

Afghanistan Braces for New War

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There is media buzz lately about an anti-Taliban insurgency struggling to be born in Afghanistan. A former Afghan army general, Sami Sadat, is returning home as the West’s favourite to don the mantle of leadership of a pan-Afghan “resistance” movement against repressive Taliban rule.

There is a lot of infighting amongst marginalised Afghan elites, civilian and military. Apparently, the western powers are trying to rally them behind Sadat. An axis between Sadat and Panjshir leader Ahmad Massoud seems to be the preferred option for MI6 and the US intelligence. Sadat and Massoud are both products of King’s College, London, known to be the recruitment centre of MI6, and British military academies.

Image on the right: Sami Sadat (Source: @SayedSamiSadat/Twitter)



The western powers, with the UN and EU support, made a determined effort in recent months to co-opt the Taliban leaders with seductive offers of financial help, easing of UN sanctions, etc. Indeed, the US holds the trump card as it is in a position to inject cash into the Afghan economy. Afghanistan has no money left after Americans took away their reserves.

But the Taliban didn’t take the bait, given their deep suspicions about American intentions and the West’s intrusive approach to prescribe norms of governance alien to Islamist ideology. After winning a 20-year war against the US, Taliban sees no reason why it should settle for a subaltern role.

Taliban has found it far more agreeable to work with the regional states, especially China and Russia, which steer clear of Washington’s exceptionalism and coercive diplomacy. The regional states accept Afghan ethos and traditions for what they are and understand the futility of forcing the Taliban to rule by western values. The regional states’ priority lies in the security sphere where they expect the Taliban to curb extremist groups and eliminate

drug trafficking.

Indeed, such an approach can be productive. On April 3, Taliban announced the banning of cultivation of opium poppy, which is a big issue for regional states.

This humane thinking gets reflected in a [statement by Russian Foreign Minister](#) Sergey Lavrov on Friday where he commended that the military-political situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban “has relatively stabilised.” Lavrov took note of “the efforts of the new leadership to return to peaceful life after a long armed conflict, to resume the normal operation of the national economy, as well as to ensure law and order and security.”

Lavrov said Moscow is satisfied that the level of cooperation is rising and Taliban’s attitude is “exemplary”. Beijing is in empathy with Moscow’s approach. Suffice to say, Russia and China are [steadily advancing their diplomatic engagement](#) of the Taliban regime. The Western powers are sensing that their space and capacity to bully the Taliban is rapidly shrinking.

After all, what is “international recognition”? There are no universal guidelines. If a regime is recognised by the country’s population, if there are no rival claimants to authority, and if it is capable of handling governance independently, it qualifies as the legitimate government of the state. Period. There is no question that the Taliban regime makes the grade. While Taliban does not require a determination by the international community to function as the government, formal recognition is useful and necessary to conduct diplomatic relations with other countries.

Clearly, the immediate purpose of a hurried Western insurgency in Afghanistan at this point is to create a rival counterpoint to power with a view to portray that the Taliban is not the only force in Afghanistan which is capable of running the affairs of the state. The proposed insurgency in May is in effect a trial balloon to see how far it will fly. Sadat told the BBC that he hopes to attract “moderate Taliban” as well — that is, MI6 and the CIA will split the Taliban.

Against the backdrop of the West’s confrontation with Russia and China, Afghanistan’s crucial importance as a regional hub of geo-strategy is self-evident. A [recent report in Nour News](#), which is affiliated to Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, disclosed that “volunteers” drawn from erstwhile Afghan military and security forces, trained by US and British experts, have been deployed to Ukraine to fight the Russian forces. Conceivably, these “volunteers” are Sadat’s comrades-in-arms.

[Sadat told the BBC](#) that he has admiration for Ukraine’s resistance to Russia! And he hinted that he is in touch with the Ukrainian forces. “I think they (Ukrainian forces) are holding their ground pretty well. But I also tell them to, you know, believe in themselves more... I hope they will get continued (western) support as long as they need it.” It’s a small world, after all!

To be sure, Russia and China (and Iran) will counter the Western project to return to Afghanistan. On Friday, President Putin held a videoconference with the permanent members of Russia’s Security Council to discuss “issues that are of great interest from the point of view of national security ... in respect to the events in Afghanistan and generally in that region, in that sector.”

The targeted attacks on Shi'ites in Afghanistan and the recent attempts to create misunderstandings between Iran and Afghanistan at the people-to-people level are perceived in Tehran as a conspiracy by external powers to sour Iran's relations with the Taliban government.

Without doubt, Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe's regional tour of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran last week also factored in the direct and indirect fallouts of the developments in Ukraine on security relations in Central Asia. In his meeting with Kazakh president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the Chinese general "called for vigilance about certain major powers interfering in Central Asia to disrupt and undermine regional security" (Chinese MOD readout).

The general told Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov that China "firmly opposes external interference in Turkmenistan's internal affairs." During his meeting with President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran, the general underscored China's readiness "to work with Iran to cope with various risks and challenges, safeguard the common interests of both sides and jointly safeguard regional and world peace and stability."

However, at the end of the day, it is Pakistan's role that is going to be vital. Pakistan's equations with the Taliban have radically changed after the sudden replacement of the ISI chief Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed in September by COAS Gen. Bajwa. Prime Minister Imran Khan's overthrow further complicated the Pakistan-Taliban equations.

Taliban's traditional position on the Durand Line; its reluctance to clamp down on Pakistani Taliban; the spike in terrorist violence in Pakistan; the distaste toward Taliban ideology among westernised Pakistani elites — all these have eroded the mutual trust between Pakistan and the Taliban.

Besides, Western powers and the Taliban do not need Pakistan anymore as go-between. Yet, apathy is not an option, either, for Islamabad. No doubt, Pakistan is going to be hit hard if an anti-Taliban resistance movement gathers momentum. There is bound to be spillover if western intelligence succeeds in splitting the Taliban. Anarchical conditions in Afghanistan can only play into the hands of external forces to destabilise Pakistan's internal security.

Meanwhile, the US-backed regime change in Pakistan is not helping matters. The sooner elections are held in a fair and free manner and a new government with fresh mandate is elected, the better it will be for Pakistan. But the good part is that nobody is going to blame Pakistan for the resurrection of warlordism in Afghanistan.

Sadat has the reputation of being a very violent man whose assignment in Helmand was particularly bestial. In real life, Sadat held his military position while also making a fortune as the C.E.O. of Blue Sea Logistics, a Kabul-based corporation that supplied Afghan security forces with everything from helicopter parts to armoured tactical vehicles.

In a heart-rending essay in the New Yorker magazine last year titled [*The Other Afghan Women*](#), well-known author and war correspondent Anand Gopal had a few things to recount about Gen. Sadat. Some excerpts here:

"During my visit to Helmand, Blackhawks under his (Sadat's) command were committing massacres almost daily: twelve Afghans were killed while scavenging scrap metal at a former base outside Sangin; forty were killed in an almost identical incident

at the Army's abandoned Camp Walid; twenty people, most of them women and children, were killed by air strikes on the Gereshk bazaar ... (Sadat declined repeated requests for comment.)"

When Sadat reached Kabul from Helmand on August 15, 2021 to take up his new assignment as commander of the so-called "special forces," he saw that the Taliban was already at the city gates. And he was one of the first "evacuees" to escape to the UK from Afghanistan.

When Sadat returns now, the Afghan people will only regard him as an imposter. They deserve better. The West owes it to them after all the unspeakable sufferings they have been put through during the past 20 years of NATO occupation.

The plain truth is, the Taliban have been in the driving seat for only eight months. It is far too premature to condemn them. As Kathy Gannon, the veteran Afghan hand at the AP, [said](#) the other day,

"I think there certainly is an effort on their (Taliban's) part to try to get to a position where they're actually governing the country. How they will get there and what it will look like is still unknown. And that's really difficult for Afghans because they're struggling with that uncertainty."

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