[**State of uncertainty**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642103/state-of-uncertainty)

[Maleeha Lodhi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8829/maleeha-lodhi)Published August 23, 2021 - Updated 2 days ago

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.

LAST week’s dramatic developments in Afghanistan that stunned the world raise a host of critical questions about the future. What can be expected under a Taliban government? How is the international community responding to this extraordinary turn of events? And what does it mean for Pakistan?

The situation in Afghanistan is in flux so any assessment is necessarily tentative. But first, the much-debated question as to why a 20-year Western project ended in chaos and a political and military collapse. Varying answers have been offered. A key explanation lies in the fact that no dispensation imposed by foreign military intervention outlasts the departure of its patron. This has long been a lesson of history. A 21st-century version of a colonial-style ‘civilising’ mission lay in ruins as the final act of a project plagued by strategic flaws and tactical misjudgements from the very start. What was imposed on Afghanistan by the US-led coalition was a war of retribution — for 9/11 — and not one defined by consistent or realistic objectives.

The meltdown of Afghan national security forces represented a collapse of political will — a reminder that more than military training and sophisticated weaponry it is the motivation to fight that counts. An imposed government deeply mired in corruption hardly provided a reason to fight for demoralised and abandoned soldiers. Pakistan’s former army chief Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kayani had presciently warned US officials over a decade ago that the Afghan army would eventually collapse. Not to be underestimated was the popular yearning for peace which may also explain the lack of armed resistance to the Taliban as that would have involved more bloodshed.

Most consequential for Pakistan is whether the situation stabilises and peace is established in Afghanistan.

What next for Afghanistan under the Taliban? Again, a much-discussed question is whether their rule will be a throwback to their austere and repressive reign of the 1990s or a break from that dark past. Answers will only emerge with time. For now, the Taliban are keen to dispel the impression that the future will resemble the past, in recognition of the reality that the international environment today is very different from two decades ago.

In the [first press conference](https://www.dawn.com/news/1641205) after their takeover of Kabul, Taliban spokesmen claimed they would behave differently, having learnt from experience. Pledging no retributory action against those who fought them they also sent a number of messages about how they intend to govern. They vowed to establish an inclusive government, respect human rights and women’s rights and ensure Afghanistan’s soil will not be used against any country.

This was aimed to reassure an anxious and sceptical international community. Whether the Taliban live up to these promises remains open to question especially as there are already some indications of relapse into their old ways. Nevertheless, talks between the Taliban and former political foes are in progress to set up a broad-based government. It is to be seen if a political settlement emerges. Many countries are in a wait-and-watch mode and suspending judgement for now. Clearly though, concerted pressure by the global community seems to be working. The Taliban are making reassuring statements in their desire for international legitimacy and recognition. The country’s fragile economic situation must weigh significantly in their calculation especially as dollar reserves are dwindling while the IMF has suspended funding. Without international assistance and trade the economy would simply collapse.

The international consensus — as also reflected in the Aug 16 UN Security Council statement with the focus on an inclusive government, respect for human rights and combating terrorism — has sent a common message. It has encouraged the Taliban to adopt a conciliatory stance, in words at least. This means two things. One, engagement is having a moderating effect and two, consensus over key expectations is eliciting assurances from the Taliban. The converse may also hold true. If the international community divides over the recognition issue or there are cracks on other issues this could provide wriggle room to the Taliban to back out of promises. Thus, the need for the multilateral community to engage the Taliban, hold out diplomatic inducements but also sustain collective pressure to ensure promises translate into actions.

**Read:** [*Afghanistan’s future*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1640778)

To make good on their promises the Taliban will have to ensure that local commanders abide by their leaders’ decisions. Moreover, mollifying the international community is one thing and living up to public expectations is another. Governing a war-ravaged country will be the real test and an imposing challenge especially as the Taliban have been a warring force, not one adept at governing. Consolidation of power will depend on how well the country is administered, accommodating others as well as addressing the needs of a new generation who are more educated and connected to the outside world.

Islamabad has long argued that other than Afghanistan, Pakistan has the most to gain from peace in its neighbouring country and the most to lose from more strife and instability. There is understandable relief among officials that bloodshed has been avoided so far. But as the situation is yet to settle Pakistan must move with caution and prudence. In this fluid period Islamabad must stay in lockstep with the international community and coordinate closely on the issue of formal recognition. There is no advantage in going it alone. Diplomatic engagement is in any case continuing and so is cross-border trade. Islamabad is also extending help in intra-Afghan talks aimed at a political settlement. But its involvement should not go beyond this in line with its stated policy that it should be an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led process. Our security forces should also step up border surveillance as a fluid situation can encourage cross-border attacks from militant groups based in Afghanistan that Kabul has yet to act against and on which Islamabad should secure ironclad guarantees.

Above all, the government should speak less on an evolving situation and with one voice. There is no reason to sound triumphal, be spokespersons for the Taliban or to keep obsessing about the past. It is the future that should concern us and what is most consequential for the country — whether peace will return to Afghanistan after decades of war, strife and foreign interventions.

*The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.*

*Published in Dawn, August 23rd, 2021*