

Afghanistan: One Hundred Days of Solitude

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As the Taliban completes its first hundred days in power, the Western powers are groping for a face-saving formula to engage with the authorities in Kabul with some modicum of dignity.

The European Union is taking the lead role here. The European countries have a sense of urgency over potential refugee flow from Afghanistan. The EU intends to launch an “inclusive regional dialogue platform, initially with Afghanistan’s six immediate neighbours” (China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.)

Speaking during the 13th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on Friday that the EU must support the people of Afghanistan “to prevent imminent economic and social collapse that the country faces.”

Last month, the EU had announced a humanitarian package worth 1 billion Euro for the Afghan people and neighbouring countries, including 300 million Euro in humanitarian aid. The EU is expected to shortly reopen its embassy in Kabul but insists that it is not recognising the Taliban Govt.

There has been a flurry of activity lately with officials from Brussels flying in and out of Central Asian capitals, especially Tashkent and Dushanbe. The EU hopes to open a ‘humanitarian corridor’ to Afghanistan. The recent EU-Central Asia Ministerial meeting in Dushanbe has been an effort in that direction. The EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell who lead the delegation to the Dushanbe meeting later [wrote](#):

“Central Asia may not be at the top of the news for most EU media but it is an important region, sandwiched between major powers, next door to Afghanistan and connecting East and West through trade, investment and other links. As EU, we have clear interests at stake – and so do the Central Asians.”

Borrell probably got carried away by his first exposure to the Central Asian region when he wrote,

“The region appreciates having an ‘EU-option’, alongside their relationships with their immediate neighbours. They see the EU as a factor of balance and predictability in a volatile international landscape mired in great power politics.”

To be sure, there is a sudden spike in attention in Brussels.

“Where politicians go is a sign of their political priorities, so this uptake in travel, in both directions, is a sign that things are moving in EU-Central Asian relations,” as Borrell puts it.

How far this hype translates into concrete actions remains to be seen. Russia is the main provider of security for Central Asian region and Moscow has a troubled relationship with the EU and Borrell in particular. Unsurprisingly, Borrell projected the EU’s focusing on Central Asian region in benign terms, saying,

“The EU wants to keep the region as an open space for connectivity and cooperation rather than an area of binary strategic choices and rivalry.”

Against this backdrop, the talks in Doha on Saturday between the Taliban and the US / EU officials are expected to be an attempt to kickstart the moribund Doha peace process. The talks will cover political issues, frozen assets, humanitarian aid, education, health, security, reopening of embassies in Kabul, according to the Spokesman of Afghan Foreign Ministry, Abdul Qahar Balkhi.

Without doubt, the Western narrative is changing tack. The BBC News programme The Real Story today featured its latest episode under the title [Hunger in Afghanistan: Time to work with the Taliban?](#)

The running theme of the 50-minute programme is that it is irresponsible that a political legitimacy crisis should stand in the way of the international community’s engagement with the Afghan people. Yogita Limaye, BBC News correspondent who covers South Asia, reported from western Afghanistan:

“The desperation and the urgency of the (humanitarian) situation here is hard to put in words. It’s quite clear that there is no more time left to reach the people of Afghanistan. It cannot wait while the world debates whether or not to recognise a Taliban Government.”

Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), another participant in The BBC discussion, flagged the imperative need for engaging with the Taliban. His remarks are particularly interesting since the NRC runs one of the biggest western aid programmes in Afghanistan and has on its staff currently over 1000 Afghan nationals deployed in Kabul and the provinces. Egeland forcefully reinforced Limaye’s assessment:

“There’s unanimous disbelief that the Western countries, the Nato countries, left just like that and pulled the rug under the population ... There are very many questions like the rights of women to education, but we have negotiated a deal for the rights of all our female staff to work. So, it’s possible to engage with the new government.”

That said, Western engagement with the Taliban remains problematic. To my mind, the Taliban, after mulling over things in solitude through the past 100 days, may now be even

less willing to share power in Kabul or to accept any Western pre-conditions. The only way forward is to encourage the Taliban to continue on its current path of moderation.

The Western preconditions are plainly unrealistic. Abdul Qahar Balkhi, the MFA spokesperson who took part in the BBC programme was dismissive when asked about the Western conditions:

“We never wanted this situation. All we did was to fight for our freedom, to gain our independence from occupation. And for others to come and dictate our life, to the Afghans — that is not the solution to the problem. The solution to the problem is not pressure tactic to dictate. The solution to the problem is through cooperation, through positive relations and through encouragement to bring about a situation where all of us can work together.”

On the other hand, while the Western capitals feel the pressure to do something quickly that prevents a refugee flow, a system needs to be put in place first whereby they can directly reach out to the Afghan people, sidestepping the Taliban.

Some bizarre ideas are being floated such as creating liquidity in the Afghan economy by disbursing money directly to the people via a central bank in Kabul that will be independent of the Taliban government and audited by the IMF! Taliban will never countenance such a patent Western encroachment on their country's sovereignty!

Equally, is it realistic to expect that the Taliban will reconstitute the government by easing out the Haqqanis as quid pro quo for lifting of US sanctions? Above all, the precipitous fall in Biden's rating casts a shadow, as his willingness to fairly and sincerely develop a new relationship with the Taliban is in doubt.

Simply put, Afghanistan will become a political football in the US politics as the mid-term elections approach next year, and Biden's instinct will be to play it safe. Biden will prioritise counter-terrorism.

Thus it is that, all things considered, the US and its Nato allies have come full circle back to the old pathway that it is only Pakistan who can be depended upon to leverage the Taliban to get them to accede to Western demands.

Accordingly, a high-level [Pakistani military delegation was hosted](#) at the Nato Headquarters in Brussels this week. At the same time, on a parallel track, in a stunning volte-face, Washington has also extended an [invitation to Pakistan](#) to participate in the virtual Summit of Democracy in Washington on December 9-10. The strategy is to carry both the civilian and military leaderships in Pakistan.

Significantly, the Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated today that the US wants to keep military contacts with Pakistan and the recent visit to NATO Headquarters by the high-level Pakistani military delegation was part of that process. As he put it,

“When it comes to Pakistan, NATO has had regular contacts with Pakistan for many, many years. Of course, not least discussing the situation in Afghanistan. We have political contacts, we have regular military contacts and dialogue and I think this is important that this continues, because there are still many challenges in the region, especially related to the future of Afghanistan.”

What a dramatic turnaround! Pakistan is back in the good books of the Americans. The US/Nato overture to the Pakistani military leadership in Rawalpindi coincides with the resumption of talks in Doha between the US officials and the Taliban. Washington is seeking a political fix in Kabul with Pakistani help.

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Featured image: Taliban Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi (L) met Qatari officials before talks with US/EU representatives, Doha, Nov. 27, 2021 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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