

Afghanistan – the Taliban’s failure is in nobody’s interest

The Taliban have seized power in Afghanistan and have forced the West into a humiliating retreat. For now, we have seen little evidence of their promise to govern moderately and ensure the safety and stability of the country, and we are seeing almost daily reports of attacks against the public and terrorist attacks perpetrated by ISIS. Yet, these are fundamental prerequisites prior to gaining international recognition and receiving urgently needed aid.



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A region in political upheaval

The withdrawal of the USA and its allies has created a power vacuum that China and Russia in particular are seeking to fill. But Pakistan, Iran and India could also play an important role in this. For years, China has held valuable licences in Afghanistan, for example for copper mining. Due to the presence of the US and the precarious security situation, however, the country hasn't been able to make use of them until now. Close cooperation with Afghanistan also offers the possibility of expanding the already China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) within the greater framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the event of a crisis, Afghanistan could – at least in theory – offer an alternative route to Pakistan.

Pakistan's government, the creator and closest ally of the Taliban, now hopes to strengthen its position with its neighbour and senses an opportunity to curb the influence of its arch-rival India. Despite its scepticism, Iran seems to be coming to terms with the new rulers. Teheran is relieved that the threatening proximity of US soldiers has finally come to an end. Russia, which had vehemently opposed the permanent establishment of US bases in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, probably views the situation similarly. Moscow must feel a certain sense of satisfaction from Washington's departure, as the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan following their unsuccessful intervention in the country now appears in a very different light.

Afghanistan's neighbours, however, are as anxious as they are relieved, for they are very much affected by developments in the country, especially pertaining to its security situation. Russia is afraid that Islamic extremism and terrorism could spread through the former Soviet states all the way to Moscow. China, on the other hand, fears support for the Muslim Uighurs in its north-western province of Xinjiang. Even Pakistan's government could find itself in trouble if the Taliban's success leads to their ideas spreading unchecked.

Whilst it can be debated to what extent the US has been able to provide security, it has ensured stability.

This burden now rests on the Taliban regime and those directly or indirectly involved in the area. Going forward, they all bear a great responsibility.

The US shifts its focus to the Indo-Pacific

The withdrawal certainly played out differently than the White House had planned or hoped. US President Biden is likely to suffer from the reputational damage for some time to come, despite the fact that he only carried out what his predecessor Barack Obama had already planned, and his immediate predecessor Donald Trump instigated. The fact that the latter was deceived by the Taliban and that President Biden was caught off guard by the events is certainly no credit to him. What is certain is that the US base in Afghanistan as a military hub for the southern Central Asian region has been lost. Accordingly, ISIS terrorist bases can no longer be combatted directly on the ground.

Putting all of that aside, the US has at least been able to free itself from an old burden and thereby opened up the possibility of positioning itself more clearly in geostrategic terms. After all, the Afghanistan mission has cost an incredible two trillion USD and used up considerable military capacities that have now been freed up.

As early as 2011, President Obama shifted the US government's primary geostrategic interest to the Indo-Pacific in order to better position the US against the increasingly powerful China as a geopolitical rival ("Pivot to Asia"). The AUCUS (Australia, UK, USA) security alliance forged by the US in September 2021 has clearly underscored this pivot to the Indo-Pacific.

The West's dilemma

For Europe, the number one priority after the withdrawal will be "humanitarian damage control", i.e., keeping the suffering of the Afghan people to a minimum. A stable Afghanistan would also have the advantage of preventing mass refugees from departing the country again. This would be in the interest of its neighbouring states as well as in that of the EU. For the West and international organisations, however, this

poses a serious dilemma: Can they really refuse to help a starving and suffering population if the Taliban regime doesn't meet even their most basic demands, such as respect for basic human rights?

What could happen, however, is that China and Russia fill this void and prove themselves to be saviours in times of need, thus giving the Taliban regime more room for manoeuvre.

Judging the Taliban by their actions

Afghanistan's new rulers seem to be leading their country and its people back into the past. They are preventing women from accessing education, denying fundamental rights and suppressing the free media. The "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" is ruled on the basis of Sharia, the Islamic legal system. At the same time, the Taliban leadership is struggling for international recognition in order to obtain urgently needed aid funds. According to a UN estimate, around 60% of the Afghan population is dependent on food aid, and the situation is seemingly getting worse as winter approaches.

One should call into question whether the Taliban is even capable of governing in broader terms and whether they will be able to overcome international isolation. Even more importantly: Will they be able to bring stability to the country and prevent it from becoming a refuge for Islamic terrorist groups such as al Qaeda or ISIS? Both questions are of vital importance, especially for Afghanistan's neighbouring states and for Moscow. The outside world will therefore be watching very closely to see whether the new leadership will be able to provide order, security and stability. It will also be interesting to see how its neighbours will react to serious threats to their security.

Internationally, the credo has been that the Taliban "should not be judged by their words but by their actions". This sounds plausible but is likely to run into problems and hurdles in the real world. For the interpretation of future events and developments will in most cases depend on the interests of the respective states. However, serious crimes against humanity or



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The Taliban have seized power in Afghanistan: a boy, sitting on a destroyed tank on the hills over Kabul city.

further terrorist attacks by groups operating from within Afghanistan will act as strict red lines. Crossing them could result in the complete isolation of the Taliban regime, far-reaching sanctions and even limited military interventions.

Failure is in nobody's interest

On 20 October 2021, Russia invited representatives of the Taliban leadership, China, Iran and Pakistan, as well as several other neighbouring states, to a "Conference on the Political Future of Afghanistan" in Moscow. In doing so, President Putin on the one hand expressed his interest in playing a mediating role and on the other hand opened the door to international recognition for the Taliban. The move was to be expected since both China and Russia had already held talks with Taliban delegations prior to the US withdrawal.

From a realpolitik point of view, no one – not even the US – should favour a failure of the new leadership. An ungovernable (failed state) Afghanistan would create a far greater number of security and humanitarian issues than just another state run according to strict Islamic law. Thus, despite all concerns and fears, the international community will have to come to terms with Taliban rule for the time being. ●