

Filling the Void in Afghanistan: How Pakistan, Qatar, and Turkey Benefit from U.S. Retreat

Featuring Aykan Erdemir, Farahnaz Ispahani, and Varsha Koduvayur

Moderated by Maseh Zarif

Introductory remarks by Jonathan Schanzer

SCHANZER: Hello and welcome to yet another timely panel hosted by Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Jonathan Schanzer, FDD's Senior Vice President for Research. Today's discussion comes as American foreign policymakers and the international community wrestle with the grave implications of a bungled American military withdrawal from Afghanistan. A Taliban-al-Qaeda syndicate once again rules Kabul, just as it did ahead of the 9/11 attacks. The initial indicators are worrying, to put it mildly. Yet, the White House insists that our exit was a hard-fought success in the struggle to end America's longest war.

As my colleagues at FDD's *Long War Journal* have documented in great detail for more than a decade, the Taliban are murderers and human rights abusers. And despite what we hear from the White House, or even the Pentagon, they are not partners.

The Taliban, though, are not the only bad actors to watch. Essential components of this story have been absent from the increasingly partisan media coverage. The U.S. retreat has yielded opportunities to the likes of Pakistan, Qatar, and Turkey to become key players in Afghanistan. This is not a positive development.

Our discussion today examines how these leading patrons of political Islam are working to fill the void. If past is prologue, there is ample reason for concern. The record clearly shows that Islamabad, Doha, and Ankara have all financially supported and harbored Afghan extremists, including members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda linked Haqqani network.

We have an expert lineup with us today to discuss how these countries— FDD has at times described them as “frenemies”— are leveraging their newfound influence in Afghanistan --directly or by proxy-- to expand their economic, political, and military influence in the region.

Joining this discussion is:

Aykan Erdemir, senior director of FDD's Turkey Program. He is a former member of the Turkish parliament and has been at the forefront of the struggle against violent extremism, religious persecution, hate crimes, and hate speech in Turkey and the broader Middle East.

Farahnaz Ispahani is a senior fellow at the Religious Freedom Institute and a Public Policy Fellow at the Wilson Center. She previously served as a member of the Pakistani parliament and as a media advisor to the president of Pakistan from 2008 to 2012.

And finally, Varsha Koduvayur is an analyst at Valens Global, a security, research, and analysis firm, where she covers domestic extremism and geopolitics. Until recently, Varsha was a colleague at FDD, where she was a senior research analyst focused on the Gulf.

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I am now pleased to turn things over to today's moderator Maseh Zarif. Maseh was born in Afghanistan. He spent his career as a U.S. national security and foreign affairs policy professional. He is currently Director of Congressional Relations at FDD Action. Maseh, over to you.

ZARIF: Thank you, Jonathan, both for the introduction and for your thoughtful leadership on these issues. I think Jonathan set the stage well, so we'll jump right into our discussion. I'd like to start by getting the panels take on the question of how we got here and specifically how the governments in Pakistan, Qatar, and Turkey exploited the crisis that we saw in Afghanistan, including in the final phase of the U.S. military withdrawal. So if I could ask Farahnaz to start us off on Pakistan—

ISPAHANI: Thank you, Maseh. As I think most of my co-panelists know, Pakistan currently feels that it has won in Afghanistan. It supported the Taliban ever since the Taliban's founding, and in spite of that, has also managed to become America's key ally in the region, especially as the logistics hub for U.S. forces. So in spite of the relationship with the U.S. and all of the things that surrounded that, Pakistan brought the Taliban back home. Pakistan's leaders do not see the rise of Islamist terrorism as the bigger problem. In fact, Prime Minister Imran Khan has already begun speaking about talking to the Pakistani Taliban, who have already also resumed their terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. So, winning with the Taliban in Afghanistan has not led to a win for Pakistan internally at all. The Pakistani Taliban has started its suicide bombings all over again, so that's not good.

And it is unnerving to Pakistan watchers. Within the Pakistani power circles, which include both the government and the Pakistan military, there's some concern that the U.S. might want to punish Pakistan over its role in supporting the Taliban in helping them defeat the U.S. But Pakistan has a long history of fending off U.S. anger over its conduct. It's hoping to be useful to the U.S. in the short-term with the evacuations of American still in Afghanistan of those approved for SIVs, Special Immigrant Visas, and to manage American skepticism through public relations.

So, you've all probably seen the many op-eds and interviews by PM Imran Khan stating that the Taliban did not win because of Pakistan, and that, in fact, the Taliban were victorious because it was inevitable that they were going to win as they were the true representatives of the real Afghan culture. However, as we all know, the Taliban do not represent Afghans. They have not won an election.

They oppose the very idea of elections and that they have gained power through violence and threats of violence. Already, we can see their repression has resumed in all parts of Afghanistan. The attitude towards women and girls remains unchanged. So does the attitude to the country's religious minority populations. And we have started seeing graphic images of live hangings again. The so-called moderate Taliban trotted out for negotiations in Doha have been marginalized soon after victory. Again, this was a big victory for Pakistan because the so-called moderate Taliban, who were negotiating in Doha, were fighting with the terrorist group, the Haqqani Network, a component of the Taliban who have been always sheltered in Pakistan itself and have been Pakistan's Taliban in some ways. And when the moderate Taliban and the Haqqani group got together to form the government, and it seemed like they couldn't come to any agreement, in flies Pakistan's Intelligence Chief, and within a few days, the Haqqani group basically takes over the government.

And we last saw Mullah Baradar was trotting off to find Amir with his deal between his legs, making again, the U.S. look quite silly, I would say. So again, as a big snub to those who had negotiated this withdrawal, 17 out of the first 33 cabinet appointments comprised of internationally designated terrorists, ISIS-K, al-Qaeda are back in action, the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan, and the Tajik Islamists are already preparing to launch attacks, and I personally believe that

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there will definitely be a resumption of terrorism by various international terrorist groups who have regained a safe haven in Afghanistan. And the Taliban had made it clear that their definition of terrorism is not the same as the rest of the world's. They have recently repeated their assertion that they've never seen evidence that Osama bin Laden was behind the 9/11 attacks, the very reason the U.S. went in 20 years ago.

And as we've seen from one of their first acts, releasing thousands of prisoners, including members of international terrorist groups, from jails and all of that, Pakistan's ruling now in one way is trying to insulate itself from the Taliban's actions because we are starting to see the Tehrik-I-Taliban Pakistan come back into action all of a sudden, and it looks like it might find the Taliban very difficult to control, especially in their moment of triumph. And it is caught between an uncontrollable Taliban and an international community demand that they control the Taliban. And on the other side of this, the Talibanization of Afghanistan led before and always leads to the Talibanization of Pakistan. And as I've mentioned, the TTP, the Pakistani Taliban, have resumed their terrorist attacks and Prime Minister Khan is already on his knees and talking about resuming talks with them. So there might be yet more Islamization in Pakistan expanded to the Pakistani Taliban. So, I don't see this as Pakistan won, but I don't think the Pakistani people and the country of Pakistan have won this round.

ZARIF: Well, thanks very much for that setup, Farahnaz. I think that gives a good window for sort of how we arrived at the moment. And I do want to circle back on the question of what sounds like the blowback effect that Islamabad is going to face, I think, in the period ahead. Shifting now to one of the Taliban's other partners in Qatar, I want to ask Varsha to step in and sort of give us the view from how Doha had been managing their interests and maneuvering inside Afghanistan in recent months.

KODUVAYUR: Qatar has played its hand remarkably well, both in the pre- and post-withdrawal atmosphere. It's really been the biggest winner, geopolitically speaking, especially in the aftermath of the withdrawal. Qatar has positioned itself as the essential go-between between with the Taliban and the Western countries. And it also reaped a lot of goodwill for the role that it played during the evacuation and for the assistance that it provided in the evacuation. Our other Gulf partners, the UAE and Bahrain, also stepped up and played a very important role, but it was Qatar that was getting a lot of the praise and getting singled out with statements from Secretary of State Blinken, saying that no country has done more than Qatar to assist in the evacuation efforts.

Qatar also displayed a remarkably personal touch during these evacuation efforts. Qatari diplomats personally helped escort evacuees to the airport, of about 50,000, wouldn't be more than that, evacuees all transitioned through Doha on their flights out of Afghanistan. And Qatar also worked with Turkey to rebuild the Kabul airport. And then on top of that, of course, we saw that Qatar Airways became the first international airline to resume international flights out of Afghanistan. So, we see a really, I think, clear and concentrated picture of the various ways Qatar has positioned itself to play this really vital role as the interlocutor of the Taliban to the West and to other countries.

None of these victories came overnight. What we see in the way that Qatar has been working in Afghanistan, both pre-and post-withdrawal, is a strategy that Qatar has deployed time and time again. It's a very purposeful strategy of essentially playing both sides and speaking to all parties, and that's what allowed Qatar to play the facilitating role that it did between the U.S. and the Taliban when it came time to convene the talks and to continue playing that interlocutor role that I mentioned earlier now, between the Taliban, the U.S., our European allies, and other countries. In previous years, this strategy of trying to play both sides and to be the mediator did not redound to Qatar's benefit necessarily. It earned Qatar the U.S.'s ire and public admonition.

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I think one of the most notable examples would be of course, during the 2017 Qatar crisis, when the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt enacted a unilateral land, sea, air blockade on Qatar. The statements that we saw U.S. officials make in the aftermath of that were not necessarily praising Qatar for this intermediary role that it played. It was singled out as a funder of terrorism, and it was bashed for its ties to terrorists. Fast forward four years later, we now have U.S. officials essentially thanking Qatar for the role that it is playing in serving as the bridge between one particular and very violent terrorist group and the rest of the world. So those same ties with terrorists that were seen as a liability before are now, in this current context and environment, seen as an essential channel. The U.S. diplomatic mission, by the way, is also based in Qatar now. The U.S. diplomatic mission to Afghanistan is also based in Qatar now, along with several other European embassies.

So, I think both pre- and immediately post withdrawal, we saw Qatar provide this essential service and sort of all sign points to Qatar wanting to continue to play this role as the bridge between the Taliban in Afghanistan and the rest of the world. It's a huge coup for Qatar in terms of reaping huge amounts of goodwill. Not just U.S. goodwill, but really global goodwill for the assistance that it played in the evacuation mission and in winding down U.S. operations there, especially in the context of this administration reviewing and intending to revise the U.S.' overall relationship with the Gulf States. So I think that can be very much classified as a huge geopolitical win. But where this might end up down the road becoming a liability is Qatar's closeness with the Taliban essentially means it has put itself in a position where Taliban actions may end up reflecting on Qatar itself. So there is a reputational risk that could end up becoming a liability and become some blowback for Qatar further down the road.

ZARIF: Thank you, Varsha, for that. And then that's a great point at the end. The parallels here across some of the country portfolios are uncanny in some ways. So shifting now to Turkey, which also has ties with a similar set of Islamist terror groups as Qatar does. And there are also parallels in terms of the Kabul Airport mission that you mentioned, Varsha. So if I can ask Aykan to step in and give us the lay down on Turkey's view.

ERDEMIR: There are two separate games and trajectories when it comes to Turkey's long-term involvement with Afghanistan. On the one hand, we have the Turkish Republic, since the early days of the Republic, having cordial relations with Afghanistan. Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, had very close relations with the Afghan King Amānullāh, who were both secular modernizers advocating for gender equality. But at the same time, we have Erdogan, who has been ruling Turkey for the last 19 years, who has close relationships with a wide range of Islamists across the world, including in Afghanistan, including, for example, Hekmatyar, who fought against the Karzai government and only returned to Afghanistan after long years of exile. In fact, when we take a look at the winning team here, namely Pakistan, Qatar, and Turkey, we see that this is the one and the same team, that they are all patrons and advocates of political Islam in one way or another.

And Erdogan appears to be enjoying his victory. But at the same time, we shouldn't rule out the entire separate Turkish involvement in Afghanistan, outside of Erdogan's Islamist project. For example, going back to 2001, Turkey was one of the first countries, before Erdogan's rise to power, to send troops as part of the International Security Assistance Forces mission. And then the Turkish presence in a non-combat role was geared towards winning hearts and minds because Turkey was a Muslim majority country, but a secular one and a NATO member state, so Ankara saw its own position in Afghanistan as one to win hearts and minds, not through weapons, but through its soft power. Hence, we have seen Turkish presence geared towards training, airport security, infrastructure development, and humanitarian aid. In fact, we have seen Turkey's former foreign minister and deputy prime minister from Turkey's pro-secular Republican People's Party serve as the NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, and he was followed up by another Turkish ambassador in 2015 and 2016 as well.

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So, Turkey was integral to NATO's mission in Afghanistan, and the only casualties it had to endure were either in a helicopter crash in Kabul or a traffic accident. The one and only known attack targeting a Turkish individual was when in 2015, there was a suicide bomb attempt against the Turkish ambassador, who was the NATO Senior Civilian Representative, which shows you that Turkey for the most part had a different, a separate, and mostly constructive role to play in Afghanistan, regardless of Erdogan's own agenda, which oftentimes clashes with the Turkish Republic's traditional agenda in Afghanistan. Just to give you one concrete example, right around the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Erdogan said, "Imperial powers entered Afghanistan. They have been there for over 20 years." This was a clear reference to the U.S. forces and NATO forces in Afghanistan. What is odd in the statement is that Turkish troops from day one, 2001, were part of that mission, first with the International Security Assistance Forces mission and then with the Resolute Support Mission. So, in a strange way, Erdogan was also referring to Turkish presence in Afghanistan, alongside U.S. and NATO forces as imperial powers entering Afghanistan. I think this shows almost the split personality in Ankara's policy toward Afghanistan. On the one hand, the secular Turkish Republic's long running ties with Afghanistan, and as well as the NATO mission there, versus Erdogan's personal Islamist agenda that resonates very closely with that of Qatar's and Pakistan's.

ZARIF: Thank you for that, Aykan. One of the things that struck me and some of the statements coming from US officials, I think in the weeks after the withdrawal finished about Turkey's role is, the positive tones about what Turkey will do in Afghanistan going forward. We've mentioned the Kabul airport mission and I know that you've talked a little bit about how that positive message toward Ankara has been something that has been a bit of a trend this year. But at the same time, you do see Erdogan's regime consistent in pursuing policies that have created destabilizing effects, I think both within Turkey and outside. Where do you see the trajectory of U.S. policy toward Turkey going, given what we've just seen unfold in Afghanistan?

ERDEMIR: When we take a look at the Biden administration's approach to the Erdogan government, we see two radically different periods. Until June when Erdogan reached out to his U.S. counterparts and offered to provide security during and after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, we have seen the Biden administration giving Erdogan the cold shoulder. From the election of Biden as president until June, we have seen an unprecedented chain of messaging coming from Washington, criticizing Ankara for its purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia, for its human rights abuses, for its policies against gender equality and LGBT individuals, for its imprisonment of the pro-Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtaş and Turkey's leading philanthropist, Osman Kavala. So this was a Biden administration that put human rights and democracy at the center, the NATO values at the center of its relationship with Ankara. But the moment Erdogan made the offer to take over the security mission in Afghanistan, the Biden administration has entered a period of radio silence when it comes to the Erdogan government's transgressions at home and abroad.

And this didn't even change when Erdogan attacked the Biden administration right from the center. For example, following the UN General Assembly meetings, when Erdogan failed to secure a one-on-one photo opportunity with Biden, he slammed the Biden administration. He attacked Biden personally, comparing him to earlier U.S. presidents, and declaring him as being uniquely unsuccessful. He accused Washington of supporting terrorism, and there was absolutely no pushback from Washington, simply the Biden administration looked the other way. Another aspect of the stark contrast was during the confirmation hearings, when Blinken referred to Turkey as a "so-called" NATO ally. Whereas since June, he has repeatedly referred to Turkey as an invaluable NATO ally, even when Erdogan said he could purchase a second batch of the S-400 air defense system. Now this in itself, I think is a very important message for U.S. foreign and security policy.

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What happens in Afghanistan does not stay in Afghanistan. There is a negative spillover. The neo-isolationism across the U.S. political spectrum that lost Afghanistan is also losing U.S. and NATO positions elsewhere. To give you another concrete example of the fallout, with the debacle in Afghanistan, we have seen a dramatic spike in Turkey's cross border attacks, targeting Northeast Syria's vulnerable minorities, including the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces who are allied to the U.S. in its fights against Islamic State. And we have seen Washington, again, look the other way and maintain radio silence when it comes to attacks by Turkish forces, as well as Erdogan's Islamist proxies in Syria. This shows that once you begin to appease adversaries in one part of the world, that often has a negative spillover effect in other parts of the world where you have to continue the appeasement policy, especially if you entrust your own security interests in the hands of autocratic regimes, especially adversarial autocratic regimes.

And I think this is what we have been witnessing with Turkey, and I expect the trajectory to continue, that is I expect the Erdogan government to continue to extract concessions not only from the United States, but also from the European Union. As Ankara weaponizes the security situation in Afghanistan, as well as weaponizes potential refugee waves from Afghanistan to extract further diplomatic and financial concessions. So, the take home message from the Turkish case when it comes to Afghanistan, is that neo-isolationism and appeasement do not work, and they undermine U.S. and NATO interests in the short to long term.

ISPAHANI: Absolutely, they also have had a very negative effect on the poor Afghans in Afghanistan. The Americans just lost interest. And I think as you were saying, Aykan, Turkey, Turkey's rule, Pakistan, Pakistan's rule, Qatar, let's see it's a very rich country and it funds terrorist groups, but it's not necessarily militarily otherwise, a regional power in the way that Turkey and Pakistan are. But yes, it is equivalent, I would say in terms of leading to terrorist groups. And I think the safe haven that Afghanistan has become now is going to be a serious problem for the United States and its NATO allies as we move forward.

ZARIF: Yeah, it does sound like what, what Aykan and Farahnaz are describing here is in some ways, a counter to the thinking that you might hear from some in the policy community who say, "Well, we can do two things at the same time. We can be transactional here, but stick to our core interest here." But what you actually have is a dynamic where these countries are using their short term, near term usefulness, or perceived usefulness as cover to be able to advance what are some broader aims around the regions. And I think that's a really important counter to the thinking that, "Well, we can separate these two things."

And I think in that same vein, let me actually turn over to Varsha. In the case of Qatar, you were describing this posture where they're an ambassador hype man almost for the Taliban, and then given the direction that I think U.S. policy has wanted to go under multiple administrations, they've used that to curry favor with Washington and build in some greater dependency in that relationship. How do you think Doha will leverage that experience as it thinks about what it wants to do in its more immediate neighborhood, especially vis-à-vis some of the other Gulf countries?

KODUVAYUR: I think that Qatar has two main objectives. The first is to preserve domestic stability, and the second is to maintain its policy independence. Regionally, this translates to being in a position where Qatar can more easily withstand any pressure that is applied to it by its erstwhile Gulf allies slash rivals, namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. I think Qatar will seek to leverage the dependency that you described that it has cultivated, not just with the U.S., but several other countries, in Afghanistan to achieve these aims. I think its actions in Afghanistan have put it in a great position in terms of the dependency that this has created. It is echoing the theme that Aykan touched upon, where it's impossible almost, I would say, for the U.S. to continue to shine a spotlight on some of these countries' negative behaviors while simultaneously relying upon them to facilitate access to the Taliban or to facilitate access to Afghanistan.

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And I think we'll absolutely see that dynamic with Qatar as the Biden administration continues to rely upon Qatar as a partner in Afghanistan. There's the often-mentioned idea that Qatar punches above its weight and it wields outsized influence compared to its relative size. It's certainly not a military power as Farahnaz just mentioned. I think Afghanistan is a perfect example of where tiny Qatar has really punched well above its weight and set itself up to be in the central position that was far from guaranteed. It was very carefully cultivated. And I think there are two ways this could go. In the short term, as I mentioned earlier, this absolutely redounds to Qatar's benefit. It has a lot of support from the U.S. right now, which I think gives it a level of insulation, perhaps that it did not enjoy with the previous administration.

It probably provides it a level of protection regionally, especially as we're starting to see some shifting geopolitical calculations within the Gulf itself. We're seeing the acrimony of the last four years or so possibly start to fade away. We're seeing the UAE and Qatar try to mend fences, the UAE and Turkey try to mend fences. So, there's a bit of a reshuffling of the geopolitical deck going on within the Gulf at the same time that Qatar has and continues to provide this absolutely essential role to the United States. Both of which I think will redound to Qatar's benefit in the short term. But that said, I want to bring up the point that I mentioned earlier, where I think Qatar's links to the Taliban could end up creating future reputational damages and become a liability. This would not be the first time that Qatar's bets in the region have not been as impactful in a positive way as maybe Qatar leadership had hoped.

We saw the same dynamic emerge in the post Arab spring scenario where Qatar supported Islamist leaders in Egypt and beyond, and it looked like Qatar made the right bet when these leaders began notching electoral gains. But as their incompetence in governance quickly showed through, these leaders became absolute liabilities for Qatar and bogged them down in a series of reputational damages that I think in some ways, Qatar's still trying to get itself out of. So the Taliban could end up being a similar bet in that regard. Qatar will have to execute a very tricky balance, whereby it gets to retain that very essential go between function without the Taliban's actions eventually coming back to reflect on Qatar itself.

ISPAHANI: I think one thing, Varsha. You sound very, very gung-ho on Qatar, which is fine. Aykan and I, I think tried to give both aspects of the countries we're talking about, but the thing that is not being talked about right now is Qatar's relationship with Iran. That's a really important relationship as it borders Afghanistan. So to this conversation, I think we do need to bring that to the table. Qatar's support of terrorist groups, we do need to bring that to the table. Because the three countries we are all talking about have helped because of, as Aykan was saying the U.S., unseemly hurried to get out of Afghanistan and the mess with which they had left, they didn't really care about what was happening at the Doha courts. The Doha courts, there was nothing included about al-Qaeda, there was nothing included about human rights, the rights of women, the rights of anybody.

They were very poorly drafted, but the U.S. didn't really care, they wanted to leave. So I don't think anyone is feeling very positive about the situation right now in Afghanistan. And countries that are closed in I think again, I think Turkey could play a big role, and with Erdogan leading, I don't think it'll necessarily be a positive one. Because as he said right at the beginning, all three of these countries are politically Islamist in nature, and that is their ideology and that is a dangerous ideology for the U.S. to walk away from and feel like, "Okay, we've cut our ties." No, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, not just al-Qaeda, not just ISIS-Khorasan, not just the Tajiks, not just all of these groups –

–but they're all regrouping in Afghanistan today. So, this conversation really, I think we need to talk about the U.S. has walked out. So what is after this point, where do we go from now? For Pakistan for example, Ambassador Wendy Sherman is planning a trip to Pakistan very soon, it's in the offing. So that means that the sudden isolationism of the United States is again a little uneven. So we're not clear what the game is, but I think we've all in the international

community, lost a lot. The Afghan people have lost the most, but we have all lost a lot and it has become a breeding ground for terrorism in a way it was not 20 years ago. So from my point of view, it's been a major loss.

ZARIF: That's a great point Farahnaz, and if I can ask you a follow-up about the way that you've described this growing sanctuary in both Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the trajectory that's going, you mentioned al-Qaeda, but there's a whole grouping of entities, including Lashkar-e-Taiba and others within that al-Qaeda orbit that certainly do stand to gain. You've talked a little bit about the effects inside of Pakistan, but I wonder if you can zoom out a little bit even more, obviously China's got a role in this region and the China-Pakistan relationship is an interesting dynamic here, but how do you see some of the blowback effects at a more wider regional level playing out? Obviously, the type of thing that you mentioned in Wendy Sherman's trip, but the U.S. policymakers will, will have to grapple with, especially with the limited presence in the region and constraints on eyes and ears about how that threat is metastasizing.

ISPAHANI: Indian colleagues and people who work within the Indian establishment are gearing up for terrorists' threats from Afghan soil towards India, which is a U.S. ally. Al-Qaeda and ISIS-linked Kashmir groups are jubilant that they would be able to reorganize, and that Pakistan would have deniability about supporting them. So this is what I meant about the compounding. The East Turkistan Islamic movement is a problem for China in Xinjiang. China is now trying very hard to talk to the Taliban in restraining them with aid from China. So now China for the first time is in a position where they're actually negotiating with the Taliban, because of Xinjiang. Pakistan faces a specter, Pakistani Taliban, as well as anti-Shia terrorism. Pakistan says it thinks it can manage the threat, but Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also face a threat and as does India, which I want to reiterate, and there's going to be a spillover in south Asia, central Asia, and the Middle East.

So, all of these really, I think we're past the Doha codes. We're past the supposed victory. We are now at a point with the Taliban, they have described China as the main development partner for the future. Is this a U.S. win? I couldn't say so. A Taliban delegation has already visited Beijing and Beijing, which wants to stamp out weaker militancy and is not keen on Islamic revivalism is planning to find a way to expand its Belt and Road Initiative and the China, Pakistan economic corridor to Afghanistan, and through Afghanistan to Central Asia. Well, let's see how that goes. Given the Taliban's undiluted ideology, China's relations with the Taliban won't be easy, but China is paying attention. And that is more than we can say for the U.S.

So, China is not a U.S. ally, they are in there as the Taliban's possibly the biggest funders. So not only now you have a breeding ground for terrorism, you have blowback expected in all the neighboring countries, and now you have China coming in and putting its very big footprint in that area, leading to all of Central Asia and South Asia. So it's messy, it's very complicated and very ugly and disturbing at the moment.

ZARIF: Indeed. And I think it underscores what Aykan said earlier about what's happening in Afghanistan is certainly not going to stay there on a much bigger scale than I think we all have seen up to now. So one thing that you mentioned earlier, and I'm glad you raised it is Qatar's support for both Islamist terror groups and also the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism in Iran. And so Varsha, I wanted to ask you, it sounds to me like from a U.S. policy perspective, that the likelihood now given what we've seen that the Biden reservation is going to confront Doha on those types of issues was already low and decreasing. Is that a fair assessment to take from your analysis?

KODUVAYUR: Absolutely. I think it's going to be really difficult for this administration to confront Qatar on the host of nefarious ties it has to Hamas to the Muslim Brotherhood, to Iran and the host of malign behaviors that it is implicated, in allegations of terror finance and so on. I'd like to go back to what Aykan said earlier when he said that this is the blowback that can be expected of relying upon an autocratic regime to fulfill essential security functions.

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That's the exact dynamic that the U.S., that the Biden administration finds itself in regards to Qatar too. It's going to be really tough for the Biden administration to take any offensive stance because of the level of interdependency almost that has been created as a result of the role that Qatar has stepped up to play, very cleverly on Qatar's part, very strategically again. But it's like Farahnaz is saying, it's not a win for the United States to have outsourced its security needs in this manner. The U.S. is going to be hard-pressed to continue shining a spotlight on Qatar's ties to extremists, on Qatar's ties to Iran, as it simultaneously relies upon Doha to fulfill this central role.

Essentially the U.S. needs Qatar, and I think it's going to find itself in a position where it doesn't want to jeopardize that role or that access by continuing to hammer away at Qatar's bad behavior. That's not to say I think that Qatar is going to turn access on and off like a spigot in retaliation to any criticism. I don't think Qatar will necessarily be vindictive like that, though other regional allies of the United States have certainly displayed that behavior. I think it's more a reflection of U.S. strategy and U.S. behavior where the U.S. will look hypocritical to try to talk about Doha's ties to extremists and terrorists while also simultaneously relying upon Qatar's ties to one extremist group in particular. So it does put the US in a bind. How do we push for reducing Qatar's ties through extremists or reducing Qatar's maligned behavior?

KODUVAYUR: How do we continue to maintain a focus on the very real problem of Qatar being a permissive jurisdiction for terror finance? There have been a lot of steps that Qatar has taken on that front since the start of the Gulf blockade, but there's still plenty of work to be done. So how do we maintain that kind of focus while at the same time being in this situation of relying upon Qatar for access to the Taliban into Afghanistan? I think it's a moot cause to, I think even try to assume, as Aykan pointed out, the Biden administration will be able to mount any kind of assertive or offensive stance against Qatari malign behavior at this point.

ERDEMIR: And I would like to follow that great comment by saying that the relationships that are emerging between the United States and the three countries we have in focus happen to be very asymmetric. That is some might fool themselves into thinking that this is a transactional relationship, win-win relationship, where you give some and take some. On the ground, that's not how things are developing. Just to give you an example. While since June, the Biden administration has silenced all criticism of the Erdogan government, Erdogan has doubled down on the U.S. Most recently, he said, "If it were up to me, the United States should leave Syria and Iraq." This is literally a call for Iran, Russia and the Assad regime to dominate the region. Or Erdogan doubled down by going for potentially a second batch of the S-400 air defense system from Russia, or by accusing the United States of supporting terrorism.

So, it seems this asymmetric relationship could bring out the worst in the so-called transactional partners while Washington has the burden of looking the other way. So this is a varying trajectory, and the sad thing is that we have seen some of this before, that is during the first Obama administration there was a lot of faith that the Muslim Brotherhood could be a force for good and democratization in the Middle East and beyond, and we have seen how that ended. So today as political Islam will be emboldened by the wins Qatar, Pakistan and Turkey have secured in Afghanistan, some might again think that, "You know what? Maybe political Islam could be part of the solution." But I think we will have to learn again, the hard way that this is simply an invitation, not only for a majoritarian sectarian vision to hold strong ground in the Muslim majority world, but also pave the way for more radical extremists, more violent versions to take action first from its basis in Afghanistan. And then in the rest of the Middle East and and North Africa.

ZARIF: That's very worrying, Aykan, and I think this is also a threat across all three countries, is that you really do have deep concerns about all of the communities and people that have targets on their backs that these governments and some of their proxy forces are going after. And so I wonder, Aykan if you could expand a little bit on the case of

Turkey, given where you've seen Biden administration policy go, what do you think are the prospects for some of the targets that Erdogan has, everyone from pro-democracy activists inside of Turkey to some of the communities in neighboring countries?

ERDEMIR: So, I would be particularly concerned about two groups. At home Turkey's pro-secular, pro-Western democracy forces will be under increasing pressure through Erdogan's courts, through Erdogan's vigilantes and proxies. So this could either be legal harassment, or this could be, as we have seen, literal physical action, beatings and torture and disappearances and executions. But beyond Turkey's borders, we will see an emboldened Erdogan in Libya, in Syria, in Iraq and of particular, I think interest and concern to the U.S. audiences, should be what's happening with the vulnerable communities in Northeast Syria and in Northern Iraq, because some of these communities are genocide survivors.

Only recently they escaped the wrath of the Islamic State, and they have been painfully taking small steps towards rebuilding their communities. Meanwhile, we see repeated reports in the Western media of Ankara's proxies attacking some of these Christian and Yazidi minorities in brutal ways, including shellings, abductions for ransom, enslavement, pillaging, this again shows us that what happens in Afghanistan does not stay in Afghanistan. And that neo-isolationism is actually a domino theory of you lose in one country to extremism, you embolden extremism in other settings as well.

ZARIF: That's right. And I think given the picture that you all have painted with each question. So, I wonder if I can actually move to a hypothetical, if you'll humor me. Imagine if there's a scenario in which Secretary Blinken is traveling to Ankara, Doha and then onto Islamabad on the same trip, what would your advice be on the message from a U.S. policy perspective that needs to be delivered in this moment to each of those capitals? Aykan, we'll start with you.

ERDEMIR: I think the key message vis-à-vis Turkey should be separate from the message toward Qatar and Pakistan, given Turkey is a NATO member state, given Turkey is a member of the Council of Europe. Given Turkey is an accession country to European Union, which means Ankara needs to answer to higher standards because Ankara has committed itself according to international law to these higher standards. So Secretary Blinken should not shy away from holding Ankara accountable for the wide range of transgressions, ranging from human rights violations to adversarial action when it comes to collusion with Iran, Russia, and Venezuela. So ultimately I think Blinken should hold a mirror to Ankara and remind Ankara who Turkey is as a NATO member, as a Council of Europe member, and as a European Union accession country.

ZARIF: Thanks for that, Aykan. And Farahnaz, what's the message to you to Islamabad?

ISPAHANI: The message to Islamabad, unfortunately will be the same. They'll say do more and the Pakistanis will say, "Poor us, look at the blowback already. We're the neighbors. We're the ones who are under fire and you've just left us all behind.

And the Americans will not quite believe it because now – I mean, ever since drone technology was, and I know this from when I was in government, the Pakistanis say, the U.S. would say, for example, that there are terrorists along the border with India, right, and the Indians are complaining. In the old days, the Pakistani's would say, "No, they're not there." Now, the U.S. and Israel, everyone can see that they're there. But in spite of that, Maseh, in spite of that, the answer that will be given to Blinken is: "What, us? Poor us? We still have 3 million refugees from the last time around. Our people are suffering. Look at the suicide attempts." And the U.S. will nod and say do more and leave with accomplishing absolutely nothing.

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But what will be accomplished, I think, is – What we’re seeing now is a lot of embassies that used to exist in Islamabad now don’t exist. And a lot of people who were talking to Pakistan are no longer talking to them. I think they’re trying to find others within the stans and other countries to talk to. So, it’s going to be the same conversation that’s been happening ever since Pakistan became the U.S.’ most allied ally in the region, even though the Indians have protested over terrorism and all of that so much in the past. But nothing has changed. It’d be the same old conversation.

ZARIF: Thank you for that, Farahnaz. And then onto Doha.

KODUVAYUR: Sure. This is, I would say, of Secretary Blinken, that this is an administration that came into office vowing to put human rights back into the center of U.S. foreign policy, and this is an administration that heavily criticized the transactional, almost free-wheeling, *carte blanche* approach of the previous administration. And yet there’s nothing pro-human rights about turning a blind eye to allegations of Qatar funding terrorist groups. And there’s nothing that’s remotely pro-human rights about ignoring Qatar’s ties to nefarious regimes like the Mullah regime in Iran that murders its own citizens. There’s also arguably nothing pro-human rights, of course, about the way in which we exited Afghanistan. But that’s a conversation, I think, for another time. I would remind Secretary Blinken that there is the possibility—more than the possibility, there’s the duty to continue to bring up Qatar’s maligned behavior, to continue to demand reforms on that front.

And they should not revert to any sort of transactionalism, whereby they let that kind of negative behavior slide in return for the essential role that Qatar is playing in Afghanistan today. This is also not necessarily a new strategy for Qatar. This is the reason, I think, that they’ve done so much to build up and keep Al Udeid Air Base there. It sort of functions and has been used by Qatar as a bargaining chip with the U.S. and is a source of leverage to get some sort of space and reduce U.S. pressure on certain policy priorities in Qatar. But this administration cannot continue to claim that it is putting human rights at the center of foreign policy if it’s going to enable any sort of transactionalism, whether that be with Qatar, with Pakistan, or with Turkey.

ZARIF: Thanks for that, Varsha. And before I move onto my next and last question, I actually wanted to touch on a question that we got from Laurie Mylroie from *Kurdistan24*. And Aykan, this is for you, and it’s about the relationship that Turkey had with the Taliban and whether Turkey’s position within NATO impacted at all the Taliban’s view of Ankara.

ERDEMIR: I think Ankara is acutely aware, just like Qatar, based on what Varsha has just said, that its relationship with the Taliban could be damaging. So we have seen some cosmetic attempts at damage control. For example, the Turkish Foreign Minister and other Turkish officials have repeatedly paid lip service to human rights, gender equality, or inclusiveness when it comes to the Taliban’s actions in Afghanistan. I know this sounds like a joke, but the Turkish Foreign Minister recommended the Taliban to be more inclusive when it’s forming its Council of Ministers or to include more women or ethnic minorities in Afghanistan.

Now the problem with this recommendation is when we take a look at Erdogan’s very own government, it’s almost entirely composed of men and entirely composed of Sunni Muslims. Not a single member of Turkey’s religious diversity is represented in the Erdogan government itself. But interestingly now, Ankara turns to Kabul, and almost as the Taliban whisperer, tells them to moderate a bit. This, of course, is geared more towards, I think, Brussels, towards NATO, towards Washington, the United States. Ultimately, Erdogan knows that the fallout from Taliban’s atrocities in Afghanistan could come back to haunt Ankara, just as it would come back to haunt Doha and Islamabad.

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ZARIF: Thank you, Aykan. The last that I wanted to bring up for the three of you is – So if you take a step back and try to think about the next few months, what do you all think is the most important thing to be paying attention to, something that could potentially be a wild card or something that is really unsettled and that you've got indicators out that you're watching for, with each of the countries, whether it's about their strategy in Afghanistan or even more broadly? Farahnaz, let's start with you.

ISPAHANI: Vis-à-vis Pakistan being the neighbor, being the country that harbored most of the Taliban leadership, especially the Haqqani group for the last 20 years, the first and second emirs of the Taliban died in Pakistan in hospitals, et cetera. So the fact that Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban has been like that of no other country. Now, in spite of the closeness, what I see happening, even though we saw what looked like the Taliban marching through Afghanistan without a shot fired, they did manage that for various reasons. But what it's actually done is – The Taliban is inward-looking, so I'm not concerned about the Taliban for the Middle East, for South Asia, for Central Asia, the rest of the world. This time around though, the international terrorists who are based in Afghanistan and who are much more brutal in their ways than the Taliban and much more sophisticated and have an international hatred of Israel, a hatred of the Western way of life, and the West itself, this is a very –

So today, you see not just a weakened al-Qaeda hiding in caves, sheltering behind Mullah Omar. Today, you see five or six terrorist groups with international aspirations, with international goals and international targets sitting in Afghanistan. And I don't see how Pakistan, Turkey, Qatar, or anyone else that the U.S. has relied on in the past, or who even may want to come into the region now in a bigger way. I think we get their fingers burnt in the way that Pakistan has done as well. I mean, the moment the Taliban came to power in Pakistan, mosques, police, and our rangers and people started getting targeted and killed. Almost instantly. So it's the international terrorists in Afghanistan, with an international lens and international targets, that's who we have to be watching now. And I don't think anyone can control them.

ZARIF: It's a grim picture, and I fear your you're right. Let me move to Varsha. Who are you watching for?

KODUVAYUR: There are three dynamics or indicators that I would be watching for, and they sort of all pertain to intra-Gulf relations. The first is, I think that the withdrawal likely exacerbated underlying fears in the Gulf about an eventual U.S. retrenchment from the region. The second thing is that it also likely casts into light how erratic and confusing U.S. policymaking can seem at times. And the third is that the withdrawal has also spurred a sort of a sense of urgency within the Gulf for the other Gulf states to make similar inroads into Afghanistan and to not, like Qatar, have all the focus or to let Qatar end up becoming the most favored ally of the United States in this region. It's a very interesting time in the Gulf right now. There was a lot of, as I'd mentioned earlier, a lot of geopolitical reshuffling going on prior to the withdrawal. There are conversations between Saudi Arabia and Iran that are mediated by Iraq.

The UAE has been mending fences with Qatar and Turkey. I think we're likely to see these kinds of outreach to mend regional risks continue because of those three dynamics that I mentioned, but especially the first two, which is fear of an eventual U.S. retrenchment from the region and also this understanding that U.S. policymaking can be very erratic at times. And so I think the Gulf States are going to deal with this dynamic of how best to protect themselves, how best to insulate themselves. It's going to be a very interesting time because I don't think that the underlying tensions that caused, for example, the 2017 blockade in the first place, are going to be fully dealt with, but they're going to be pushed under the rug in order to make way for some sort of common agreement on these more broader security concerns and stability concerns that the Gulf States have.

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KODUVAYUR: And at the end of the day, of course, I'd also go back to a great power competition. But that's, to me –Like Aykan has been saying, what happens in Afghanistan does not stay in Afghanistan, and great power competition is the most poignant and terrifying, to me, example of that. The U.S. is going to be in a really hard place in order to advocate for itself vis-à-vis Russia or China with the Gulf States. It's going to find that any sort of stay with us, not them conversations are going to be even harder to have now post withdrawal than before. So I would leave it at that.

ZARIF: Thank you, Varsha. Aykan?

ERDEMIR: So, for Turkey, there are two wild cards to watch. The first one has to do with Afghan refugee flows to Turkey. Turkey already has nearly 4 million Syrian refugees, which the Turkish electorate blame Erdogan for, for his involvement in the Syrian Civil War, and already, according to official figures, there are over 100,000 Afghans in Turkey. But unofficially, the number is close to 400,000. And if there is a massive wave of Afghan refugees into Turkey, this could further undercut Erdogan's support as we see an anti-refugee sentiment across the Turkish political spectrum. So ultimately, Ankara's involvement in Afghanistan and siding with the Taliban could backfire. The second wild card to watch is, following up on Farahnaz's warning about international terrorists, these really violent extremists in Afghanistan, if we begin to see attacks against Turkish technicians working with the Taliban to keep the airport open as well as Turkey's private security and plain clothes security, which actually are Turkey's Special Forces, become a target, that would also be a major risk for Erdogan. Because again, the Turkish public would see this as yet another one of Erdogan's attempts to pursue wins through political Islam that backfired.

We have seen similar backfiring with Syria, when some of the jihadists that Ankara tried to use against the Assad regime then turned back and attacked Turkish targets, both within Turkey and within Syria. So I would argue that the Turkish people have very little patience for Erdogan's adventurism with Islamism, and Afghanistan could simply be the perfect example of a blowback, either in the form of refugee flows or in the form of radical jihadist attacks.

ZARIF: Thank you, Aykan. And with that, I think we've given the audience a good guide for what to watch in the period ahead. Aykan, Farahnaz, Varsha, let me thank the three of you for your tremendous and clear insights on what are undoubtedly complex issues. I know I learned a lot. And thanks to our audience for taking in the conversation.

For more information on FDD and the latest analysis from its Center on Military and Political power and its Turkey program, we encourage you to visit fdd.org. We hope to see you all again soon. Thank you.