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### **Rise of Taliban and Changes in Geopolitical Landscape of Central Asia**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The geographical location of a country defines its geopolitical significance and vulnerability. The geographical proximity of a fragile, unstable and conflict-prone state generates geopolitical influences on countries of its immediate neighbourhood with all its negative consequences. Countries with such geopolitical locations are increasingly prone to the spillover effect of the geopolitical crisis in the 'Neighbourhood'.

This paper considers the geopolitical crises in the borderland of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It also presents an account of the ethnic and geopolitical cleavages between the two countries. The rise of Taliban has aroused many geopolitical concerns of Tajikistan. The region of Hindukush, Karakorum and Pamir mountains is expected to become a new area of ethnic conflict. This paper aims to reinterpret the geopolitical landscape between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Drawing evidence from the past conflicts, it provides future predictions of the geopolitical conflict taking place in Central Asia and Inner Asia.

**KEYWORDS:** Geopolitics, Central Asia, Inner Asia, Taliban, Afghanistan, Tajikistan

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Geopolitics is ‘everywhere’ - it makes itself felt in particular areas more than others but sometimes, still remains to be surrounded by an element of ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> The geopolitical location (of country or countries) is viewed with reference to the immediate vicinity. The proximity or the geographical location (neighbourhood) of a country has a huge impact on its geopolitics. It defines the geopolitical significance and vulnerability of the country.

The geographical proximity of a fragile, unstable and conflict-prone state generates geopolitical influences on countries of its immediate neighbourhood with all its negative consequences. Countries with such geopolitical locations are increasingly prone to the spillover effect of the geopolitical crisis in the ‘Neighbourhood’. There is no escape from the neighbourhood and the conditions in the neighbourhood.

Tajikistan is located on the periphery of one of the most volatile countries of the world. The location makes it vulnerable to the ill effects of regional geopolitics. Besides, Tajikistan exercises a powerful (geopolitical) influence on the neighbouring region of Afghanistan. On past several occasions, it has proved its real geopolitical significance.

In the present circumstances, the geographical proximity of Tajikistan to Afghanistan is expected to generate geopolitical anxieties and concerns. At the same time, its geocultural contiguity provides it with the ability to affect existing volatile geopolitical states of affairs in Afghanistan.

## **GEOPOLITICAL LOCATION AND ETHNOGEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE**

Afghanistan and Tajikistan are two geopolitically significant countries of Central Asia and Inner Asia. Both the countries are located at the junction of the Hindukush, Karakorum and Pamir mountains. Tajikistan shares the north eastern borders of Afghanistan. More specifically, the geographical location of Tajikistan is adjacent to the Afghan provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz and Balkh. It is indeed a borderland between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

The geopolitical contours of the borderland between Afghanistan and Tajikistan represent an area of cultural contiguity and cultural conflict. It is an unsettled area with deep geopolitical cleavages. The geopolitical situation of the borderland makes it a conflict area (region) between the two countries.

The geocultural landscape of Hindukush and Karakorum is dominated by Afghan Tajiks. The Afghan Tajiks have deep-rooted differences with Taliban (Pashtuns). On the other hand, culturally it is a contiguous area, running in to Tajikistan. In addition, the ethnic conditions in Tajikistan are also volatile and unstable. The ethnogeopolitics along the borders makes it the area of ethnic and geopolitical crises.

## **GEOPOLITICAL HISTORY OF TAJIKISTAN**

The geopolitics of a country or region is determined by its history based on geography. It affects the foreign policy of the country and its national interests.<sup>2</sup> Tajikistan has a long history of engagement in the affairs of Afghanistan. Until 1991, Tajikistan was a part of the Soviet Union. When Moscow invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Tajikistan, along with the other Soviet Republics of Central Asia, supported the Soviet intervention. It made Tajikistan a target of the Afghan Mujahadeen. Even many Tajiks (from Tajikistan) joined the jihad in Afghanistan and fought along with the Mujahadeen.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, several of these Tajik Mujahadeens returned to their own country. Here they formed the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). It was opposed to the ruling leadership of Tajikistan. The conflict between IRP and Tajik government led to a brutal civil war in Tajikistan. This conflict continued from 1992 to 1997. The then president of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani, an Afghan Tajik, allowed the IRP to operate from Afghanistan due to their close cultural and kinship relations. The Afghan government even provided arms and ammunition to the Mujahadeens of Tajikistan. In 1996 Rabbani was deposed by Taliban. He then formed Northern Alliance to oppose Taliban. In his conflict with Taliban, Rabbani required support from Tajikistan. Therefore, he proposed a compromise between the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) of Tajikistan and the Tajik government headed by Rahmonov. As a result, both agreed to a ceasefire and to end the civil war in Tajikistan. In response to it, Rahmonov extended support to Northern Alliance. However, some members of Islamic organisations within Tajikistan had support for Taliban and continued to pose security challenges for Rahmonov.

Both the countries, Afghanistan and Tajikistan fostered a close relationship since the fall of Taliban in 2001. The relations between them improved considerably since then. The geopolitical and geostrategic significance of Tajikistan got new dimensions in the American War against Terror.

The history repeated itself once again in 2021. The relationship between Afghanistan and Tajikistan is once again under threat. It is likely to be reversed in the wake of recent developments in

Afghanistan. Due to the geopolitical location of Afghanistan and Central Asia, the spillover effect of the political crisis will have a direct impact on Tajikistan.

## **GEOPOLITICAL COMPULSIONS OF TAJIKISTAN**

The security of a state against external threats determines its frontier policies. Frontiers borders determine issues of war and peace amongst neighbours, but the selection of neighbours is never a choice.<sup>3</sup> Although any country in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan will refrain from getting into a direct confrontation with the Taliban but Tajikistan has its own geopolitical compulsions. It has an extensive mountainous border with Afghanistan. It is also a transit route of most of the narcotraffic from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. Besides the country has also suffered numerous terrorist attacks in the last few years.

Unlike its Central Asian neighbours, including Russia and China, Tajikistan is not rushing to establish ties with the new government in Kabul. On the contrary, it has taken a pragmatic stand to safeguard itself (its territory). On many occasions the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmonov has insisted upon an inclusive government in Afghanistan. He has reiterated that Tajikistan will not recognize any other government formed in Afghanistan through oppression and persecution of its people (other minorities). He insists on the inclusion of the entire Afghan population. Rahmonov is particularly concerned about the ethnic Tajiks.

Tajikistan has taken hard stance on Afghanistan due to its geopolitical compulsions. The military of Tajikistan is believed to be the weakest in Central Asia. Given the military might of Tajikistan, it is difficult to control large infiltration from Afghan borders. Although at this stage Tajikistan has no intention of getting into a direct confrontation with the Taliban. But obviously, Tajikistan is faced with the challenge at the border posts. It is difficult to police the porous borders along Afghanistan. But they have to do it in order to prevent the overflow of illicit drugs and refugees into the country.

The resistance leaders Ahmad Massoud (jr.) and former vice president and self-proclaimed acting president of Afghanistan Amrullah Saleh have great sympathy in Tajikistan. There were reports that both the leaders were present in Tajikistan (although Dushanbe denies this report). There are also reports that large number of Afghan soldiers have also fled to Tajikistan. going beyond all this, in a political gesture, Rahmonov has awarded the prestigious Order of Ismoili Somoni award to Ahmad Shah

Massoud, the legendary ethnic Tajik leader and Burhanuddin Rabbani, the former president of Afghanistan. It is regarded as a geopolitical assertiveness of Tajikistan.

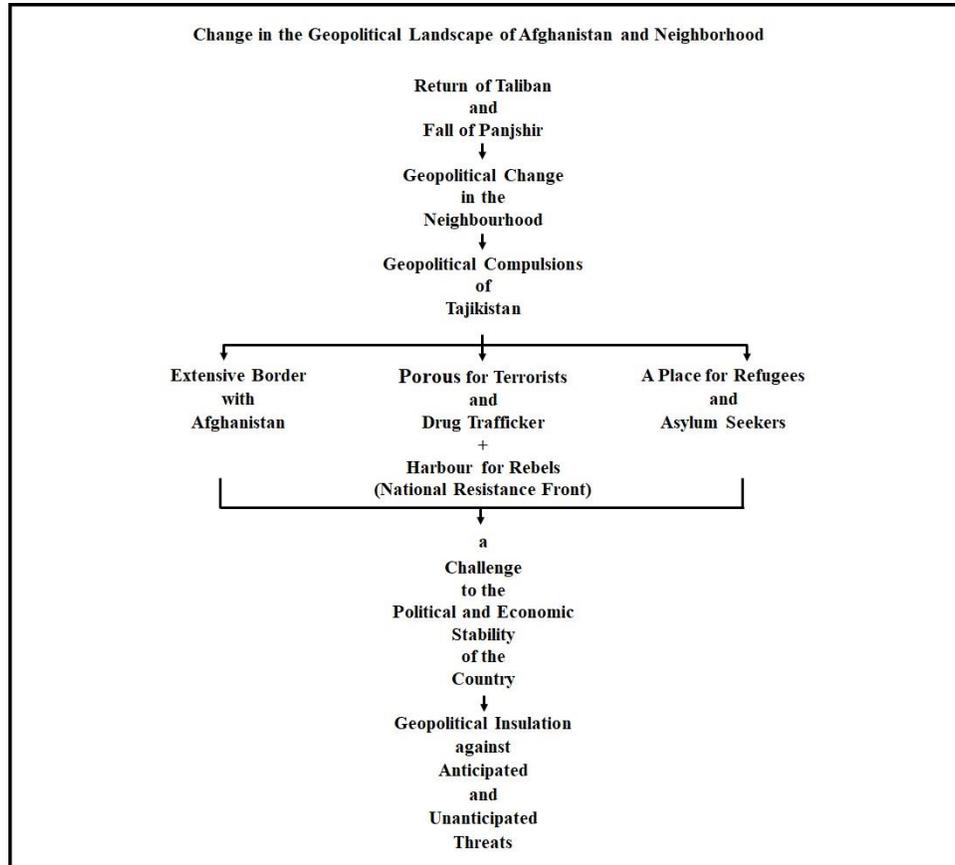
The Taliban have aggressively responded by saying that they will not tolerate ‘any interference in internal affairs of Afghanistan’. Taliban may take an aggressive stand (attempt) in case of any eventuality. Although the situation is calm on the borders of Afghanistan and Tajikistan despite harsh rhetoric. The world is aware that any adventure from anyone will lead to a geopolitical crisis.

On the other hand, Tajikistan is also demonstrating its military preparedness. It has put thousands of its troops on alert and recalled all its reserve forces to test their combat preparedness. The unconfirmed reports say that 20 thousand Tajik soldiers were sent to the Afghan border. President Rahmonov has personally visited the border regions of the country.

Rahmonov also fears that Afghanistan is once again on the path to become a breeding ground for international terrorism. He believes that it will be a challenge for the security interests of the neighbouring countries in the region. His fear is justified, as and when the situation will unfold, Tajikistan will not only have to confront with an onslaught of refugees but also with security challenges ranging from the export of terrorism. Further, the geopolitical interest of Tajikistan favours a stable Afghanistan as its priorities are to tackle cross-border flow of terrorists and drug trafficking origination from Afghanistan.

## GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES FOR TAJIKISTAN

Figure 1.



## ETHNICITY AND GEOPOLITICAL DILEMMA

Afghan Tajiks are the second largest ethnic community of Afghanistan. It is second only to the Pashtuns. They dominate Panjshir valley of northern Afghanistan. Tajiks live in smaller concentrations in Herat province also, on the western border with Iran. Afghan Tajiks also make up a large percentage of the population of Kabul. They have been politically significant and economically successful. Tajiks are said to maintain strong ethnic ties with their families and friends in Tajikistan. The fate of Afghan Tajiks is extremely important for their neighbours.

Ever since the fall of Kabul, ordinary Tajiks in Tajikistan are concerned with the plight of the ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan. There is great public sympathy for the ethnic Tajiks of Afghanistan. Tajikistan is particularly concerned with the political and economic plight of ethnic Tajiks of

Afghanistan. Assuming that the situation in Afghanistan is unlikely to stabilize in the foreseeable future, the political crisis in Afghanistan will have an effect on the internal affairs of Tajikistan also.

With reference to Tajikistan, there are different geopolitical dimensions of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Rahmonov will have to consider the sentiments of Afghan Tajiks. The popular sentiment is against Taliban (both in Afghanistan and Tajikistan). The majority of Afghan Tajiks passionately reject Taliban. Although some of them have been included in Taliban.

The increasing geopolitical tension, ongoing instability in neighbouring Afghanistan and the presence of radical Islam in Central Asia all serve to amplify threats and risks to regional security.<sup>4</sup> Dushanbe is cognisant of the possible rise in extremism (both in Afghanistan and Tajikistan) caused by the dominance of Taliban. It will have an impact on radical factions within Tajikistan. The radicals in Tajikistan aim to establish an Emirate of their own.

## **TAJIK UPRISING**

The recent events in Afghanistan have added entirely new dimensions to the geopolitics of Central Asia and Inner Asia. No country of Central Asia and Inner Asia can remain unaffected from the emerging philosophy of extreme Islam. The ideology of extreme Islam may be instigated, supported and sustained by the Taliban. The concern of Tajikistan is also related to any eventuality of Tajik Spring. The geographical boundaries have little reliability and relevance against diffusion of the extreme philosophy (ideas and ideologies). The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan (in the neighbourhood) is ready to redefine the ideological landscape of the region. The rise of Taliban has encouraged jihadis all over the world. Russia and China have similar concerns (threats). It is difficult for any country or region to insulate itself from the infection or ideological contamination of jihadi Islam. As a result, the region of Central Asia and Inner Asia may evolve in the region of Islamic jihad. Therefore, there is a need to evaluate (discuss and analyse) the role of Russia and China in the evolving geopolitical and geostrategic equations.

There is an interdependence between Islamic extremism and Taliban. The recognition of Taliban in Afghanistan is legitimacy to the ideology of jihadi Islam and certainly, it will have regional and also global implications. Eventually, it will change the geopolitical equation of Central Asia and Inner Asia.

There are a large number of countries (with a substantial Muslim population) on the periphery of Afghanistan. The majority of them have religious and ideological leanings and attachment to Taliban. The legitimacy of Taliban will be a support to radical Islam. It will impact the peace and stability of the region. It will have an impact on the configuration of fundamentalism and terrorism. It will also ignite extremism in other areas. The forces of instability and destruction will plague the whole region. Eventually, it will adversely impact the security environment in Central Asia and Inner Asia. the question of legitimacy of Taliban relates to the collective security of the region. The shared destiny of the region demands for a collective action. It also demands a for new geopolitics of containment of the terrorist, separatists and insurgent activities.

The interior minister of Tajikistan Ramazon Rahimzode has recently asserted that there are 10 to 15 thousand militants across the Afghanistan Tajikistan border. Additionally, many of them have cross-border connections. The presence of these militants compounded the problem of security in Tajikistan.

## **EXISTENTIAL GEOPOLITICS**

The geographical 'location' both physical and cultural of any country is everything when it comes to existential and security considerations. Geopolitics is intrinsic not only in defining borders but also in protecting borders. Thus, security and geopolitics are interdependent/interconnected. The ideas about its own vulnerabilities and threats are geopolitical concerns and the measures to prevent the threats or at least reduce the risks demands a new kind of geopolitics.

The fall of Kabul has enthused many extremists (Islamist radical) across the Muslim world, who are likely to pose a threat to Russia and its neighbours in Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> Many other Central Asian countries are also apprehensive of the spread of the radical ideology of Taliban in their countries. Though Tajikistan is a secular state, there is a fear of morale boost of radical elements in Tajikistan.

The geopolitical thinking and corresponding stand of the Tajik president (Rahmonov) is in accordance with the existence and security of the region. This geopolitics does not have any aggressive territorial ambitions but it is existential geopolitics. It is essential to neutralize the jihadist elements of extreme Islam. Historically the spread of extreme Islam (the geopolitics of jihad) has always led to instability and eventually war or conflict. The events since 2001 across the region suggest that the export of Islamic terrorism has encouraged conflicts and also unsuccessful attempts of regime change.

Meanwhile, the new geopolitics of containment is the demand for the stability, peace and security of the region.

The ‘sustainable peace’ is eluding Afghanistan over centuries.<sup>6</sup> One can imagine (speculate) the contours of the post-Taliban landscape of Central Asia and Inner Asia. The instability, tensions and strife, barring other unforeseen accident may be some of the potential geopolitical consequences. Therefore, some thoughts are needed to ensure a more stable future of the region. A truly democratic, pluralistic and stable Afghanistan can only prevent regional rivalries and the risk of terrorism.<sup>7</sup>

Since history, the region of Inner Asia and Central Asia is dominated by the Islamic. It continues to be regarded as a potentially unstable region. Brzezinski and Huntington have recognised this region as a geopolitically dangerous and ethnically unstable region.<sup>8</sup> It is typical in the history of Afghanistan. The ethnic differences propitiate frictions. It will breed civil conflicts. It should not be overlooked at any moment. Central Asian states are concerned about the potential spillover of insecurity from Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> The fears of the spread of fundamentalism, particularly after the situation in Afghanistan have made Russia and China more apprehensive.<sup>10</sup>

The greatest danger to global stability is now posed by global terrorism rather than by the geopolitical competition between and among sovereign states which seek to further their own economic, political, military and security interests.<sup>11</sup> The previous background of Taliban and their relation with other terror organisation will shape the responses of other countries of the region. The presence of Taliban in Afghanistan and any destabilisation in the security and stability in Central Asia will compound the challenge.

The geostrategy revolves around the survival strategy of countries. The ‘inclusivity’, is a mantra of inner containment of Taliban regime. But one should not bet on it to produce spectacular results. Russia and China will play a significant role in the future geopolitics of the region as the jihadist elements of extreme Islam are a common threat to everyone. The world expects some changes in the geopolitics of Central Asia and Inner Asia.

## **CONTOURS OF GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF CENTRAL ASIA AND INNER ASIA**

The geopolitical situation of countries defines geopolitics and the affairs of international relations. The physical reality (geographical location) is regarded to be decisive for the international relations of a country. The geographical location of Tajikistan and political challenges are major causes of its tough relationship with its neighbouring country.<sup>12</sup> There is another dimension of the geopolitical confrontation between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Tajikistan is situated at the transit route of narco-trade. A significant quantity of illegal opium passes from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe through Tajikistan. Taliban and other terror organisations operating from Afghanistan derives most of their funding from opium. The continued opium cultivation in Afghanistan will exacerbate that problem.

Every country has its own geopolitical compulsions and equations in the international affairs. These geopolitical compulsions and equations determine the geopolitics of the country. The primary security concerns of Dushanbe stem from its southern borders. By virtue of its geography, Tajikistan shares a 1400 km long border with Afghanistan. A strict policing of these mountainous border is impossible. Unable to do so, Tajikistan fails to prevent the flow of drugs and refugees into its country.

The geopolitical location determines the geopolitics. It is also defined by the situations of the neighbourhood. Tajikistan in particular is most at risk from a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. For Tajikistan, the main spillover threats include a renewed civil war that would involve Afghan Tajiks.<sup>13</sup>

Tajikistan is home to 15 thousand Afghan refugees. The country is particularly concerned about the pressure of new refugees or asylum seekers. Tajikistan expects to receive an influx of large number of refugees from Afghanistan. During the previous civil wars in both countries, large numbers of people crossed the border between the two nations. If the activities of Taliban remain anything similar to the late 1990s, it is expected that the neighbouring regions will experience a huge flow of refugees. These refugees create change in the geopolitical stability of countries. Dushanbe has already allowed some of the Afghan Tajiks who attempted to enter in their territory to stay. It is expected to increase significantly in near future. With the recent move of Taliban there is fear of more and more refugees to cross over the borders of Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

American withdrawal from Afghanistan and rise of Taliban have set the stage for emergence of a new geopolitics. It is a new phase in international affairs. It demands for a collective response from the countries of the region. In 2002, Russia and Tajikistan along with other countries have signed a charter in Tashkent founding the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).<sup>14</sup> Faced with the (new) border concerns, Tajikistan has called upon Russia for its security assistance. In response to it, Russia has agreed to build a new outpost on the Tajik-Afghan border. It has also assured that if needed, it is prepared to activate its troops positioned in Tajikistan. The recent developments may bring in reconfigurations of geopolitics of Central Asia and Inner Asia. There are other players in the geopolitics of Central Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an intergovernmental security organization, which was founded in 2001 by the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>15</sup> The evolving posture of Tajikistan is dependent on its international support also.

One cannot alter the geography but can modify its geostrategic orientation.<sup>16</sup> In an expected geopolitical move, Tajikistan has relocated 20 thousand of its troops to strengthen the forces of the country on its border with Afghanistan. It has also participated in a joint military exercise with other Central Asian countries. Although Tajikistan refers it as an attempt to check the combat readiness of its armed forces, these moves are seen as a geopolitical assertiveness of Tajikistan. Undoubtedly the conflict between Afghanistan and Tajikistan will shape the geopolitics of region. The growing assertiveness of Taliban and controlled aggression of Tajikistan will shape the prospects for peace and stability of the region will be a too simplistic assumption. The game of confrontation and containment has many dimensions.

The new geopolitical landscape of Inner Asia and Central Asia has a situation of tense stability. As every major country feels its way through the shifting contours of geopolitics of Inner Asia and Central Asia, the relations of Russia and China with Taliban will shape the new geopolitics. Both the countries have promised to promote stability in the region as deteriorating security in adjacent Afghanistan could have an effect on regional and global security.<sup>17</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The countries of Inner Asia and Central Asia have unique geopolitical location. Central Asian countries are under the influence of jihad. The appearance of jihadi elements in Afghanistan has also stirred up a new wave of radicalisation in the region. There are several other interrelated geopolitical

challenges. All of this generates new dilemmas for Central Asian security. The security and stability in Central Asia spells security for Russia and China both. To ensure stability and security in the region the countries will need to eliminate or at least contain the source of instability.

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