

International

Warlords, jihadists, Islamic republics: The key players in Afghanistan

Fighting intensifies for control of war-weary country

KABUL: With US and international troops all but gone from Afghanistan and the Taliban making rapid gains, a number of players are positioning themselves for the next phase of the conflict. Here is a rundown of what these powers, from the government in Kabul and local militias to regional nations, seek to gain or lose in Afghanistan as fighting intensifies for control of the war-weary country:

Afghan security forces

Thinly stretched with supply lines strained, the Afghan security forces have come under immense pressure in the final stages of the US military withdrawal. Afghan troops are facing blistering attacks from the Taliban, including onslaughts on positions in the militants' southern strongholds and a lightning offensive in the north.

But government forces continue to maintain control over the country's cities, with most territorial losses in the sparsely populated rural areas. "Many of the districts that have fallen were low-hanging fruit - remotely positioned and difficult to resupply or reinforce, with little strategic military value," said Andrew Watkins, a senior analyst on Afghanistan for the International Crisis Group.

The Taliban

Never has the jihadist movement appeared so strong since being toppled by US forces two decades ago. The group has executed a successful string of offensives across Afghanistan, capturing fully or partially about 100 out of more than 400 districts at a dizzying rate since early May. The international community blames the Taliban for stalling landmark peace talks with the Afghan government in Doha. Instead of a political settlement,

the insurgents seem focused on positioning their troops for a military takeover. The Taliban appear to be united, operating under an effective chain of command, despite perennial rumors of splits among the group's leadership.

President Ashraf Ghani

Known for his academic disposition and infamous temper, Ghani is said to be increasingly isolated at a moment when he is in desperate need of allies. He has remained defiant despite mounting pressure on his government in the face of territorial losses. "He was the creature, the man of the Americans, but he is now considered to be uncontrollable and an obstacle to the peace process," a Western diplomat in Kabul said.

A recent shakeup of the country's defense and interior ministries pulled his supporters closer, and may prove pivotal to his future political survival along with continued backing from Washington. However, many of his team, who have spent years living abroad, are accused of being out of touch with the complex fabric of Afghan society. Still, a recent trip to the White House saw Ghani secure promises of billions of dollars in security and humanitarian assistance.

The warlords

Afghanistan's warlords may be waiting to make a comeback as the country's security forces increasingly look to militia groups to bolster their depleted ranks. As the Taliban battered their way through the north in June, a call for national mobilization was sounded, with thousands taking up arms in scenes reminiscent of the 1990s civil war. Militia leaders may attempt to leverage their past contacts with



TALOQAN, Afghanistan: Afghan militia forces stand guard at an outpost as they patrol against the Taliban fighters in the Tange Farkhar area of Taloqan in northern Takhar province yesterday. —AFP

foreign intelligence agencies to secure cash and weapons in exchange for on the ground reconnaissance. New strongmen among Afghanistan's ethnic minorities have also begun arming and training recruits, which may further inflame the country's deep ethnic and sectarian divisions.

Regional countries

A new front in the region's great game is opening with neighboring countries looking to influence momentum on the ground in Afghanistan while also courting the conflict's likely winners. Pakistan has backed the Taliban for decades and may finally be able to cash its chips in a future government the

insurgents either participate in or lead. Islamabad's major goal will focus on preventing archival India from establishing any influence and posing a threat to its western border.

Iran is also hedging its bets. After nearly going to war with the Taliban in the 1990s, Tehran has engineered considerable clout over at least one major faction within the group. It also retains links with warlords who fought the Taliban during the country's civil war. "Some in Iran and Pakistan might certainly wish their favorites to get a bigger portion of the pie," said Asad Durrani, the former head of Pakistan's formidable spy agency. "I doubt if the Taliban will let them have their way." —AFP

Afghan forces vow to retake districts lost to Taliban

KABUL, Afghanistan: Afghan authorities yesterday vowed to retake all the districts lost to the Taliban and deployed hundreds of commandos to counter the insurgents' blistering offensive in the north, a day after more than 1,000 government troops fled into neighboring Tajikistan. Fighting has raged across several provinces, but the insurgents have primarily focused on a devastating campaign across the northern countryside, seizing dozens of districts in the past two months. Last week, all US and NATO forces left Bagram Air Base near Kabul—the command center for anti-Taliban operations—effectively wrapping up their exit after 20 years of military involvement that began in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

"There is war, there is pressure. Sometimes things are working our way. Sometimes they don't, but we will continue to defend the Afghan people," National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib told reporters. "We have plans to retake the districts," he added. Troops and pro-government militiamen were deployed in the northern provinces of Takhar and Badakhshan where the Taliban has captured large swathes of territory at lightning speed, often with little resistance.

Afghan defense officials have said

they intend to focus on securing major cities, roads and border towns in the face of the Taliban onslaught, launched as US and NATO troops pressed ahead with their final withdrawal in early May. The militants' rapid gains have spurred fears that Afghan forces are facing a spiraling crisis, particularly now that vital US air support has been massively curtailed by the handover of Bagram Air Base.

Afghan forces flee

Mohib acknowledged that the Afghan air force was stretched and largely unable to support bases that were in remote districts. But he said the air force was now being reorganized and would offer the needed backup to troops on the ground. "We had some glitches as a result of the (US) retrograde... (that put) additional pressure on the Afghan air force, he said. "Next week we will receive seven Black Hawks" as part of Washington's continued support of Afghan forces, he said.

President Ashraf Ghani blamed the Taliban for all the "bloodshed and destruction", adding that his government will not "surrender" to the militants, a palace statement said. On Monday, more than 1,000 Afghan troops fled into Tajikistan, forcing the neighboring country to bolster the



BAGRAM, Afghanistan: An Afghan National Army (ANA) soldier take a selfie with his mobile phone inside the Bagram US air base after all US and NATO troops left, some 70 Kms north of Kabul. —AFP

frontier with its own soldiers. Several hundred Afghan troops had already crossed into Tajikistan in recent weeks, in the face of an advancing Taliban. Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov has ordered "the mobilization of 20,000 reserve troops to further strengthen the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan", a statement from the presidency said late on Monday.

"We had to abandon our base because there was no coordination or interest among our commanders to counter the attack," said Mohammad Musa, a soldier who had fled to Tajikistan after his base in Kunduz province fell to the Taliban last week. The fighting in the north has also

forced Moscow to close its consulate in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, the capital of Balkh province and one of Afghanistan's largest urban centres near the border with Uzbekistan.

"The situation is changing rapidly. The Afghan forces, as they say, have abandoned too many districts. This logically creates nervousness," Moscow's envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov told the state-run TASS news agency on Monday. Mohib said the soldiers who fled were returning and rejoining the security forces. "They may have abandoned their posts because they ran out of ammunition or they ran out of supplies, but by no means has anyone defected to the Taliban," he said. —AFP

Afghan troops struggle to replace Americans at key base

BAGRAM, Afghanistan: After American troops withdrew without notifying them, Afghan soldiers guarding the Bagram Air Base have been left with thousands of Taliban prisoners and a certainty that the enemy will attack. The sprawling military complex was at one point home to tens of thousands of US and allied soldiers, and one of the most important sites to prosecute the two-decade war in Afghanistan. But the last of the American soldiers quietly left the base last week, effectively completing their withdrawal from Afghanistan and leaving a massive security vacuum that the Afghan military will struggle to fill.

The new commander of the Bagram base, General Mirasaddullah Kohistani, on Monday spoke candidly about the challenges ahead, as reporters were given a tour of the largely deserted base. "You know, if we compare ourselves with the Americans, it's a big difference," Kohistani said, admitting his forces could not be as "powerful" as the Americans. "But according to our capabilities... we are trying to do the best and as much as possible secure and serve all the people."

The lack of a clear handover or transition plan appears to have made the task even more challenging. Kohistani said he only knew of the foreign forces' exit after they had left. "We did not know of their timeline for departure. They did not tell us when they left." Just 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Kabul, the base is key to the security of the capital while also providing strategic cover to much of the country's rugged north where the Taliban have focused their recent offensives. —AFP



MUMBAI: People hold posters outside the church holding memorial mass for the Indian rights activist and Jesuit priest Father Stan Swamy, in Mumbai yesterday. —AFP

UN 'disturbed' by death in jail of Indian priest

GENEVA, Switzerland: The United Nations said yesterday it was deeply disturbed by the death in pre-trial detention of Father Stan Swamy, an 84-year-old Indian rights activist and Jesuit priest. Swamy, who was detained for nine months without trial under Indian anti-terror laws, died on Monday ahead of a bail hearing. The priest, who campaigned for marginalized tribal communities, was arrested last year for allegedly inciting violence between different Indian castes in 2018.

"We are deeply saddened and disturbed by the death of 84-year-old Father Stan Swamy," Liz Throssell, a spokeswoman for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told reporters

in Geneva. Swamy was denied bail despite suffering from Parkinson's disease and other ailments. He was admitted to hospital in May with coronavirus and suffered a cardiac arrest over the weekend. The priest had been detained under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), which effectively allows people to be held without trial indefinitely.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has made use of the law to have campaigners, journalists, students and others arrested, in what critics say is an attempt to silence dissent. "High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet and the UN's independent experts have repeatedly raised the cases of Father Stan and 15 other human rights defenders associated with the same events with the government of India over the past three years, and urged their release from pre-trial detention," said Throssell. "The high commissioner has also raised concerns over the use of the UAPA in relation to human rights defenders—a law Father Stan was challenging before Indian courts days before he died." —AFP

News in brief

6 kids arrested for 'bomb plot'

HONG KONG: Six secondary school children were among nine Hong Kongers arrested on terror charges for allegedly trying to manufacture a powerful explosive, police announced yesterday. Five males and four females aged between 15 and 39 were arrested Monday on suspicion of "conspiracy to use explosives for terrorist activities", police said. "The operation we conducted yesterday was against gangsters (who) tried to manufacture TATP explosive inside a home-made laboratory inside a hostel," senior superintendent Steve Li, from the city's new national security unit, told reporters. TATP is a high-powered explosive. Police said the nine people belonged to a pro-independence group that called itself "Returning Valiant". —AFP

Philippines retrieves black boxes

MANILA: Philippine security forces have retrieved the cockpit voice and flight data recorders of a military aircraft that crashed in a coconut grove and killed 53 people, a top commander said yesterday. The C-130 Hercules transport plane was carrying 96 people, mostly fresh army graduates, when it overshot the runway on Sunday while trying to land on Jolo island in the southern Sulu province. Witnesses and survivors told investigators the plane landed "hard" and then bounced twice before taking off again, said Lieutenant General Corleto Vinluan, chief of the Western Mindanao Command. "Then at the right side of the airport it hit a tree—that's the account of the injured," Vinluan told AFP. —AFP

Academic charged with spying

BERLIN: A German political scientist has been charged with spying for China by exploiting high-level official contacts made via his position as the head of a think tank, federal prosecutors said yesterday. The accused, identified only as Klaus L., is suspected of "regularly passing on information to Chinese intelligence ahead of or after state visits or multinational conferences" between 2010 and 2019. Klaus L. had been running a political think tank since 2001, gaining international importance due to his scientific reputation and networks he had built up over many years, the prosecutors said. He was approached by members of a Chinese intelligence service during a lecture tour to Shanghai in June 2010, they said. —AFP

Suu Kyi vaccinated

NAYPYIDAW: Ousted Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her personal staff have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 since being taken into military custody, her lawyer said Tuesday, as the country battles a spike in cases. Suu Kyi has been all but invisible since being detained by the military in February, with a handful of court appearances in a special court in Naypyidaw her only link to the outside world. Coronavirus infections are rising sharply in Myanmar, with authorities reporting almost three thousand cases Monday, up from around 100 per day in early June. The impoverished country of 54 million is rushing to secure more vaccines after receiving 1.5 million doses from India and 500,000 from China earlier this year. —AFP