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Note From Head CS3

Dear All,

The current gigantic shifts in South Asian geopolitics and the likelihood of more of it in the future necessitates a better understanding of the security trends and the linked history. The balance of power seems to be shifting, and one needs to revisit the contours of many foreseeable and unforeseeable power-dynamic developments taking place in this region.

Recent political developments have pushed Afghanistan into an economic crisis. In August, the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan, with immediate repercussions facing daunting development challenges across an economy. Rapid reduction in international grant support, loss of access to offshore assets, and disruption to financial linkages are expected to lead to a significant contraction of the economy, increasing poverty, and macroeconomic instability. Even before the collapse of the government, Afghanistan was facing daunting economic and development challenges. Afghanistan's economic growth was slow up to August 2021, reflecting weak confidence amid a rapidly worsening security situation and severe drought conditions negatively affecting agricultural production. Today with under the new Taliban, the economic and development outlook continues to remain stark.

The month began with inaugural India – Australia 2 + 2 Dialogue was held on September 10. The stage for this was set with Dr S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, delivering the JG Crawford Oration on "Why Quad Matters" at the Australian National University on September 06, and his Australian counterpart, Marise Payne, delivering the Third Indo-Pacific Oration in New Delhi three days later. The Dialogue resulted in a Joint Statement structured around four pillars: deepening COVID-19 cooperation, a shared vision of the Indo-Pacific, bilateral cooperation and people-to-people ties. The positive trend in this relationship thus continues, to the benefit of both countries and the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, Australia conducted three other 2 + 2 dialogues during the month, with Indonesia, South Korea and the US, to add to the 2 + 2 with France on August 30.

Hence, such complexities can only be unboxed through navigating relational and security waves through systematic inquiry. Thus, the South Asian Monitor endeavours to unravel some of these issues through analytical articles and journals written by informed academicians. I am sanguine that this Monitor will generate interest and help you in your future research projects.

Maj Gen RPS Bhaduria, VSM (Retd)
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ANALYSIS

Can The Revenue Crisis Usher Responsibility in Afghanistan?

-Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh, VSM (RETD)

The Taliban are once again in control of Afghanistan after twenty years. However, while they no longer have any military opposition and instead are combating internal issues, they now face an economy on the brink of collapse, which threatens to worsen an already devastating humanitarian crisis.

The World Bank had clearly stated that the Afghan economy was "shaped by fragility and aid dependence". Afghanistan's economic indicators are poor and have been so even before the Taliban seized control of Kabul on 15 August. According to the Asian Development Bank, 47% of the population lived in poverty, and a third survived on the equivalent of \$1.90 a day. However, after the Taliban takeover, most Western countries have suspended aid. A nation is considered aid-dependent when 10% or more of its gross domestic product (GDP) comes from foreign aid; in Afghanistan's case, about 40% of its GDP was international aid, according to the World Bank. In addition, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have also halted payments with the IMF blocking access to Afghanistan's \$460 million in emergency reserves. Countries may continue to provide humanitarian aid, but this is likely to be channelled through aid organisations rather than the Taliban government.

Foreign reserves of Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), the central bank, have also been frozen. DAB has reserves of roughly \$9 billion, most of which is held in the US. DAB's reserves are held in safe, liquid assets such as US Treasury bonds and gold offshore, as per international standards. These are Federal Reserves; \$7.0 billion (US bills/bonds: \$3.1 billion, World Bank Treasury RAMP assets: \$2.4 billion, Gold: \$1.2 billion, cash accounts: \$0.3 billion), International accounts \$1.3 billion and BIS (Bank for International Settlements) \$0.7 billion. Hence as per certain reports, the accessible funds to the Taliban are perhaps 0.1-0.2% of Afghanistan's total international reserves. To compound matters, millions of dollars belonging to the state had disappeared from banks before the Taliban entered the capital some of which was reportedly flown out with President Ashraf Ghani. Apart from foreign aid, 4% of Afghanistan's GDP was made up of remittances, according to the World Bank. This meant that it was one of the country's most dependent on remittances in the world. The billions of dollars in international assistance that came from ex-pats and outside investors saw an increase when there was more political reliability and many countries also contributed to Afghanistan's reconstruction including India which spent over \$3 billion in Afghanistan. The country's gross domestic product, estimated at \$22 billion, had grown nearly threefold since the Taliban were driven from power in 2001.

Today, falling confidence in the Afghan economy has caused the currency to lose its value resulting in a steep increase in the costs of essential goods. One US dollar is now hovering around 85 Afghans with some fluctuations taking it as high as 90 Afghans. It was at around 80 Afghans before the fall of the previous government. Reports indicate that the bordering villages and towns of Pakistan have stopped accepting the Afghan currency owing to its depreciating value. The shutting down of local currency exchanges has pegged the price to these levels. Experts fear that unless there is some fiscal stability it will be above 100 Afghans. Due to Afghanistan's large current account deficit, the DAB was reliant on obtaining physical shipments of cash every few weeks. The amount of such cash remaining is close to zero due to a stoppage of shipments as the security situation deteriorated. This was the major reason why maximum withdrawal limits of \$200 were placed for banking customers. On top of all of this, Afghanistan is in the middle of a devastating drought, which according to UN estimates has left around half of the country's children malnourished. The UN World Food Programme estimated that some 14 million people, roughly one out of every three Afghans, urgently need food assistance. A UN agency meanwhile warned that a worsening drought threatens the livelihood of more than 7 million people. Farmers caught up in the war during the harvest season and the dire state of some of the country's roads has also meant that much of the produce has been wasted.

As per the UN, it is estimated that since the beginning of the year, conflict and insecurity have driven more than 550,000 Afghans from their homes and some 70,000 displaced people have converged from across the country into Kabul. The post-war situation coupled with the socio-economic impacts of the COVID19 pandemic have made essential supplies and food items out of reach for most Afghan families. Presently, the fact is that food prices are skyrocketing. Most banks are shut and those that have opened are enforcing a withdrawal limit, further, salaries are not being paid. Al Jazeera recently reported that food prices in Afghanistan have increased by about 50 per cent, and petrol by as much as 75 per cent. Policy paralysis is showing up all around, and countries like Pakistan are exploiting the crisis by inflating Afghan imports.

The economy is therefore expected to take a major hit with the GDP likely to shrink by 9.7 % this financial year and by 5.2 % next year as per the credit rating agency Fitch Group. The Fitch Group's report also mentioned that the after-effects of the US' sudden pull-out will be felt for quite a while until some sort of stability is restored. The Taliban takeover has exacerbated the multiple crises that already existed. What we have in Afghanistan is multiple crises happening at once. This is without mentioning the effect the pandemic has had in Afghanistan. It could turn Afghanistan into a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, similar to the ones in Syria and Yemen.

Taliban could get revenue from illegal mining, opium production or trade routes however, revenues while considered relatively large when only running an insurgency

campaign is wholly inadequate to operate a functional government where salaries have to be paid and money has to be spent on development and social services. Ajmal Ahmady; an MBA from Harvard Business School who served as the Governor of DAB recently stated at an event hosted by the Atlantic Council that the Taliban "had sufficient revenues to run an insurgency but not to run a government." Will the Taliban understand that governing effectively will mean delivering on people's basic needs and providing hope for the future in a country where the average citizen has got used to a certain livelihood in the last twenty years? It is therefore imperative that they try to integrate to some extent with the global economy and gain access to foreign aid and development funds. They cannot afford the risk of a complete collapse of the economy, because if it collapses it will lead to social disorder in the country which they may not be able to control.

Managing that economy has been a cohort of Afghan technocrats, many of them Western-educated or trained like Ajmal Ahmady have fled the country. Few of them are expected to remain in the country, despite the Taliban's promise of "amnesty" for anyone who worked with the deposed government. The most urgent economic challenge for the new dispensation is a yawning skills deficit in government ministries and departments. The Taliban will struggle to find ministers and administrators whom foreign donors and investors can trust. On 21 September the Taliban government bolstered its economic team by naming a commerce minister and two deputies as the group tries to revive a financial system in shock. Nooruddin Azizi, a businessman from Panjshir province, was named as acting Minister of Commerce and Industry. Azizi joins the acting Finance Minister and Minister for Economic Affairs, in a team facing a daunting task.

Unfortunately, the first tenure of the Taliban from 1996 to 2001 offered little to assuage any concerns surrounding their handling of the economy. Taliban's primary source of revenue was the illegal narcotics market and cross border smuggling of goods. Afghanistan then accounted for more than 3/4th of the world's opium economy. The economy was so bad then that the printing of new Afghani notes was dropped for a certain period owing to a loss of value for the currency. The Taliban has a few options to increase its revenue. They can exploit their vast estimated minerals for which China can play a major role. But the infrastructure requirements for extracting Afghanistan's mineral wealth are huge: The country is severely lacking in transportation networks. Getting the minerals out of the ground and into China would require huge investments. They can also exploit the transport routes that flow through Afghanistan and benefit countries like China and Russia. Currently, Afghanistan is not part of the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) but they may soon join this initiative. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on 22 September that the various unilateral sanctions or restrictions on Afghanistan should be lifted as soon as possible. Economic sanctions on Afghanistan must end, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement, citing Wang at a virtual G20 Foreign Ministers meeting on Afghanistan. He said Afghanistan's foreign exchange reserves are national assets that should belong to the country's people and

be used by its people, and not be used as a bargaining chip to exert political pressure on Afghanistan.

What remains to be seen is whether the Taliban will want to prove that they can govern effectively, and be willing to compromise to get foreign funding reinstated. Pakistan is in no position with its already depleted finances to step in and support the Afghan economy; hence the only choice remains China, who will no doubt extract their pound of flesh or can this be leverage with the West to force the Taliban to change its spots by compromising on its ideology leading to an inclusive government and not allowing the use of its soil for terrorism in any manner. There is no doubt that they will need to resolve issues between revenue and religion.

Major General Jagatbir Singh was commissioned into 18 Cavalry in December 1981, a Regiment he has subsequently commanded. He has held various command, staff and instructional appointments and has served in varied terrains. Amongst his command assignments was conversion of an Armoured Brigade to an Arjun profile in the Desert Sector and command of an Armoured Division. He has been an instructor at the Indian Military Academy and served twice both as an Instructor and Senior Instructor and Head of Training Team in Defence Services Staff College. He has been writing articles on security related issues post retirement which have been published in various newspapers and magazines.

ANALYSIS

Can Indo-French Collaboration Help India In The Wake Of AUKUS?

-Samridhi Roy

The French envoy to India Emmanuel Lenain called the signing of AUKUS, a breach of trust amongst the Indo-Pacific allies. The newly formed trilateral partnership between Australia, the UK and the US is vastly aimed at developing nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN). France, referring to the AUKUS, feels rather 'betrayed' at the formation of minilaterals opposite to QUAD. It believes that the military confrontational bloc lacks requisite purpose in the Indo-Pacific, especially given AUKUS's similarity with QUAD. While the implied similitude of the two blocs is up for debate, France postulates blocs formation as the antithesis of adopting a 'broader approach in the region.

As per his interview with ANI, the French envoy to India Emmanuel Lenain said: "You know our approach. We don't think the logic of blocs being military confrontational is the answer to our problem. We feel that we need a much broader approach with much more partnership between countries, we need to provide an alternative to order pushed by certain countries in the region, we need a positive agenda."¹ It is abundantly clear how France views QUAD as a broader global grouping in comparison to AUKUS. At this point, what truly matters is how the bloc members interact with one another within the said blocs. Up until now, QUAD is serving its tactical purpose well, as, it is apparent in its workings and announcement. The QUAD grouping has always approached their result-oriented delivery through pragmatism. While critics liberally comment on AUKUS upstaging QUAD, one needs to analyse two major questions- How are QUAD and AUKUS different from one another, do their aims and objectives complement each other?² Also, Do the formation of case-to-case cooperative alliances cause a greater rift than partnership? Contributing to the convergence debate, India has clarified its understanding of AUKUS as a security alliance and QUAD is an alliance of like-minded democracies. However, to protect its strategic interests India has increased its interaction with France at the highest levels. French President Emmanuel Macron had a telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar also met his French counterpart on the sidelines of UNGA in New York which prompted the below-mentioned Tweet.

¹ <https://thedi diplomat.com/2021/09/aucus-and-submarines-the-fallout-for-france/>

² https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/decoded-what-are-the-key-differences-between-the-quad-and-aucus-121092401342_1.html



While tempers are running high over the birth of AUKUS, one may argue that unilateral collaborations are not as dominating as they are being presented as. In April 2021, Quad navies joined the French military exercise which was deemed highly successful. This allows hints at France marching in to join “QUAD plus”. India is at the core of France’s Indo-Pacific strategy and it’s high time India hits the iron while it’s hot³. Both countries face regional challenges in similar ways, which is either to completely rely on other nations for security or develop their own strategic autonomies. India and France have more often than not given themselves the means to be independent, they demand strategic space, autonomy in terms of critical technology such as cyber, AI, space, energy etc. Hence, it is only reasonable for Indo-French collaborations to enhance further in the future⁴.

What Can One Expect from Indo-French Collaboration?

For India, a positive influence of AUKUS could be the possibility of acquiring French NNR technology. There is a fruitful incentive for both India and France to collaborate, India requires more power, India also needs a more powerful reactor than that which currently powers its Arihant submarine and France which has lost a massive order and is smarting from being left out. France has been a rock-solid partner for India, backing it even when the Western world sanctioned India after its nuclear tests. India’s defence purchase from France goes back decades and currently its most potent fighter jets and submarines are French. The French are the frontrunners in India’s tender to acquire another six conventional submarines⁵.

The French have mastered the technology of naval nuclear reactors using low-enriched uranium (LEU) compared to the US and UK using highly enriched uranium

³ <https://news.usni.org/2021/10/20/panel-pacts-like-aukus-agreement-quad-key-to-counter-china-in-the-pacific>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/18/france-work-with-india-promote-truly-multilateral-order>

⁵ <https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/sunday-spotlight/quad-aukus-and-indias-balancing-act-1036712.html>

(HEU). As with the UK and US, India uses HEU for the Arihant class, though not at weapons-grade levels. French submarines are designed with special hatches for refuelling during the refit, which allows for better operational availability as compared to the current Indian design based on Russian technology which requires cutting open the submarine hull to refuel and welding it back, a process that can take up to two years, thereby reducing operational readiness. US submarine reactors are designed to last a lifetime of about 35 years without the need to refuel. However, these use weapons-grade uranium which requires a costly enrichment process and availability of uranium. The US which has a global presence needs more operationally available assets. India's naval requirement is for the Indo-Pacific and it also needs uranium for its strategic programme.

There has been some discussion in India about why it has not been included in the AUKUS's collaboration on the SSN⁶. The question is, does India need American nuclear submarines or asked for them? India, which already operates nuclear ballistic missile submarines, plans to build its SSN, which has already got government clearance. India has more experience in making submarines than Australia, having built the conventional Shishumar and Scorpene classes, and nuclear Arihant class. It is usually the same set of people who are opposed to buying critical weapons from the US since they view the country as an unreliable supplier that is prone to imposing sanctions. Australia is a treaty alliance partner of the US and fought every war the US has in the last 100 years. In a sense, AUKUS is not a new security alliance, but a partnership of old treaty allies who have decided to help Australia build nuclear submarines.⁷

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⁶ <https://eurasianimes.com/france-accelerates-rafale-fighter-jet-sales-to-india-uae-post-aukus/>

⁷ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/09/29/aukus-is-deeper-than-just-submarines/>

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

This section explores ongoing security issues and perspectives from India's neighbouring countries, including – Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and Maldives.

Afghanistan's Rebirth Strategy

Afghanistan has namely transitioned from being an Islamic Republic (IRA) to an Islamic Emirate (IEA). As Taliban seized the first province in the South in Nimroz, on August 6 2021, thereafter, what we know as the domino effect collapse of Kabul, the change in Afghanistan's identify was set afoot. The Afghanistan National Defence and security Forces (ANDSF)⁸ held a tough fight at Helmand and Kandahar where they met their eventual defeat to Taliban forces on August 15, 2021. Policy analysts globally are attempting to decode the possible strategic failures, lack in capabilities that led to the speedy evacuation from Afghanistan commencing on May 01, which made it far easier for Taliban to take over. As the challenges of modern statehood engulf the group, Taliban leaders candidly admit they hadn't estimated such a facile fall of the resistance.⁹

The Afghanistan supreme leader of the Islamic Emirate Mullah Hebtullah Akhund was reported to be in Kandahar on August, 29 2021. His meeting with the tribal leaders of Kandahar province ended on an amicable note. With the departure of Ashraf Ghani, the former President of Afghanistan the Taliban spokesperson dispensed several statements hinting at a more "inclusive" state formation, which is, obviously limited to the men in Afghanistan. Policy analysts globally formed a general perception of Kabul's Inclusivity to include some leaders from outside the Taliban mainstream including the Haqqani Network Anaamullah Samangani, a member of Taliban's Cultural Commission on August 28, who again claimed that the group has decided to form an "inclusive" caretaker government in Afghanistan. This goes without saying that the Taliban inclusivity is only enjoyed by the "male" members of the society, mostly Pashtuns, including a few notorious international designated terrorists, plus one Uzbek and two Tajiks amongst the thirty-three ministers in the governance. Evidently, Kabul's tribal, ethnic and regional fault lines are prominent than ever, with various Taliban factions vying for power. Meanwhile Pakistan is doing everything in its agency to impart greater strength for hardliners like the ISI-Haqqani network to gain an upper hand in the territory.¹⁰ Clearly the pragmatist has been side-lined paving way for hardliners to exercise control in the worst way possible, the Al Qaida leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri, also known as a deputy of Osama Bin Laden believed to be holed up in

⁸ <https://www.shephardmedia.com/news/training-simulation/andsf-training-where-did-it-go-so-wrong/>

⁹ <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/great-gamesi-1503016727.html>

¹⁰ <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-revenge-afghan-security-forces/31505696.html>

Pakistan, has announced his existence through a virtual message posted online. Taliban has put into effect a double-edged policy attempting to serve international demands and domestic policies. Meanwhile the Doha agreement is unravelling latest signs of faults as the Taliban accuses the US of renegeing on the Doha Agreement that promised that America will engage with the UN to remove Taliban members from the sanctions list by 29 May 2020. The Western media parading the concept of a 'reformed' Taliban that followed the Doha Agreement was to clearly wash off the US guilt of sudden pull-out. Even though the Western media downplays the role of Pakistan in perpetuating the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, as acknowledging that inevitably invites the question of why the US turns away from Pakistan's deviousness and unlawful acts like- smuggling nuclear technologies, developing nuclear weapons and missile capability. Pakistan's blatant sponsorship of terrorism has been nicely ignored to mostly cater to Washington's personal strategic interests. All in all, the Taliban calling their government an interim one is prophylactic for dodging international denunciation.

Digging deep into the Taliban government structure, the education minister has publicly under classed the necessity of education and shoved the importance of Sharia into the new-law-land of Kabul. Women have been warned to remain indoors whilst covering themselves in full burkhas, irrespective of their personal choices. Culturally, the growth of citizens, especially women has been stumped. One of the Taliban spokesperson has publicly declared that purists of music and sports must be out of women's reach. Musical instruments have been broken to pieces, women led protests have been suppressed, journalists have been beaten up for performing their jobs, all of which is happening under the full view of international media houses.

International Response To The Taliban

The Delhi Declaration issued the BIRCS member nations have been more than careful in naming the Taliban. To use Afghan territory as a terrorist sanctuary, Pakistan has increased the operation of military quarters raising concerns over renewed international terrorist attacks. This caution of the major powers is directly linked to ensuring cooperation that that Taliban offered for the evacuation of foreigners and citizens stuck in Afghanistan. Taliban's controversial return will make Afghanistan pivot for geopolitical realignment. As a result of which, India may utilise its ties with major powers to readjust and subside the emerging terrorism from the Af-Pak region.¹¹ Meanwhile, Pakistan's ISI chief is conferring with intelligence representatives of China, Iran and Russia, alleging that India was sponsoring terrorism in Pakistan with the cooperation of Afghanistan's previous governments. Pakistan has also tried to deflect attention by issuing a dossier on India's human

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/17/why-did-the-afghan-army-disintegrate-so-quickly>

rights 'violations' in Kashmir.¹² Inevitably, it will use out-of-work Taliban, LeT and JeM terrorists against India.

So far, China has positively embraced the Taliban. Its interest has three strategic dimensions—terrorism, mercantile exploitation of minerals and extending the BRI for regional hegemony. The militant Uighur organisation ETIM has been active in Afghanistan, allied with other organisations. China has extracted a promise that the Taliban will expel ETIM militants. It has announced an aid package of \$31 million. At a time when Afghanistan has become an economic basket case, China's leverage with the Taliban is considerable and Pakistan will use its leverage with the Taliban to provide concessions to Beijing. The China-Pakistan axis will be riding on the former's deep pockets and the latter's close links with the Taliban. Ultimately, Russia too will have to consider whether it would serve its geopolitical interest to cede regional supremacy to China. Iran, a major player and a neighbour of Afghanistan with close ties to the Shia Hazara community, has been critical of foreign interference in Kabul. Its economic ties with China and sanctions imposed by the US will also force it to follow China's lead in Afghanistan, though ties are strained by the Sunni Taliban's hostile attitude towards Shias. China-Russia-Pakistan-US had shut out India from consultations, though the American and Russian intelligence chiefs have been consulting Delhi recently.

For India, the principal dilemma has been whether to engage the Taliban or not, as it consistently supported the elected government in Kabul. Having closed her Embassy and Consulates, India has no representative in Kabul. This does not preclude India supplying humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, who have a very high regard for India. This goodwill has to be nurtured. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has called for unimpeded access and equitable distribution of humanitarian aid. Geopolitically, the Quad is likely to gain greater salience. India's growing ties with the US and conscious ramping up defence hardware procurement from America and France has affected Russia's exports. It must be acknowledged that both India and Russia have attempted to retain fundamental elements of their bilateral ties that have stood the test of time, even as they disagree on the Quad. One aspect that underlines Russian commitment to bilateral ties is the supply of military hardware at the height of China-India tensions in Ladakh against Beijing's wishes. As Russia leverages the China-Pakistan axis, New Delhi and Moscow have a window to coordinate positions on Afghanistan.

Can Panjshir Valley Become A Rallying Point For Anti-Taliban Resistance?

Ahmad Massoud, son of the former mujahideen commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud has declared support of members of the Afghan military, including some from the elite

¹² <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/after-mundra-drug-haul-adanis-ban-afghanistan-pakistan-iran/articleshow/86951448.cms>

Special Forces units as per Reuters and sought support from the international community. "We have stores of ammunition and arms that we have patiently collected since my father's time, because we knew this day might come," he said in a WT editorial adding that some of the forces who had joined him had brought their weapons. "If Taliban warlords launch an assault, they will of course face staunch resistance from us," he said. The editorial follows a declaration by Amrullah Saleh, Ahmad Shah Massoud's closest aides who later became vice president, that he was the rightful president of Afghanistan after Ashraf Ghani fled Kabul as Taliban insurgents seized the capital on August 15¹³.

The Panjshir valley north of Kabul was the centre of resistance to the Soviets as well as against the Taliban when they ruled Afghanistan in 1996-2001¹⁴. "The Taliban are not a problem for the Afghan people alone. Under Taliban control, Afghanistan will without doubt become ground zero of radical Islamist terrorism; plots against democracies will be hatched here once again," Panjsir province, the only province that has not fallen to the Taliban, say that the Taliban has cut telecommunication networks.

Tolonews reports indicated that several wounded people arriving at Emergency Surgical Centre for War Victims in Kabul has stabilised, but war-wounded patients at its health facility in Panjshir province north of Kabul has reported a large number of arrivals. "The situation in the city seems to have improved, although unfortunately there was unrest again at the airport this morning to suppress the mass of people trying to catch a plane to leave the country. The situation is chaotic and it is difficult to understand what is really happening there¹⁵. Last night, however, we heard Kalashnikov fire in our district," said Alberto Zanin, Emergency's Medical Coordinator in Kabul as per the Tolonews. A broader resistance movement may be building up as Taliban may find itself on a difficult wicket after having swept the country.

The people at large reject the Taliban flag and are willing to stake their lives by holding violent protests. These, as well as images of chaos and people being beaten while trying to approach Kabul's airport in an attempt to flee the country, have undermined their efforts to present themselves as responsible stewards of the government. In Khost, there were also demonstrations in the southeastern part of the country, with dramatic photos and video showing hundreds of people taking to the streets. There were reports that armed uprising members attacked the pol-e-Hesar district of northern Baghlan province and was cleared of the Taliban. Deh Salah and Qasaan- have also been taken back from the Taliban however the Taliban soon recaptured these districts.

¹³ <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/panjshir-leaders-resume-efforts-to-form-afghan-govt-in-exile-325752>

¹⁴ <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20211004-afghan-resistance-has-sanctuary-in-tajikistan-but-fighting-taliban-a-non-viable-prospect>

¹⁵ <https://www.trtworld.com/perspectives/meeting-former-afghan-fighters-who-now-hunt-for-emeralds-in-panjshir-50600>

Collapse Of The ANDSF – Leadership, Subversion And Corruption

Former Afghan army chief of staff General Yasin Zia said that the Afghan national army was not defeated but the politics and leadership failed in Afghanistan which led to the collapse of the country. President Joe Biden told the American people on July 8 that the U.S. and its partners in Afghanistan had "trained and equipped nearly 300,000 current serving members of the military" – a critical element to his justification for why the U.S. could withdraw. However it is believed that these figures were never reached. Some of the local forces fought bravely for the U.S.-backed Afghan government – and died for it. But many also simply put down their weapons, defected to the Taliban willingly or because their Families faced threats, or succumbed to the other forms of bribery and waste that American inspectors general have been publicly documenting for at least a decade.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction released a report documenting seven fundamental flaws in U.S. investments in Afghanistan, including ambiguous accounting for the number of Afghan forces trained and fielded. What was more important is that the Afghan soldiers did not ultimately believe that the Taliban was the real enemy or the cause for which they were fighting for. The sudden collapse of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) was unexpected but has been inevitable given failure of the leadership, corruption and preparation of the battlefield by the Taliban so to say to subvert their loyalty. Thus, material support was not lacking as NATO donated more than \$70 million in supplies to Afghanistan's defense forces, including medical equipment and body armor, so far this year and the United States has left back tonnes of stores for the forces, the breakdown of motivation to fight has led to the collapse. Leadership was a major factor and there was no firm ministerial or command guidance.

The president Mohammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai appointed General Bismillah Khan Mohammadi as the acting Minister of Defence. General Abdul Satar Mirzakwal as the Acting Minister for Interior Affairs in the month of June. Meanwhile in the heat of the battles so to say, commander of 215 Maiwand Corps, Gen. Sami Sadat, was appointed as commander of the Special Operations Corps, replacing Gen. Hibatullah Alizai. Gen. Hibatullah Alizai, the commander of the Special Operations Corps, was appointed the chief of army staff, replacing Gen. Wali Ahmadzai who had been appointed in June/ This reshuffle in the midst of a chaotic situation seems to have been one of the major reasons for emergence of the challenge faced by the ANDSF. The Taliban also worked on the forces exploiting the indigenous aspect and fight against foreigners to effect. Money is also said to have played a major role and corruption has been a major issue with the Afghan forces in the past. Supply lines are pilfered, with arms, ammunition, and other equipment sold onto the black market, and much of it reaching the insurgency. Many soldiers and police are posted far from their

homes, and abandon positions to return to defend their families and property almost unchecked. Thus, the issue is leadership both at the military and the national level. An attempt was made to form Public Forces Command Center in the midst of the fighting to integrate the militia formed by local tribal leaders and the ANDSF but this came about too late¹⁶.

Rebuilding Security Forces – Who will the Partners?

One of the key challenges faced by the Taliban in the immediate term is rebuilding a security structure and a viable Afghan National force. Operation and security of the Kabul airport is the immediate task ahead, and so far, this is managed by the United States and remnants of the Afghan aviation organisation. Turkey is hopeful that it would have a role to play in the future. Taliban has reached out to former pilots and soldiers from the Afghan armed forces to join its ranks. How successful that recruitment is remains to be seen.

Wahidullah Hashemi, a senior Taliban member, told Reuters¹⁷ the Taliban planned to set up a new national force that would include its members as well as government soldiers willing to join. "Of-course we will have some changes, to have some reforms in the army, but still we need them and will call them to join us." Hasmini said the Taliban especially needed pilots because they had none, while they had seized helicopters and other aircraft in various Afghan airfields during their lightning conquest of the country after foreign troops withdrew. "We have contact with many pilots," he said. "And we have asked them to come and join, join their brothers, their government. We called many of them and are in search of (others') numbers to call them and invite them to their jobs."

Taliban expected neighbouring countries also to return aircraft that had landed in their territory. 22 military planes, 24 helicopters and hundreds of Afghan soldiers who fled to Uzbekistan over the weekend. On the other hand, a minor insurrection is building up in Panjshir Valley. In case the Taliban plans to rebuild the Afghan National Forces, it will require massive assistance, Pakistan and Turkey will remain the obvious choice of partners for development while China may provide material assistance. "Turkey is ready for all kinds of cooperation for peace in Afghanistan, the well-being of our kin in the country and the protection of Turkey's interests," Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in a joint.

¹⁶ <https://bnn-news.com/afghanistan-resistance-movement-denies-taliban-victory-in-panjshir-228726>

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/exclusive-council-may-rule-afghanistan-taliban-reach-out-soldiers-pilots-senior-2021-08-18/>

Sri Lanka Attracts Massive FDI Investment

According to a local report, the Board of Investment (BOI) of Sri Lanka has managed to secure \$461 million (close to \$0.5 billion) foreign direct investment and local investments till now. The figure is a result of the consummation of investments from 103 new expansionary projects approved by the BOI. The report says BOI sources stated that from January to August 2021, a total of 28 new projects and 75 expansionary projects were approved and undertaken by the BOI.¹⁸ BOI Chairman Sanjaya Mohottala stated that nearly 50% of capital formation which took place in 2020 were from existing BOI investors who expanded their footprint in order to take advantage of global opportunities, indicating the eagerness of countries to invest in Sri Lanka and possibly develop closer ties to the island nation¹⁹.

Pakistan's Direct Pitch for Taliban

Pakistan has launched a global campaign to accumulate more support for the Taliban government functioning in Afghanistan, with senior officials making the pitch for engagement in speeches²⁰, Op-eds²¹, and interviews²², as well as through diplomacy with Western governments²³. Islamabad has called for immediate development assistance to the country and for sanctions on the regime to be removed. The gist of Pakistan's message is that failure to engage with the Taliban will doom Afghanistan to a humanitarian disaster and other destabilizing outcomes. In his speech at the United Nations General Assembly last weekend, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan said, "There is only one way to go. We must strengthen and stabilize the current government, for the sake of the people of Afghanistan." He struck a similar note in a *Washington Post* Op-ed. No other government has made such a direct and sustained pitch for engagement with the Taliban. This isn't a surprise: Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban when they held power in the 1990s and the last country to end that recognition. It sheltered the Taliban's top leadership for much of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. Pakistan is recalibrating its support for Taliban as the group marches towards governance.

On one level, Islamabad's argument for recognizing the Taliban makes sense. As Afghanistan's eastern neighbour, Pakistan has good reason to worry about the

¹⁸ <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-central-bank-says-debt-deals-land-power-plant-sale-in-progress-87315/>

¹⁹ <https://www.lankabusinessonline.com/ips-policy-insights-covid-19-global-economy-sri-lankas-external-sector-outlook/>

²⁰

https://estatemnts.unmeetings.org/estatemnts/10.0010/20210924/ajen3uMeQSDH/XOqp89IAVee9_en.pdf

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https://estatemnts.unmeetings.org/estatemnts/10.0010/20210924/ajen3uMeQSDH/XOqp89IAVee9_en.pdf

²² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/23/pakistan-taliban-afghanistan-qaureshi-interview>

²³ http://click1.crm.foreignpolicy.com/iydmmfqcagmwybybwbqfzwtqrhwfftczbzbychzdmgmnmg_allmlmpbdlnmpd_dbdldhp.html

potential spill over effects if the government collapses—refugees, drug trafficking, cross-border terrorism. Afghanistan’s need for humanitarian assistance is critical. This week, CNN reported²⁴ that food prices have risen by 30 per cent and fuel prices by 40 per cent. But Islamabad’s argument is still a tough sell, in part because of the messenger itself. Pakistan doesn’t engender a lot of trusts when it comes to Afghanistan policy because of its long-standing support for the Taliban, including the Haqqani network faction, which is implicated in some of the deadliest attacks in the country. It is this very history of support that belies Pakistan’s contention that it doesn’t deserve blame for the Taliban takeover.

Pakistan is emphasizing its positive contributions in Afghanistan, including its help in delivering relief supplies. That might not convince foreign governments, which may cynically view Pakistan’s promotion of the Taliban regime as a ploy to get much-needed cash for its friends. Additionally, Islamabad’s main assertion—that the Taliban are more likely to moderate their policies if they are assured of continuous assistance—is questionable. The Taliban haven’t indicated that their fundamental ideology has changed, even after getting what they have long wanted: legitimacy from Washington after a 2020 deal, and the withdrawal of all U.S. troops. The hard-line interim government is just the latest example of the Taliban’s defiance. The more the group is given, the more it seemingly doubles down.

The Taliban seek international legitimacy. The group doesn’t want to become a global pariah, as its regime was in the 1990s. But Pakistani efforts to help forestall that outcome face many obstacles. No Western country has indicated any intention of recognizing the Taliban regime. Even some regional actors expected to play a major role post-withdrawal—Iran, Russia, Turkey, Tajikistan, Qatar—have expressed concerns about the Taliban’s lack of respect for rights and inclusivity. This suggests that for the foreseeable future, and global engagement with the Taliban will likely be limited. Khan’s calls for the world to “strengthen and stabilize” the new government in Kabul may well go ignored.

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http://click1.crm.foreignpolicy.com/ozfwvnqnfwdtttkdkfvmdcnpzdvvccqkmtqzmlwfwrk_allmlmpbdlnmpddbldhp.html

NEPAL

The 15th Indo-Nepal Joint Military Exercise

India and Nepal held their 15th joint military²⁵ exercise on 17th September 2021. The exercise, called “Surya Kiran” came out to be highly productive as both the countries collectively learnt from each other’s experiences in disaster relief, humanitarian assistance methods, jungle warfare and high-altitude warfare. The exercise includes special 48 hours of gruelling exercise to validate counter-insurgency operations in mountainous terrains.” The exercise is said to strengthen bilateral relations between India and Nepal and it is also a part of an initiative to develop interoperability between the two armies. It would also bring the countries closer as friends. The Times of India quoted Captain Kuldeep, a liaison officer from the Indian side, saying “Infantry battalions from both countries will participate in the exercise. the armies will be sharing with each other mountain warfare tactics, disaster assistance, rescue and relief operations in mountainous terrains. The exercise includes special 48 hours of gruelling exercise to validate counter-insurgency operations in mountainous terrains.” India and Nepal and it is also a part of an initiative to develop interoperability between the two armies. It would also bring the countries closer as friends.

INDIA-NEPAL POWER PACT

A report by *Nepali Times* said that Nepal signed a power exchange deal with India²⁶ to increase two-way electricity trade. Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) Managing Director Kulman Ghising signed an MoU with the state-run Power Grid Corporation of India on September 8th, for the construction of a second, transnational 400kV transmission line from Butwal to Gorakhpur. Once the construction of this line is completed, Nepal will be able to export up to 2000 MW of electricity to India and it also has the potential to be involved with new power deals in Bangladesh.²⁷

Another deal is in the making as Nepal’s Tourism Ministry has given clearance to the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal to sign a long-term government-to-government deal with India for periodic airport surveillance²⁸ and radar flight inspections said *The Kathmandu Post*. “The government-to-government deal will ensure testing of the equipment and airport in a timely manner”, said Buddhi Sagar Lamichhane²⁹, joint secretary at the Ministry overlooking civil aviation affairs.

²⁵ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/sep/18/15th-indo-nepal-joint-military-exercise-begins-on-september-20-2360608.html>

²⁶ <https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/india-nepal-sign-power-exchange-deal/>

²⁷ <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/power/india-completes-handover-power-transmission-line-to-nepal-indian-embassy/86828173>

²⁸ <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2021/09/18/nepal-to-sign-deal-with-india-for-periodic-airport-checks>

²⁹ <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2021/09/18/nepal-to-sign-deal-with-india-for-periodic-airport-checks>

BANGLADESH

Is Bangladesh's tail-spinning economy headed for a crash?

Bangladesh's finance minister Mostofa Kamal's recent statement, "Governments must not mislead the public" has gained massive public attention. He remarked on the per capital foreign debts which amounts to about taka 25,000. The minister should have also commented on how much the per capital international debt is at the moment and rounded up the data to let the people realise how much each country folk was burdened with the cumulative volume of national debt. Which no doubt, has hit the dizzying length of almost \$150 billion; inclusive of the latest borrowings within and outside the country. This amounts to almost 50 per cent of the GDP. However, the GDP, on the other hand, had fallen from over 8 per cent in 2019 to 3.8 per cent in 2020. Mirrored accurately, the cumulative national debt may be more than 50 per cent of the GDP. In several developed nations, debt-GDP ratio is much higher. Moreover, the factors that matter the most are- sustainability of an economy, in keeping investment, employment, production and exporting on the right track.

Dhaka's volume of investment is shrinking by the click on the clock. From over 30 per cent of the GDP in 2019, it had dipped by another 1.5 per cent in 2020. Amidst reduced FDI and private investment, and a paltry 8 per cent of the GDP contribution stemming from public investment, the whopping gap between the debt-GDP and the investment- GDP ratios is the primary concern. It is highly unlikely for the situation to get better once the effects of pandemic subside is highly unlikely. The three most fundamentals of the Bangladesh economy are remittance, export and the volume of consumer spending. The first two are the external-dependent, and shrinking. The late one consumer spending, is getting even worse amidst 60 per cent of the able workers having either been relegated to lower income threshold, or rendered outright unemployed. To revive the economy, investment- both private and public- is most needed. That comes with a caveat: opportunity to borrow. The higher gets the debt-GDP ratio, borrowing from local outlets will shrink further due to the country's degraded credit rating. Domestically, banks and financial institution are defaulting in paying off the depositors, according to media reports. Even the public owned investment Corporation of Bangladesh (ICB) can't pay back the deposits of foreign and domestic companies. Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) is one of such victims, as are the BTC and many scheduled banks. The money crisis has been exacerbated further by the corrupt private corporations emerging as leasing and holding entities. The 3,000 crores taka swindling by the PK Halder of the People's leasing is just the tip of the iceberg. As many banks too invested in those fake entities to get higher margins of profit and interest, as estimated \$80 billion equivalent of taka is considered already lost. The hype that banks are sitting on idle liquid is hence a myth, and, the money, to invest by both the government and the private enterprises is very much in short supply. The quintessential tick to overcome that 'end of the cliffs syndrome' by printing more

money will lead to a kind of hyper-inflation that could destroy the Bangladesh economy irretrievably.

Bangladesh-UK Strategic Dialogue

On 9th September, Bangladesh and the United Kingdom held their fourth strategic dialogue in London, UK. The dialogue covered the exchange of views across bilateral relations between the two countries; ranging from - political and diplomatic relations, global and regional issues, economic and development partnerships and security and defence-related issues. You can read the full press statement [here](#). But here are some points that I found noteworthy:

“Following the UK’s Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, the UK highlighted its long-term commitment to the Indo-Pacific region, recognising the region’s increasing importance to a range of global challenges including conflict prevention, support for the rules based international order, countering terrorism and climate change. The UK and Bangladesh agreed to cooperate on these global challenges”

“The UK and Bangladesh affirmed their enduring commitment to the people of Afghanistan and agreed that a democratic and inclusive Afghanistan was the best guarantee of the country’s stability and development. The UK and Bangladesh further agreed that the country must not become a safe haven for terrorism, nor a source of terrorist attacks on others. Both parties committed to work closely on this issue, recognising the importance of a coordinated international response”.

“Both countries agreed a dialogue on the future shape of their development partnership as Bangladesh consolidates middle income status. Bangladesh welcomed the UK’s support in areas such as knowledge, innovation, and skill development, enhanced co-operation between British and Bangladeshi universities, and in harnessing the Blue Economy”.

“Both countries welcomed joint military cooperation, including training, professional military education and instructional exchanges, and looked forward to inaugurating a Defence Dialogue later this year. This would create opportunities for broader discussions on bilateral defence and military issues, including deployments, visits, joint exercises, training, workshops, defence supply, and procurement, and cooperation on capabilities”.

Both countries addressed pressing issues like the Rohingya crisis and the coup-takeover in Myanmar. Afghanistan was also included, with both countries reaffirming their commitment to the people of Afghanistan and supported an inclusive, democratic government to safeguard stability and development in the region.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh-Australia relations is gaining prominence as the Australian High Commissioner to Bangladesh (PPPA). Both representatives discussed the future of relations between their countries and Secretary Afroz acknowledged Australia's contribution to Bangladesh, particularly relating to poverty alleviation, education and skill development. She also proposed that Australia could explore the opportunities³⁰ to develop, implement and operate not only PPP mega construction projects but also social infrastructure PPP projects related to climate change, waste management, health and education, according to *The Daily Star*.

MYANMAR

Myanmar's army chief and now caretaker Prime Minister Snr General Min Aung Hlaing announced that he is considering changing the country's electoral system from the existing majoritarian model to a form of Proportional Representation (PR) in remarks during a meeting in Naypyitaw with members of his military council, according to state-run media. In accordance with the country's military-drafted 2008 Constitution, Myanmar currently uses First Past the Post (FPTP), a system in which the candidate who receives the most votes is the winner of the parliamentary seat in question. Min Aung Hlaing said that the PR system would be "all-inclusive" and allow for constituents' voices to be better represented. "It is necessary to consider the Proportional Representation—PR—system with all participants. It is necessary to amend the way representatives are elected and the election system. During its tenure, the government will make these amendments by coordinating with everyone," Min Aung Hlaing said during the meeting.

The military controlled Union Election Commission (UEC) has announced plans to audit the financial records of Myanmar's political parties, a move that has been met with fierce criticism. The UEC, which officially annulled the results of last year's election in July, has ordered parties to prepare their financial records for inspection, in what some suspect will be used as a pretext by the junta to disband certain parties. The commission has not yet set a date for the audit.

The caretaker government has enacted a law against genocide, which opponents of the coup regime say may be used to against resistance fighters launching guerilla attacks against the Myanmar military and its supporters. The military-run Global New Light of Myanmar said the new law had been added as sections 311A and 311B to a section of the Penal Code that criminalises the offences of murder, robbery and kidnapping children. The law, enacted on, punishes killings and other offences

³⁰ <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/organisation-news/press-releases/news/australian-envoy-bangladesh-visits-govts-public-private-partnership-authority-2175006>

committed “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part” a national, ethnic, racial or religious group – wording which follows that used in laws against genocide around the world. This could also be an attempt to ease international pressure on the regime as it faces a genocide charge at a

United Nations court for its soldiers’ atrocities against the Rohingya. The new provisions published in junta-controlled newspapers threaten the death sentence for murders committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. The promulgation of the new genocide law coincided with an online campaign to mark the fourth anniversary of atrocities against the Rohingya, the stateless Muslim people in Rakhine State, in 2017.

The legal defense team of deposed State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and ousted President U Win Myint said they would ask for permission to meet their two clients, after their trials were delayed again until early September. The lawyers have not met the pair for six weeks, since their trials were suspended due to the surge in COVID- 19 cases. “We were told by the Zabuthiri Township Court today that the trial has been delayed until September 6 and 7. We haven’t met the two for more than six weeks. And we have not heard from them during that period, so we’ll apply this week to meet them,” Naypyitaw lawyer U KhinMaung Zaw told The Irrawaddy.

The challenge for the National Unity Government (NUG) that has been formed in parallel to the caretaker one by the military junta is of international and regional legitimacy as well as the need to justify the violence and its acceptance against the Rohingya in the past. Covering up wrongdoing in the name of unity and as a strategy when injustices were perpetrated against the Rohingya in the past and were accepted by NUG members who were then part of the NLD has only provided the military a shield behind which to operate in the hope that it will be able to bring about a change in the uniform. This has led in fact to perpetration of violence today against the majority community. The unrestrained violence by the People’s Democratic Forces that have been created with the NUG approving the same should also be a cause of concern for future stability.

China’s Expanding Profile in Myanmar

China has started calling the Myanmar junta the “government” and pledged US\$6 million to fund 21 development projects in the country the aim appears to be to expand physical presence in the country through various projects. A new rail line providing China with access to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar was opened on Aug. 25 on the Chinese side of the border. The rail line stretches from Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, to Lincang, a prefecture-level city in China’s Yunnan Province opposite Chin Shwe Haw, a border trade town in Myanmar’s northeastern Shan State. The rail line will enable China to trans-ship cargo from Singapore Port via Myanmar.

Cargo will be shipped from Singapore Port to Yangon Port. From there it will be transported to Chin Shwe Haw in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone by road, and then by rail from Lincang to Chengdu. It will take three days to get from Lincang to Chengdu by rail, according to the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar. The route is the first to link western China with the Indian Ocean. And it will significantly reduce the time needed to import cargo to landlocked Yunnan Province. The route will go through Mandalay, Lashio and Hsenwi on the Myanmar side. Chinese government is trying its best to keep the whole situation in equilibrium. However the present disorder in the country has led China to remain wary and reduced the presence particularly of locals from Yunnan in Wa. China has voiced concern over the Myanmar military regime's plan to dissolve the NLD, the party that won the junta-annulled 2020 general election in a landslide. Chinese officials have conveyed to the regime's leaders Beijing's message that it wants to see the NLD continue to exist as a political party. In early August, China's ambassador to Myanmar, Chen Hai, and WunnaMaung Lwin, the regime's foreign minister, held a virtual meeting. During the meeting, China pledged US\$6 million to fund 21 development projects in the country.

Dissension in the Military

Myanmar's 300,000-strong military is now at risk of splitting, according to some ex-army officers who have deserted their units recently. Currently, around 2,000 soldiers and police have joined the country's Civil Disobedience Force (CDF), a nationwide boycott by Myanmar civil servants against the regime following their takeover in February. The Chinland Defence Force (CDF) announced that they will be rewarding soldiers defecting from the Myanmar military with 5 million kyat (around US\$3,000) in return for "standing with the people" and handing over their arms to the anti-dictatorship resistance.

Myanmar's military used to engage in violent conflicts in the past is today taking up arms against the majority Bumar community from which it draws its main recruits, thus it is not surprising that there is resentment in the rank over incidents of violence against the civilians many of whom are unarmed. The military brass on the other hand has indicated that they are fighting what they claim terrorists facing attacks from Molotov cocktails and improvised bombs. Myanmar's current problem can be seen as a consequence of the nation's inability first to purge its defence forces of the political DNA inherited from the days they were freedom fighters. Second is the country's failure to decentralise and rework a comprehensive federal political structure that ensured equitable power sharing between its many nationalities. Thus the People's Defence Force has also been formed in the belief that only violence can bring about change.

People's Defence Forces

Pro-democracy forces in Myanmar have created what they called a "People's Defence Force" to protect civilians from the military crackdown on protesters against the February 1 coup. This comes even as Myanmar Army is facing rebellion by about 20 ethnic minority armed groups and the peace process with these has come to a halt. Some of them have been assisting citizens protesting the junta and fighting against the military. Myanmar military junta accused armed groups of training citizens for People's Defence Force to protect civilians from the military crackdown on protesters in addition these have also been branded as terrorist groups thus under the law stringent action can be taken against them. The military is now looking at stepping up counter rebel operations and has been ruthless in launching these killing many civilians in the process including use of airstrikes in the areas where armed groups are thought to be training citizens.

Regional and International Engagement

US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke with a representative of Myanmar's government in exile, the first announced contact between a senior US official and the rival administration to the generals who overthrew the country's democratically elected government. The US State Department said Sherman spoke with Daw Zin Mar Aung, who has been appointed acting foreign minister in the shadow National Unity Government (NUG) for Myanmar. While the NUG has remained an unrecognized entity so far, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman first contact with the political alternate government in the country denotes that there may be a strong pushback against seizure of power. At the same time whether the NUG can regain power in the country in a realistic time frame remains to be seen?

The United Nations Secretary-General's special envoy for Myanmar says the junta has not responded to her request for talks as it tries to consolidate its rule. Christine Schraner Burgener told the media that on July 16 she had "a long conversation" with the deputy junta chief, Vice-Senior General Soe Win, about Myanmar's crisis. The special envoy highlighted concerns over the persecution of civilians, freedom of speech and the media and called for the release of all political detainees. "Some of the ideas I gave him to decide the dialogue idea were heard, like to make a statement that lawsuits against health workers will be withdrawn. On the dialogue, I didn't receive an answer: not a positive, or not a negative," she said. Burgener said the details of the conversation would remain confidential to keep the channel open.

The special summit over the Myanmar crisis was the right move for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, and Myanmar has reached a five-point consensus to lessen the violence and monitor the crisis, including deploying an ASEAN special envoy to Myanmar. This is an unprecedented move as, in many cases, ASEAN member countries have been unwilling to interfere in the internal affairs of

other members. But beyond that ASEAN faces a dilemma. Thus Brunei's Erywan Yusof who had visited Myanmar along with the bloc's secretary-general Lim Jock Hoi in May and is now the official nominee of ASEAN as a special envoy to engage with Myanmar may face multiple challenges.

Link Fest

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