peace processes involving Afghanistan. So there are two sides to that. So there are meetings held in Moscow and even Taliban delegations, although on one occasion it wasn't that fruitful because the Taliban did not agree to a cease fire, which was a key agenda item on the meeting in Moscow but there is also the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and which of course Russia and China play a key role. They also a contact group on Afghanistan.

So I think there is much more engagement from Moscow's perspective in terms of peace and stability in Afghanistan and, definitely, they'll feel relieved if the US troops leave the region and the region that they see as their sphere of influence from Moscow's perspective. Beyond that, I don't think so, Russia has seeking much more deeper sort of involvement in Afghanistan's domestic politics. For the timing they have just shown interest in the peace process and the US troops withdrawal, but we'll see with time how Russia's interests unfolds.

Ali Moore:

And of course, another key actor that has already been mentioned. But Matthew, China, Afghanistan shares an albeit short border with China but that of course is the mainly Muslim Xinjiang region. And that fear of instability is a big motivating factor for Beijing, isn't it?



Matthew Nelson:

Absolutely. And one of the features of the Trump Taliban deal that China of course takes an interest in is the promises by the Taliban to not allow their territory to be used for terrorist attacks abroad. Now in the US Taliban deal, the 'terrorist attacks abroad' were 'abroad' in a US sense, but I think China would also very much be interested in a similar type of arrangement where the Taliban provide assurances that some of the groups that China fears in Xinjiang are not allowed to mobilise or fall back into Afghan territory.

Beyond that, of course China's interest is not just security with reference to Xinjiang. It's also as I've mentioned, economic and China's belt and road initiative, which is crucial pillar of their foreign policy engagements includes not only the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which extends from western China through Pakistan to the coast Gelada but also the idea that that network will continue further West and include Afghanistan, Iran and so on. We've already seen announcements about closer ties between China and Iran. Some of those ties will involve passing through Central Asian states but the idea is that they could also involve passing through Afghanistan and Afghanistan's economic potential as a transit point becomes very important. So China's interests for its broader geo-strategic aims very much includes stability in Afghanistan and, of course, stability in western China.

Ali Moore:

And of course, we've not talked about the US. I guess Matthew, as we said, longest war in American history, even if there is a full withdrawal of US military from Afghanistan, will that really mean an end to America's influence?

Matthew Nelson:

Well, the current discussion is about the withdrawal of foreign troops. And so even the conversations about extending troop presence seem to touch on things like avoiding combat troops but perhaps allowing an extension of training-oriented troops. So for instance, in a counter terrorism capacity and so on. Furthermore, the withdrawal of troops does not mean the end of say diplomatic relations or other sorts of engagements on humanitarian assistance or reconstruction. And I think both the Afghan government, of course, but also the Taliban who aspire to have a more prominent role hope that there will be international support for Afghanistan economically and including reconstruction.

And so the US along with many other States is likely to remain part of that picture. The idea is that much of that will be coordinated under a UN umbrella as opposed to a US-led umbrella. But I think that when we're imagining what the US relationship with this region will look like in the future, it will very much look like a US military presence stepping back and other forms of engagement stepping forward. So I don't think the US will suddenly be, as it were, history in Afghanistan or the region generally. But I do think that the configuration of that will change dramatically.

Ali Moore:

And Matthew you've been very clear that this narrative of a Taliban takeover needs to be moderated. So how would you see a Taliban government in Afghanistan? Would it be the same sort of Taliban that we saw from '96 to 2001? How much has changed? How much has the Taliban learned about international engagement? And what are their own imperatives?



Matthew Nelson:

I think it will look quite different. I think, first of all coming to the Taliban in a second but first of all, the countries that matter in the region, China, India, Russia, Iran, they're nothing like they were 20 years ago and they have considerably more influence, in the case of China, considerably more resilience potentially in the case of Iran, a very different political personality in the case of India. And so I think that when we're looking forward to what a Taliban government would look like, particularly given that some of these States will be looking for ways to recognise but also work with the Taliban in new ways, the Taliban is just working with a different regional context than it was before.

The Taliban itself will have to calibrate its approach to the treatment of women, the treatment of minorities, the regulation of the judiciary, how it considers its military presence and so on and so forth. And all of those things I think, remain question marks. So the Taliban will say for instance, of course we respect the rights of girls to go to school. Of course, we respect the rights of women to work. Of course we will respect our minorities within an Islamic framework. And as soon as they say that, alarm bells go off in certain parts of the world but I think we also have to recognise that within an Islamic framework, is a pretty flexible phrase. There are lots Muslims around the world that refer to an Islamic framework in very different ways.

There are Muslim majority States, even so-called Islamic States that refer to that framework in different ways. And so I think what we'll see is the Taliban continuing to draw on that rhetoric, but a pattern of engagement with regional and international partners that sort of modulates that conversation so that there's a meeting of the minds on what those references might mean.

Ali Moore:

That's the sort of an external look. When you look domestically, when you look internally, Zahid, what will happen to Afghans who want a more liberal or more secular society? What will happen to the current leaders of Afghanistan, the National Unity government? Will they have a future role? What does their future look like under a Taliban dominated regime?

Zahid Ahmed:

I think sense the peace deal between the Afghan Taliban and the US, I think many of those groups and actors will be having a lot of sleepless nights. They Afghan government is desperately trying to reach some kind of agreement with the Afghan Taliban that can ensure their survival. It's based on also the previous experiences that Matthew talked about, of course, the women's rights and I think another aspect is how the Taliban, historically, they treated Shia minorities. And so from Iran's perspective, although they have been engaging with the Taliban in recent years because there is convergence of interest and with regard to the US peace withdrawal, I think when the US troops do withdraw, I think from Iran's perspective, their biggest worry would be to ensure the protection of the Shia minorities and to a degree to which they can influence the Afghan Taliban is also not that clear.

So, for example, in the case of Pakistan, it's clear that there's a degree to which Pakistan can influence their decision-making but also I think from within Afghanistan these ethnic minorities – non-Pashtuns, also Sectarian minority, Shias. I think their biggest worry is if the Taliban come back and start operating like the Islamic Emirate from the mid nineties up until 9/11, then what kind of future they have in Afghanistan? And frankly speaking, I don't see much hope if they do start to just act like the way they did when they were running the government. And unfortunately that may lead



to mass level human rights violation and so on. But within this whole equation, I think we have to pay attention to whether the Taliban have changed.

And I think the group has evolved over the years. They have changed in certain ways and then become really, I think in my opinion, very diplomatic in many ways, the use of ifs and buts, I think, in their language is very prominent. And also the way they have tried to decrease over-reliance on Pakistan, for example, through their diplomatic engagement with other regional actors. In the past, they were mainly dependent on Pakistan when they were running the government and many of Pakistani advisors were actually based in Kabul to help the Islamic Emirate. But in the post 9/11 context, we see the Afghan Taliban having the relationships with Iran, with China, with Moscow, their office in Doha and so on and also they still maintain a relationship with Pakistan. I think the group has evolved in many ways. They are playing the time game and very smartly and very diplomatically and I think they are not giving any easy clues to anyone with regard to how they are going to govern Afghanistan if they get a chance.

Ali Moore:

Matthew, against that backdrop of a very much a diplomatically broadened Taliban, what does it all mean for Pakistan? Do you think that when it comes to their long-term hopes for the country and for the region, will Pakistan's goals be fulfilled or do you think they are in for a frustrating future?

Matthew Nelson:

I think as I indicated earlier, the Pakistan perspective on the future is a worry about too much too fast for Taliban power. So while the Pakistan government, particularly the security services have worked with the Taliban for years and years and are feeling perhaps a sense of trepidation vindication, they also worry that that vindication could turn into a bit of a challenge perhaps pretty quickly. I think, as Zahid mentioned the transformation of the Taliban in terms of their much savvier diplomatic rhetoric is important to pay attention to, but we also see in contexts around the world, challenger groups that have an ability to adapt their diplomatic rhetoric. But then when they finally achieve a recognised role in power, diplomatic rhetoric isn't enough anymore. It's actually a much closer scrutiny when people are watching what they do on the ground.

And so the Taliban had been incredibly tight lipped about how they see their governance programme unfolding with reference to things like rights or elections or the judiciary and so on. They have said that they want to reference only one school of Sunni jurisprudence in their judiciary. And this is unprecedented in the Muslim world. This would make them an outlier in practice. So I think what we'll see from Pakistan's perspective is very intensive engagement to try to make sure that this moderated diplomatic rhetoric is then translated into moderated political practice. And I think that will be a challenge for the Pakistanis. A Taliban political force that sees itself as a sovereign force won't feel it has to pay that much attention to the Pakistan state anymore and Pakistan will struggle to make sure that their interests are preserved in this future.

Ali Moore:

Zahid do you agree that it is going to be much more challenging for Pakistan to be heard in Kabul?

Zahid Ahmed:

Yes I think unlike the general perception in Afghanistan that views Pakistan as being the masters of the Afghan Taliban, their history tells that there have been many incidents of non-compliance on the



part of, let's say, Afghan Taliban to meet Pakistani demands. We have, for example, the issue of the Durand line dispute and when the Taliban were in the government, even then they refused to recognise as a permanent border between Afghanistan and Pakistan and we have to understand that they are not foreigners. They belong to the country, the majority Pashtun ethnic group, they have their own national interests as well.

So I think for Pakistan, it's again, going to be frustrating to really achieve its national interests. I think they're looking at the short-term gains. So in terms of the short-term gains, there are Pakistani Taliban leaders who have taken refuge in Afghanistan and there are reports that the Taliban have been protecting them. So if Pakistan supports the Afghan Taliban, perhaps they are hoping that they would be able to capture those Tehrek-i-Taliban Pakistan members from there. I think another short-term gain perhaps they are looking at is in terms of India's decreased influence there. But beyond that, I don't think so Pakistan is really hoping for much with regard to addressing their historic territorial dispute. So there is only to a certain degree, I think Pakistan can influence have Afghan government, and if they will try to push them, I think the situation again will be frustrating and throw more non-compliance on the part of the Afghan Taliban.

Ali Moore:

Just a final question to you Matthew, for Afghanistan, do you think it's ever going to be in a position to control its own destiny? We've talked about the Taliban playing the long game but are there just too many neighbours who see themselves as key players in what does seem to be a seemingly endless Afghan game?

Matthew Nelson:

Yes, I think there are too many neighbours . And no, I don't think Afghanistan will ever be in total control of its destiny. But this is also to say that no country ever really is. The case of Afghanistan however, is worth looking at. We've heard for such a long time that it's important to think about an Afghan led process. And of course, listening to Afghans is important, but an Afghan led process always includes reference to regional powers.

I think that for a long time we have thought of regional powers as interlopers, as spoilers, as sustaining proxies in an ongoing war and so on. And I think that could very much be the future that Afghanistan experiences, but as I tried to indicate, there's another way that regional powers could remain involved, which is to engage the Taliban but also moderate the Taliban. The regional powers have interests and opportunities in Afghanistan and in order to pursue those, they will have to play well with the Taliban and vice versa. And so regional powers can both be disturbing but also facilitating for a peaceful future in Afghanistan. There's very little historical reason to be optimistic, but that's, I think, where the conversation is right now – trying to cultivate a sense of optimism on that level.

Ali Moore:

And who plays well will be key in the future and indeed in the very near future, we will watch with interest as events unfold. Thank you so much for your insights, both of you. Thank you, Matthew and thank you Zahid.

Matthew Nelson:

Thank you Ali.



Zahid Ahmed:

Thank you Ali.

Ali Moore:

Our guests have been Associate Professor Matthew Nelson of Asia Institute and Dr. Zahid Ahmed from the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University. We've been talking about what role for Pakistan in a changing Afghanistan. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find us, and please help us by spreading the word on social media. This episode was recorded on the 1st of April 2021. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param of Profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons copyright 2021, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore. Thanks for your company.

Ali Moore:

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