

Taleban takeover of Kabul portends new threats to Central Asia region

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The swift surrender of Afghanistan's capital city, Kabul, on Sept. 26 by the government of Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani to the onslaught of the Taleban Islamic militias, has dramatically changed the strategic alignment in Central Asia, with potentially explosive results. If the Taleban seizure of Kabul leads to increased fighting in Afghanistan, between Taleban and its allies and forces around President Rabbani and his defense minister, Ahmed Shah Massoud, and Uzbek-Afghan warlord Rashid Dostum, Afghanistan will soon become the cockpit for destabilization of all of Central Asia, with major impact on Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran.

The overriding strategic danger is encapsulated by the responses to the Taleban victory coming from Washington and Moscow.

On Sept. 29, State Department spokesman Glyn Davies stated, "From a U.S. point of view, a Taleban-dominated government represents a preferable alternative in some ways to the faction-ridden coalition headed by President Rabbani, which was unable to impose its authority on the entire country."

In Moscow, Russian Security Council Secretary Aleksandr Lebed said on TV that Russia must support all the forces of Afghanistan which oppose the Taleban movement, including those of Ahmed Shah Massoud, Gen. Rashid Dostum, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Charging that the Taleban dream of annexing the strategic city of Bukhara in Uzbekistan, he warned of a Taleban military alliance with the Tajikistan rebels, who launched a new offensive against Tajikistan from Afghanistan the same day that Kabul fell. The Foreign Ministry in Moscow issued a statement that the conflict in Afghanistan "poses a danger to international peace and exercises a destabilizing influence in the region."

Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov seemed to temper Russia's reaction, by saying that Russia should "wait." However, the fall of Kabul is of such importance to the Russian Federation and the Community of Independent States (CIS), that on Oct. 2, a spokesman for Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced that the CIS leaders would meet on Oct. 4 in the Kazakh capital of Almaty, on the situation in

Afghanistan. Russia was to be represented by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. Primakov said that "only after this summit will we take a decision. I don't think we should act alone."

But despite expressions of caution on all sides, the reality is understood: The Taleban seizure of Kabul has set up the potential for new and extremely dangerous games in Central Asia, that could easily lead to a superpower standoff in the region. That has been precisely the aim of British Intelligence, whose geopolitical strategy is to use war and chaos to destroy any potentials for the development of the Eurasian "Silk Road" infrastructural development plan, which is already in progress among China and Iran and Central Asian nations. To force a confrontation between the United States on one side, and Beijing and Moscow on the other, is crucial to the British gameplan.

The Taleban, composed of reorganized Pushtun remnants of the Afghan mujahideen who fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, represent a revanchist tendency for Afghanistan that could well provide the match to light up the Central Asia powderkeg.

Provocative actions

Following their capture of Kabul, the Taleban dragged the former Communist Afghan President Najibullah out of the UN compounds where he had been hiding since April 1992, when the mujahideen took control of the capital, shot him, and lynched him in a city square 2 kilometers away. Along with Najibullah, his brother and two aides were hanged publicly.

Now in control of Kabul, the Taleban have barred women from working in offices and have ordered them to wear traditional veils whenever they step outside. They have also ordered the men to wear caps and start sporting beards.

The first Taleban were graduates of the religious seminaries in Baluchistan run by the Jamiat Ulema Islam of Maulana Fazlur Rehman, a key Pakistani politician from Baluchistan and a former member of Pakistan's central cabinet. In addition, the Taleban are known to be joined by General Tanai, a

former leader of the Khalq faction of the Communist Party of Afghanistan, who defected to Pakistan in 1990. The Taleban had been kept on a leash throughout this past summer, after having run through the south and east of Afghanistan last year. Their drive for Kabul began again in September, when they managed on Sept. 11 to take the gateway city of Jalalabad.

The Taleban now control more than 75% of Afghanistan geographically, but do not control the northern section of the country, where 65% of the population resides. As of this writing, the Taleban have seized one province to the north of Kabul, and are now in a standoff with the Uzbek-Afghan warlord Dostum, at the tunnel to the opening of the strategically crucial Salang Highway, which links Kabul to the north.

The Taleban have stated their commitment to wipe out the forces of Massoud and Rabbani, but have made no move against Dostum, who is dependent upon Uzbekistan and controls the northern area of Afghanistan that is the corridor to Central Asia. A settlement between the Taleban and Dostum might give Afghanistan and the region some relief from war and destabilization.

Despite their harsh pronouncements, the Taleban say they are seeking cordial relations with the West. On Oct. 1, Taleban Deputy Foreign Minister Mohamed Stanakzai told a press conference in Kabul that the group wanted “friendly and good relations” with the United States, particularly economic aid for reconstruction, and reassured the United States that the Taleban would not support international terrorism. According to United Nations Deputy Secretary General Marrick Goulding, a British Arabist who has high praise for the Taleban, Taleban leaders have asked for UN assistance in creating a government, and reassured Western nations.

On the other side, the brutalities committed and the fundamentalist actions undertaken have not prompted any particular censure by the Western powers, although the spokesman for the U.S. State Department has expressed regrets for the brutal hanging of former President Najibullah and his associates. It is also true that the U.S. State Department—otherwise vocal against Islamic fundamentalists—has never uttered a word against the Taleban.

A problematic neighbor

Pakistan, which denies any direct links to the Taleban, has already sent a senior Foreign Ministry official, Arif Ayub, to establish “first official contact” with the new government in Kabul. Pakistan is expected to urge the new Kabul regime to exercise restraint. Although the Pakistan government has permitted Pakistan to be used as a logistical base for the Taleban, Pakistan is taking major risks. The murder of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto’s brother just a week before the Taleban took Kabul is one indication that stability is not on the horizon for Pakistan, whose use as a base for British-instigated operations into Afghanistan backfired disastrously

during the war against the Soviets (see p. 53).

Already, sectarian strife in Pakistan mirrors and is designed to exacerbate tensions between Pakistan and Iran. Furthermore, the Pushtun composition of the Taleban can easily become a problem for Pakistan—most Pushtuns, including the exiled King Zahir Shah whose return to Afghanistan is now being mooted—do not recognize the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan and believe that parts of Pakistan rightly belong to Kabul. Lastly, the flood of arms into Afghanistan has steadily spilled over into Pakistan, since the Afghan mujahideen waged their fight against Soviet occupation. An unrestrained Taleban can only spell more trouble for Pakistan, already rife with heavily armed separatist and sectarian groupings. These are the reasons that many Pakistani observers are waking up to a future threat to Pakistan from the events in Afghanistan, which seem to be heading for multiple divisions, foreign interferences and unending conflict.

Concern in Teheran

Of all the nations in the region, Iran, perhaps, is most concerned about the development. Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani declared on Sept. 30, that the Afghan crisis had become “an insoluble issue and a calamity for Islam. The continuation of war and conflict have weakened the Afghan people by the day, but the leaders of the factions are not ready to let go of war. War will not provide any solution for Afghanistan.” According to the newspaper *Ettela’at*, Rafsanjani called upon all leaders of the Afghan factions to come to their senses, to stop the war, and allow any individual, any group or council, to restore stability to the country.

Over the past months, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati had been attempting to negotiate a settlement in Afghanistan, only to be met with a Taleban refusal to talk. The Taleban had already pushed their control all the way to the Iranian borders by defeating the Hazara Shias of western Afghanistan, who live under the shadow of Iran. The Taleban capture of Kabul may ensure a weakening of the Iranian assets, which controlled Kabul until recently, and bring the fundamentalist Sunni movement—which is as orthodox as the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia—to the borders of Tajikistan, which Iran considers its area of influence. In addition, the Taleban had already snubbed Iran, by refusing to attend the October conference on Afghanistan convened by the Iranians. The militia has already wiped out the traces of Iranian influence in areas around Herat.

Iran is also afraid that the United States and Saudi Arabia, which both strongly promote the containment of Iran, are going to use the Taleban to shut Iran out from Central Asia and pose threats along its northern borders. *Jomhuri Islami*, a daily close to the Islamic hardliners in Iran, said recently that the militia’s capture of Kabul was “designed by Washington,

financed by Riyadh, and logistically supported by Islamabad." The newspaper also predicted that "this will not be the last government in Kabul and the next group may not even have to find itself [in power] through military force, but political dealings." Teheran, in fact, has swung into diplomatic action.

Foreign Minister Velayati has already met with his Russian counterpart, Yevgeni Primakov, and spent an hour discussing political developments in the region. Velayati has also met the Indian foreign minister, I.K. Gujral. Most important, perhaps, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Bourjadi has met with the Afghan warlord from the north, General Dostum.

A new arc of crisis?

Like Iran, which has a long border with Afghanistan, Russia does not relish the idea of having the Taleban next to the CIS, of which Moscow is a part. Russia deploys its forces along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan borders to prevent the Islamic fundamentalists from stirring up trouble within the nascent republics in Central Asia.

The Taleban are no friends of Russia. Moscow has been accused by the Taleban of supporting the Burhanuddin Rabbani government, an accusation which Moscow has repeatedly denied. The Taleban had also humiliated Russia when they intercepted a chartered Russian plane carrying arms to Kabul and held its seven-member crew prisoner for a year before they escaped.

Dr. Yuri Gankovsky, a Russian expert on Afghan affairs, said that the Taleban have established contacts with the Tajik rebels trying to topple the Tajikistan government. An alliance between the two, Dr. Gankovsky fears, would threaten the very existence of the pro-Moscow secular regime in that country and other young Central Asian republics. Fears have been expressed in certain quarters in Moscow as to whether the 25,000 Russian troops guarding the 1,000-km-long Tajikistan-Afghanistan borders would be able to withstand pressure, if and when it were exerted by the Taleban government.

Moscow has also accused Pakistan of destabilizing the region. Aleksei Vashenko, secretary of Russia's State Committee on Geopolitical Issues, said that "the success of the Taleban may strengthen Pakistan's influence in the area" and "could draw China and India into the fray."

New Delhi is yet another capital in the region where the news that the Taleban had taken Kabul sent a shudder through the foreign policy establishment. Having developed contact with the Rabbani regime in Kabul, India was eager to see the consolidation of that government.

India's first concern, is that the control of Afghanistan by the Taleban may strengthen the Kashmiri militants in the Indian-held part of Kashmir, territory disputed between India and Pakistan. In a rally in Srinagar, Kashmir, on Sept. 29, Kashmir separatists vowed to follow the Taleban lead. Proclaimed Qazi Abdullah, leader of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, "Our inspiration, which we got on Friday, is that

people who fight for their rights [i.e., the Taleban] are victorious and successful." There is clear evidence that the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence has been using foreign Islamic fundamentalists to make trouble in the Kashmir valley.

Secondly, India tends to welcome Iranian influence in Afghanistan, while fearing Pakistani influence. The defeat of the Rabbani government ensures, at least temporarily, that Iran has lost major assets in Afghanistan.

The oil factor

Already the leading oil companies of the world (all of them are Western, including some from Russia like Lukeoil) have invested billions of dollars on energy resources in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. On the other hand, the West has scored almost no success in dealing with the region's complex and volatile political situation.

There are indications that one point of support for the Taleban within certain circles in the United States is the desire to create a corridor to Central Asia from the Arabian Sea. This corridor would pass through Pakistan, Afghanistan, and on into Uzbekistan. A settlement of the Afghan war is a prerequisite for this corridor—but a settlement that ensures, as apparently Washington and London would agree, that Iran is iced out of the picture and the profit.

Specifically, the United States has vehemently opposed Iran's serving as the conduit for Central Asian energy exports. In March 1996, Unocal and Delta Oil Co. of Saudi Arabia signed an agreement with Gazprom of Russia to exploit 535 trillion cubic feet of estimated gas reserves of Turkmenistan. In October, the two companies signed a contract to design, build, and maintain a gas pipeline running from Turkmenistan's giant Daulatabad field, which has natural reserves of 45 trillion cubic feet across Afghanistan to the Sui gas field in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. The pipeline will be 1,120 km long, is expected to cost about \$4 billion, and would transport about 2 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day.

The Taleban's taking of Kabul was welcomed by the U.S. energy company Unocal Corp., which has been working to build a gas and oil pipeline that would stretch across Afghanistan to Pakistan. Unocal's Vice President Chris Taggart said that the company sees the Taleban takeover "as very positive. I understand Pakistan has already recognized the [Taleban] government. If the U.S.A. follows, it will lead the way to international lending agencies coming in. If the Taleban leads to stability and international recognition, then it's positive."

That is an assessment that remains to be proven. One thing is certain: Central Asia will remain a powderkeg with the potential to ignite World War III, until raw-materials extraction and globalization are replaced with actual economic and infrastructural development. For that to occur, hands will have to be extended over the great geopolitical divides set down by London and its geopolitical partners.