

**SECTION-6:
AJIA DIALOGUE**

Asian Journal of International Affairs (AJIA)

(A Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal and Indexed in NepJOL)

ISSN : 2822-1958

Volume 1, Special Issue, December 2021

<https://ksl.edu.np/subcenter/asian-journal-of-international-affairs>

Published by

Kathmandu School of Law

Suryabinayak-4, Dadhikot, Bhaktapur, Bagmati, Nepal

Email: ajia.journal@gmail.com, ajia@ksl.edu.np URL: <https://ksl.edu.np/>

AJIA Dialogue

**Theme : Geopolitical Turbulence in South Asian
Politics: What Nepal can learn from Afghanistan Crisis?**

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AJIA: Please assess the geopolitics of South Asia and Nepal with respect to global power interplay. Outline a few factors that make South Asia a significant geopolitical landscape?

Dr. Dhananjay Tripathi: Nepal is a significant South Asian state and is likely to be influenced by the changing geopolitics in the region and world. Both India and China are equally interested in Nepal. While this could be an advantage, it will also bring new challenges for Nepal. The foremost is how Nepal will position itself. The Sino-India competition in the region and beyond will impact Nepal's foreign policy in the short and long terms. Nepal is also well situated to focus on South Asia's regional politics, as it had done in the past.

Dr. Khaganath Adhikari: Geopolitically, South Asia is a very important region. It has both great strengths and potential as well as challenges. South Asia has its distinct civilization, has long history and culture, is made up of mostly democratic and open societies, is a huge market with about 1.8 billion people, and has two countries with nuclear power. On the other hand, this region is also marked by poverty and under-development, state rivalries, border disputes, and state-centric policies lacking common aspirations. As a subcontinent, this region has great potential to emerge as an active player on the global stage.

Nepal, too, has its own distinct identity. Nepal is a country that has been able to maintain its independence throughout its history. In the recent past, Nepal has made some visible achievements such as the resolution of the decade-long Maoist conflict through peaceful dialogue, transformation from a Monarchy into a republican setup, promulgation of the Constitution through Constituent Assembly, etc. Its location between China and India has made it very important geopolitically. Moreover, Nepal's international identity as a non-aligned country with an aspiration to maintain good and friendly relations with all countries in the world has added to its international recognition and acceptance. Nepal is a widely accepted country in the region. This is one of the reasons why the SAARC Secretariat is located in Kathmandu. Nepal carries great potential to emerge as an active and influential player in the SAARC region.

Prof. Dr. Nasreen Ghufuran: The geopolitical scenario has undergone a significant change in South Asia with the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban. It has initiated global and regional power play in the region. The world audience is by and large skeptical of the new power-holders due to their ideological position. The politically unstable South Asian region is witnessing complicated challenges- the Covid 19 pandemic; deteriorating economic conditions and the decades of war by the US and its allies, ending in the troops' withdrawal and Taliban political triumph. New alliances are being formed in the region to maintain the balance of power. Critical geopolitics, which focuses on the role of ideology, is characterizing the new political landscape. China has entered the region with its vision of Tianxia which stands in contrast to the Western international system. Taliban with their Islamic ideology want to enforce an Islamic system while the BJP led government has adopted a Hindu nationalist ideology.

AJIA: What is happening in Afghanistan and how situations will unfold, especially after the US pullout, will have a larger impact on the ties between India and Pakistan as well as India and China? How do you perceive the relationship between the three nuclear powers after the Afghan unfolding? A possible spillover effect in Nepal cannot be ignored. Is there any implication of Afghan unfolding in Nepal's foreign policy?

Dr. Dhananjay Tripathi: I think for these countries and other international players, the one thing that is of paramount relevance is ensuring political stability in Afghanistan. There may not be an apparent convergence of policies between India and China regarding Afghanistan, but both will prefer a peaceful Afghanistan. Moreover, both India and China will like to see that the Taliban shall not support any terror group that may create trouble for them. In this China will use its political-economic influence on Pakistan to negotiate with the Taliban. For India, things may not be easy. Still, with the government indicating opening some diplomatic channels with the Taliban in the future, the Indian position in Afghanistan may change. At least India is now sending humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and this is a positive move. For Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Taliban are critical for various reasons, but let us not forget that post-9/11 things have changed, and this is a new kind of Taliban. Pakistan will undoubtedly try to take strategic advantage; the point is how far the Taliban will allow itself to be used and how far the international community will ignore it. I don't see any immediate impact on Nepal, but any proliferation of terrorism in South Asia will not leave Nepal untouched. It will create a security challenge in Nepal.

Dr. Khaganath Adhikari: China, India, and Pakistan are active players in Afghanistan, but with divergent interests. China's interests include development in Afghanistan, natural resources there, as a gateway to Central Asia, and regional engagement. India is concerned with Afghanistan's development, access to Central Asia, regional influence, and countering Pakistan's influence there. Pakistan has multiple interests in Afghanistan: Afghanistan is its bordering neighbor; both of them share religion and culture; they have extensive interactions and exchanges including trade, investment, and peoples; and both are concerned with their security, both internal and external. Because of these realities, Afghanistan carries special significance for all of the three nuclear states. Nepal has limited commercial interactions and engagements in Afghanistan. Its cooperation in trade, investment, tourism, etc. is minimal, but hundreds of Nepali citizens still work there. Nepal and Afghanistan have worked together in SAARC. Both are landlocked states and have been exchanging cooperation in international forums. They have other social engagements as well. Both have competed in sports, and have respect for each other's social and cultural traditions. On the other hand, Nepal has a long-held policy of respect for sovereignty, independence, and non-interference in another country's internal affairs. It wants peace and development in Afghanistan and the prosperity of the Afghani people. It expects Afghanistan to have a widely acceptable and representative government with respect for people's will, democratic norms, and human rights, including the rights of women. Nepal should be careful to ensure that refugees from Afghanistan do not flock into Nepal and that the spill-over effects do not create any law and order problems in the country.

Prof. Dr. Li Tao: The development of the situation in Afghanistan mainly depends on Afghanistan itself, that is, whether the Afghan Taliban regime can stand firm, whether it can handle various conflicts such as nationality, religion, and regional forces in the country, and whether Afghanistan can achieve stability and development.

The United States' withdrawal not only affects Afghanistan and its neighboring countries but also has a non-negligible impact on South Asia, Central Asia, and even East Asia. Of course, it has a great impact on the relations between India and Pakistan, as well as India and China. In the early days of the U.S. withdrawal, India still followed the policy of being friendly to the former Afghan government and stigmatizing the Taliban, which made India's policy towards Afghanistan vague and criticized. India's Afghan policy changed only after the Indian government invited Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to have the Afghanistan Regional Security Dialogue in New Delhi... A stable, independent, and developing Afghanistan will benefit India, Pakistan, and China.

The biggest impact of the "Afghanistan issue" on Nepal is that as the United States withdraws from Afghanistan, its strategic focus in Asia shifts eastward, and Nepal has returned to be an outpost for the United States to contain China; the game between major powers will intensify in Nepal, and the United States is currently stepping up in Nepal. Promoting MCC is one of the manifestations of its consequences.

Prof. Dr. Nasreen Ghufra: The pullout of US forces saw an immediate collapse of President Ashraf Ghani's government and the security forces landing the country into chaos. The emergence of the Taliban on the political scene made headlines worldwide. The neighboring countries are adjusting to the unfolding geostrategic reality in Afghanistan. The fear of terrorism and refugees influxes have made all four countries cautious, though the two South Asian arch-rivals see the Taliban triumph as a zero-sum game, thereby attracting new power alignments. The US is backing India through its 'Pivot Asia' policy while China has become an active player in the region by keeping dialogue open with the new political force in Afghanistan and supporting Pakistan to implement its gigantic CPEC project. A subtle struggle has ensued amongst the three nuclear powers to influence the developments in Afghanistan. Pakistan and India oppose each other while China seems better positioned to take advantage of the situation.

Afghanistan does not directly impact Nepal's foreign policy but their geographical landlocked position binds them in an unstated struggle to reduce their dependency on their coastal neighbors. The perceived refugee influx into the country is minimal.

AJIA: Many reports and studies have shown Afghanistan as a source of terrorism in the region and beyond. How do you see the impact of the current domestic power transition in regional and global terrorism?

Dr. Dhananjay Tripathi: None other than the United States of America permitted the political transition in Afghanistan. The Taliban has given certain assurances to the USA and the rest of the world. The most important is that it will not allow Afghan territory to be used for terror activities. Let us not forget that running a government

has its own set of complexities. The biggest concern for the Taliban is to deal with the developing humanitarian crisis and the revival of the Afghan economy. None of it is possible without the help of the international community. I hope the Taliban will govern responsibly for the benefit of the Afghan people.

Dr. Khaganath Adhikari: Afghanistan has had a bad reputation of terrorism-breeding ground in the past. The presence of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Afghanistan being the haven for international terrorists was a matter of global concern. After the Taleban dissociated itself from the Al Qaeda network, there are rooms for optimism. We have to accept the peculiar identity of Afghanistan as traditionally an Islamic state. We now hope that the new Taleban regime would respect people's will, and resort to more moderate approach towards Afghan society. Afghan people need international support, so does the Afghan regime. The SAARC countries should encourage the present regime to take a moderate approach and try to establish an acceptable and representative political setup. We have to wait and see how things develop in Afghanistan. There are chances that Afghanistan would be a normal country, with no links with international terrorist networks. The international recognition of the present regime will largely depend on the present rulers' approach to the Afghani people and society. Internationally, it has to demonstrate that it has no link with terrorist networks and takes up corresponding steps at home as well.

Prof. Dr. Li Tao: Both terrorism and terrorist forces have profound socio-political backgrounds. If Afghanistan can develop independently and no longer be interfered with by external forces, and its people can live and work in peace and contentment, will terrorist forces continue to exist in Afghanistan for a long time?

Prof. Dr. Nasreen Ghufra: The years of Taliban insurgency and the presence of foreign militants/terrorists working along with the Taliban to wage the jihad against international forces in Afghanistan, has contributed to its negative image of being the global source of terrorism. A 2021 UN report has stated the presence of almost 8,000-10,000 foreign terrorists residing in Afghanistan, which makes it difficult to cast off the mantle of being a haven of terrorists. After their takeover, they have publicly pronounced pledges not to allow their soil to be used by terrorists against other countries. However, these commitments have not been taken at their face value, and great unease prevails amongst members of the international community, given the past of the Taliban and the 9/11 incident. Taliban's major challenge is international recognition and legitimacy, which will enable their country to pursue normal ties. Some limited engagement is going on with the leadership, but no country has so far recognized the new government, making the international environment difficult for it to maneuver diplomatically and politically.

AJIA: How do you assess the role of International Organizations like the UN Security Council, Humanitarian Organizations, etc in managing refugees' movement towards Nepal and other countries from the Afghan conflict? What should be their role in the future?

Dr. Dhananjay Tripathi: International organizations have responsibilities and let us hope they will actively play their role.

Dr. Khaganath Adhikari: Afghanistan is passing through a very difficult situation at the moment. The regime lacks international recognition as well as domestic legitimacy. The rulers seem to rule by fear. It has resulted in an out flux of refugees to countries near and far alike. The people need humanitarian support. International organizations have to play a very crucial role in such times, especially at a time when the 'government' has not received international recognition and support. Humanitarian assistance including food, clothing, and medicines are of utmost necessity. Different countries, including Nepal, are extending a helping hand to the friendly people of Afghanistan. International organizations have to mobilize international help and support as well as coordinate the assistance received from various quarters. At the same time, these organizations have to render active support in the management of Afghan refugees in many countries. The respective countries have also been doing a great job of helping the refugees.

Prof. Dr. Li Tao: "External factors work through internal factors." Although international organizations such as the UN Security Council and humanitarian organizations play a major role in Afghanistan, especially the current humanitarian relief related to Afghanistan is indispensable, it all depends on whether Afghanistan itself can establish a strong government.

Prof. Dr. Nasreen Ghufra: The UN is addressing the growing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan but it does not recognize the new leadership. It is pressurizing it to form an inclusive government and provide civil and political amenities to its people. The international community has started humanitarian assistance and relief supplies to the vulnerable Afghans despite their reluctance to deal with the new leadership. The UN is supporting the international agencies, particularly the WFP, to continue food supplies to ward off a humanitarian catastrophe.

The transition has put many expatriates in peril. Nepali migrants, mostly working in the green zone of Afghanistan were largely evacuated by Nepal with the help of India, the US, and Canada as they do not have a diplomatic mission in Kabul. The refugee inflows from Afghanistan are not huge because the two countries do not share a common border. Therefore, the fallout of the change is negligible despite the apprehensions of many security analysts. The illegal refugee movement is not as easy as in the case of Pakistan, because they have to cross into India to enter Nepal. Moreover, they have to bribe the middlemen to reach an uncertain destination for refuge.

AJIA: Do you see the emergence of bloc politics with Russia, China, and Iran trying to gain a geostrategic position vis-à-vis the US in Afghanistan? Or can the Afghanistan crisis emerge as a source of cooperation between powers?

Dr. Dhananjay Tripathi: The return of the Taliban and the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan have meaning. It will be perceived as the US failure in Afghanistan. In other words, it will also be considered as a kind of symbolic gain for Russia, China, and Iran. Still, it will be wrong to assess that any strategic bloc will emerge in or around the Afghan issue. Being immediate neighbors, peaceful and stable Afghanistan will be preferred by China, Russia, and Iran.

Dr. Khaganath Adhikari: Afghanistan has historically been a playground of international powers. The Great Game is an example of how different powers are getting interested and concerned with Afghanistan. Even in the modern days, great powers' interest has not receded from Afghanistan. Global power centers and powerful actors will try to establish and/or deepen their roots of influence in Afghanistan. Different countries have different interests in Afghanistan. Some have a historical legacy; some have religious/cultural commonalities; some have regional concerns and some others have their particular interests and concerns in Afghanistan. The power centers will try to strengthen their position there. Whatever the power struggle to get a foothold in Afghanistan, it seems rather unlikely that the Afghanistan crisis would emerge as a source of cooperation among world powers.

Prof. Dr. Li Tao: In fact, the geo-strategic goals of Russia, China, and Iran in Afghanistan are completely different from those of the United States, and the three countries have different concerns about Afghanistan's interests. More importantly, the factors affecting the Afghanistan issue do not only depend on these three countries but are more diverse. For example, Pakistan's role cannot be ignored, and India will gradually regain and increase its influence in Afghanistan.

Of course, the Afghanistan crisis can become a source of cooperation among major powers, and this is also the most anticipated result. As the times change, Afghanistan's geo-strategic value is changing. The past "cemetery of the empire " may become a window to three sub-regions (Central Asia, South Asia, and East Asia) and a bridge between Asian countries. In any case, the U.S. withdrawal reduces the intervention of external forces in Afghanistan, and the intervention of external forces is the root cause of Afghanistan's long-term disputes and backwardness. Therefore, Afghanistan can change from a strategic chessboard to a bridge between three sub-regions and two continents (Asia and Europe). With the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan, the westward development of China's "Belt and Road Initiative", the advancement of Russia's Eurasian Economic Union development strategy, the development of India to the west... the strengthening of infrastructure in Asia and Europe, the realization of closer connectivity between Europe and Asia, the real arrival of the "Asian Century" is just around the corner.

Prof. Dr. Nasreen Ghufra: All the countries are engaging with each other at varying levels and currently one does not see bloc politics emerging to counter the US. On the contrary, all three major powers—Russia, China, the US along with Pakistan are coordinating in the Troika—Plus group to address the crisis in Afghanistan. While China and Russia saw the American exit from Afghanistan with some pleasure, however, all are concerned about the future of the country as none wants to see it becoming once again a sanctuary for terrorists and militants. What Nepal can learn from the Afghan crisis? Nepal found it challenging to evacuate its citizens working in Afghanistan during the crisis. Even if it does not have major stakes in the country it needs to have a diplomatic mission, which caters to its interests in the host country. A second lesson is that it needs to keep its focus on economic and political stability; otherwise, the gains of an insurgent victory will be reversed. Thirdly, maintain good neighborly relations with all, otherwise, tensions and external influence will increase.