

PANELISTS DEBATE

Ali Aslan, International TV Presenter and journalist

We are nearing the final half an hour mark and, of course, I want to bring in the audience in just a bit – not quite yet, hold your horses. I will come to you in just a second because I can imagine there will be a number of questions. I want to round-up this round before we open it up, and I am going to come to the three of you to wrap it up.

Let me start with Marc. As I said, you wrote a very comprehensive book on the war on terror. The US Generals are saying that with the return of the Taliban, we are seeing a return of Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is active in Afghanistan. They are saying an imminent threat, perhaps even an imminent attack on the US, could be realistic and feasible within the next five, six months. Is that your understanding? Is that your assessment as well?

Marc Hecker, Director of research and communications at Ifri, Editor-in-Chief of *Politique étrangère*

Joe Biden said that Al-Qaeda was gone from Afghanistan, which is not true. So, we know that Al-Qaeda is still there and there are evidences that the ties with the Taliban have been maintained over the past 20 years. For instance, in 2019, there was a military operation on a Taliban hideout in Musa Qala, and actually the Emir of Al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent was killed in this operation.

Today, the Taliban have to walk the talk on this topic as well. We cannot just believe what they say. They signed the Doha Agreement, and in the Doha Agreement, they said that they would break ties, but there is no control mechanism. So, we need some evidence at some point.

ISIS is a different issue, because the Taliban and ISIS are at war. So the main question is not if the Taliban are willing to confront this group, but if they are able to eradicate it. According to the UN, ISIS has between 1,500 and 2,200 fighters, which is significant, and if they manage to control some parts of Afghanistan, then perhaps they can also export their violence to the West or to South Asia.

Ali Aslan

Right. Tatiana, there is no doubt that the hasty withdrawal on the part of the United States is a damage to the reputation, if not credibility, of the US, the West, NATO. I think there can be no doubt about that. Again, we talked about the aspect of *Schadenfreude*, perhaps, that is coming from Moscow and Beijing. Looking at this, how lasting do you think this reputational damage truly is to the United States, judging from where you are based?

Tatiana Kastouéva-Jean, Head of Russia-NIS Center of Ifri

Yes, this is what I was saying at the beginning. That the withdrawal of the American troops was in part viewed by the Russians as a geopolitical opportunity. I believe it was Zaki Laïdi who used the term on day one “increase the leverage” – i.e. ramp up the levers of Russian influence both in the region and in neighboring countries. Clearly, great damage has been done to the Americans’ reputation, and the Russians hope to benefit from this. Along with China, clearly, this is this first thing that strikes us: a duo that could take control of the problem, and maybe in connection with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Indeed, while Afghanistan has observer status within this organization, all its border states are members, with the exception of Turkmenistan. However, we also understand the weaknesses of this organization that has been ravaged by conflicts and deadlocks, in particular between India and Pakistan.

Today, I think the hot topic among international relations experts in Russia is to understand the possibilities for a type of multilateralism within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in order to manage this problem. But the dilemma that will rear its head is between effectiveness – i.e. by creating a smaller group to manage Afghanistan’s concerns and come up with solutions – and legitimacy – i.e. the arrangement has to be acceptable to all other members. In any case, the issue was broached at the most recent summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization last September, with members expressing the desire to see a neutral, peaceful Afghanistan. At the same time, no specific pathways to achieve this have emerged. It is just a question of reworking this idea of setting up a group within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But nothing is set in stone for now.

I wanted to add a short comment. You asked who knew the reality on the ground. Honestly, I think that the Russians were well aware of what was going on. Since 2017, they had foreseen the potential fall of the Ghani government. Fears about the fragility of this regime were in the public domain. This is one of the factors that impelled the Russians to talk with the Taliban – this pragmatism, this vision of the reality of the ground that was stripped, essentially, of ideology, from the optimal perspective. Once again, the real problem for the Russians is less the Taliban than their possible support – or not – to the various splinter groups operating in their territory. As a reminder, Vladimir Putin came to power in the midst of the Chechen war, and the most radical fringes of the North Caucasus fighters received support from within Afghanistan. Likewise, under the first Taliban rule, Afghanistan was the first country to recognize the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria as an independent state. The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria is the term for Chechnya. There is also the question of understanding the Taliban’s attitude to separatist movements in neighboring countries.

Ali Aslan

So Russia already had, at least in terms of vision and tactics, a leg up. You are saying they were already arranging themselves for a new reality. And China, as we know, unlike the US, has a somewhat pragmatic approach when it comes to conducting foreign policy, so they will be dealing, Renaud, with the Taliban perhaps in a very different manner.

Let us round it up by bringing in M. K. Narayanan one more time before I hand it over to the audience. I know you wanted to jump in.

Mayankote Kelath Narayanan, Executive Chairman of CyQureX Systems Pvt. Ltd., former Senior Advisor and National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of India

I want to be the devil's advocate at this point in time. I think this is not an issue of whether it is the European Union, Russia or the Americans. We have a problem, there is a huge implosion that is taking place in Afghanistan. The jihadists across the world have been electrified as a result. We have already seen Al-Qaeda and its acolytes, like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammad in the South Asian context. We also see a great deal of revival of ISIS, particularly the Khorasan group of the ISIS. These are the issues.

There is another problem that people are not talking about. The opium trade has more or less doubled or tripled in the course of the last few weeks. There is nobody talking about it. We have to stem that. We cannot wait for governments to be established, we need to deal with that problem.

Finally, you have the problem of how to deal with it. Tatiana was talking about the SCO. You start off by saying the SCO does not include the United States. That is why I referred to a global consultation. We require the world to look at this problem because what is going to happen in Afghanistan in the next year or so is going to dictate the course of events across the world. Do you want to deliver the world to terrorists? The Taliban is what we call excretion on the face of the earth, in that sense, so we need to deal with it.

I think we should have a global consultation with a group of nations. We have had that in the past. It should therefore not only include the countries of Europe. One of the prime candidates for that would be the United Arab Emirates, because it has been done and it now has a record of doing many of these things. Certainly, a country like India as well. How to keep Pakistan out of it will have to be a major factor.

So, please look at this problem from this perspective. Let us not allow ourselves to be driven by old [inaudible]. The United States in particular needs to show ideological diversity. As it has been mentioned here, you cannot say 'We will not deal with this', or, 'We will not look at them because of this kind of thing'.

I have a lot more to say, but I will leave it at that because I think we have run out of time.