



Fall of Panjshir: A Geopolitical Analysis

D. K. Shahi,

Associate Professor, DAV PG College, Dehradun, Uttarakhand

Abstract

The fall of Panjshir is a sequel to an emerging geopolitical crisis in Afghanistan and Central Asia. This research presents an analysis of the geopolitical configurations of Panjshir; its geophysical, geocultural (ethnic) and geopolitical characteristics and its other peculiarities.

Panjshir is a reminder of ethnic faults in the geopolitical space of Afghanistan. It is a region populated by Afghan Tajiks (the traditional rivals of Pashtun Taliban). Panjshir is also a reminder of the geography of resistance. The students of international relations should remember the past resistance of Panjshir valley. This valley was the birthplace of Tajik guerrilla commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, a historical symbol of resistance in the world.

Is it an end in itself or is it a new beginning? The fall of Panjshir after armed confrontation can be viewed as an 'emerging new geopolitical crisis'. It justifies the historical importance of Panjshir.

The fall of Panjshir has brought various assessments. There are many other unanswered questions. It seeks to answer; what is the importance of Panjshir and the ethnic faults passing through Panjshir? How will it affect the regional conflict and geopolitical (in)stability? Will it develop as a conflict region? If so, what will be the future geopolitics of the region? Will there be a reconfiguration of the geopolitics of Central Asia?

The present study scores on the geopolitical meaning of present resistance. It relies on the descriptive analysis of the fall of Panjshir and its future consequences.

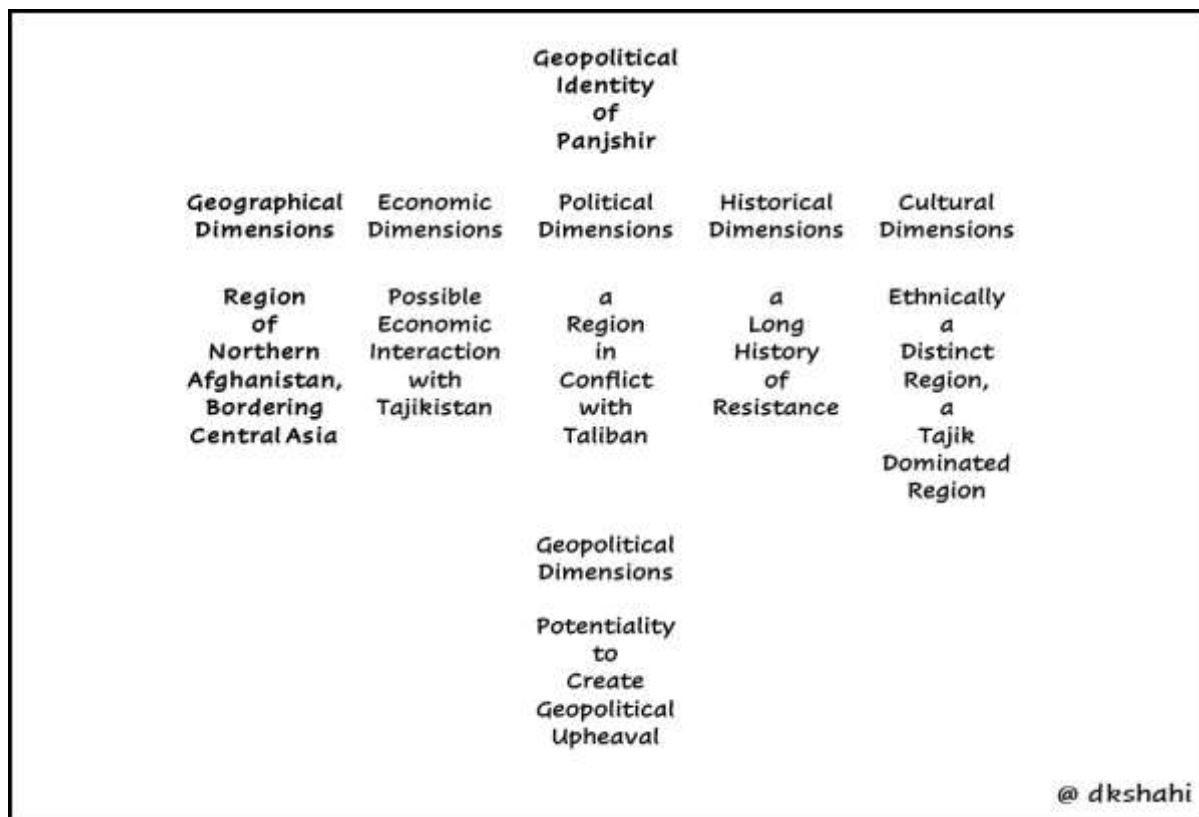
Key Words: Panjshir, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Tajiks, Geopolitics,

Geopolitical Configurations of Panjshir

Every politico-geo-conflict has its geographical and political roots. Some scholars believe that in geopolitics, politics is more important than geo (space), (Radenko Scekcic, 2016) but in some cases, geography is more important than politics. In fact, geopolitics is a struggle over the control of geographical entities (Flint, 2021).

Panjshir is a mountain valley in north eastern Afghanistan. The geopolitical perimeter of Panjshir extends to the whole of northern Afghanistan (although it is not a singular space). It is located close to the Afghanistan - Pakistan border. Central Asian countries of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are also located close to Panjshir. The location Panjshir gives it geographical and cultural continuity. Its physical geography and also ethnic or cultural geography give it an innately favourable ethnogeopolitical situation. Ethnically Panjshir is close to Tajikistan. Most of the inhabitants of this region belong to the Tajik community, while the majority of other Afghans (Taliban) are Pashtuns. The geographical and geocultural location of Panjshir valley also has enormous geopolitical significance. This is an area where different geopolitical forces have remained in conflict or competition for dominance.

The geography of Panjshir is important because of its role in providing opportunities for stability and risks of instability and the ethnicity of Panjshir is important due to its contiguity. The rise of the Taliban and the subsequent fall of Panjshir has created a new landscape. There are worries that the Afghan Tajiks crisis could fuel militancy over a larger area, beyond its geographical and political boundaries. There are also worries that the fall of Panjshir could creating geopolitical conflicts. The future geopolitics of Panjshir and the surrounding region will define the geopolitics of the region.



Geography, Geopolitics and Geostrategy

Geographically the Panjshir valley is situated within the Hindukush mountains. It has a unique geographical location. It is an intermountain valley situated between Panjshir Range to the north and the Kohistan Range to the south. It is a long strip of land encapsulated by high mountains. The valley has just one narrow route leading out to the south.

The landscape of Panjshir gives it a geostrategic location. The topography makes it a cul-de-sac that traps the intruders. Celebrated for its natural defences, Panjshir is commonly thought of a geographical fortress. The location and its physical configuration of Panjshir explains how the properties of a territory affect the (geo)politics. It also provides a preliminary explanation for the geostrategic success of Panjshir.

Panjshir valley has played a decisive role in the recent history of Afghanistan. Afghan Tajiks have faced bitter conflicts in the past but subjugation has never remained the character of tribes of Panjshir. Throughout its long history, Panjshir was an unrecognized de facto independent region. This region was never conquered by the Soviets. In the late '80s its geostrategic location protected it during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Therefore, it has remained the centre of resistance activities.

Because of its geographical location (situation), Panjshir contributed to regional stability and to the security of the northern region of Afghanistan. During those long years of conflict, it was absolutely the region of Northern Alliance and it retained the Panjshir and its surrounding area. This resistance continued for decades and the fighters of Panjshir earned a legendary reputation for resistance. Ahmad Shah Massoud, the 'Sher of Panjshir', was the undisputed commander of the Northern Alliance. It was early attempts to establish resistance organisations based on ethnic identity to fight against aggressors.

Panjshir did not even fall to the Taliban during the civil war of the 1990s. Panjshir Valley was also among the safest hideout during the time of American control. The resistant leaders retained control over the whole area from 2001 to 2021. Thus, Taliban has geopolitical antagonisms of the identity of Panjshir.

Panjshir has a glorious geopolitical history. Soviets came to Afghanistan in 1979. Soon after that Panjshir emerged as the hotbed of resistance. Within a few years of the Soviet intervention, Mujahideen fighters had established their presence across different provinces of Afghanistan. After that much of the area of Afghanistan was taken over by the Mujahideen. At that time Mujahideen fighters acquired support from US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. It allowed Massoud to hold resistance against Soviets. He thwarted nine attempts by Soviets to take on Panjshir Valley.

Massoud was the defence minister of the post-communist Mujahideen government (1992-96). In 1996 when the Taliban took control over Kabul, he retreated to Panjshir. Massoud along with the then President Burhanuddin Rabbani, formed the Northern Alliance. It was a broad coalition of anti-Taliban fighters. The Northern Alliance established its control in northern Afghanistan. It included the areas of Panjshir, Badakhshan and Takhar provinces of northern Afghanistan. In a recent biography, the veteran UK journalist Sandy Gall called Ahmad Shah Massoud the 'Afghan Napoleon' (Catherine Putz, 2021). He was assassinated in 2001 just two days before the 9/11. This attack was carried out by Al Qaeda operatives.

Even after 9/11 when US invaded Afghanistan, northern Afghanistan became the staging ground of resistance. The Alliance fought with Americans to topple the Taliban regime. Panjshir even claims a dominant political position in the recent past of Afghanistan. During the post-Taliban period, the significance of the region increased to a new height. Thus, it holds great meaning in the identity of Afghanistan.

The fall of Panjshir demands an evaluation of its geography, geopolitics and geostrategy.

- Panjshir and adjoining areas are situated in northern Afghanistan. The rugged and narrow Panjshir valley provides natural defence. Its geography can favourably influence the geopolitics of Afghanistan. To some analysts, this area is of great strategic relevance. It is true to Classical Geopolitics. By virtue of its geostrategic setting, Panjshir remained an unconquered area for over more than four decades and it played an important role in the recent politics of Afghanistan.
- It is a distinct region. The geopolitical influence of Panjshir is over northern Afghanistan and even beyond it. The ethnogeopolitical configuration of Panjshir is dominated by ethnic Tajiks. Tajiks are spread over Kabul, Kohistan, Herat and Badakhshan. Afghan Tajiks refer themselves as Panjshiris, Kabulis, Shomalis, Heratis etc. (Conrad Schetter, 2005). They are mainly concentrated in Shomali valley and Panjshir valley and other valleys in the Hindukush. They are opposed (highly resistant) to Pashtun Taliban. Resistance has great social support in this region.

But there were obvious shortcomings.

- Geographically Panjshir is a small area. Demographically it has an equally small population. It has insufficient resources. Besides, Panjshir has severe geopolitical vulnerabilities. It lacks multiple supply routes. The resistance forces fail to identify their strategic vulnerabilities.
- The fall of Panjshir indicates the failure of geostrategy. Leaders fail to assess and address geostrategic risks. Taliban consciously followed a distinct strategy. In the initial stage only, the supply lines to Panjshir were narrowed. After initial resistance, Panjshir came effectively under siege. It created the problem to get military supplies into the valley. In that condition sustaining resistance for long was not possible. It was a strategic setback to the resistance. Unsurprisingly, Taliban became successful in its strategy of containment.
- There were other challenges to the resistance. The resistance was poorly armed. It was deficient in men and material. Although there were reports that former officials, persons of Afghan security forces and local militia had joined the resistance. But Taliban was stronger this time. They were better equipped

than the resistance forces. Above all the international community (particularly its northern neighbours) abandoned the resistance movement. It proved the greatest geopolitical weakness of the resistance.

The success of geopolitics depends on the geostrategy. There was an obvious difference in the strategic efficiency of the two. This time, the geopolitical opportunities of Panjshir changed in front of the new geostrategy of Taliban. The new strategy of Taliban was to exploit the geographical vulnerabilities of Panjshir and Panjshir became a victim of its geopolitical location (situation).

Future of Conflict and Geopolitical (In)Stability

Nothing is static in geopolitics. Although Taliban claims the fall of resistance but everything is not over in Panjshir. There are reports of clashes between the Taliban and the National Resistance Front (NRF). The resistance forces in Panjshir are trying to mount challenge on Taliban. Ahmed Masood (the political hire of Ahmad Shah Massoud) has vowed to save the valley from the Mujahidin. He has promised that he will never stop his resistance for 'God, Justice and Freedom'. In a Facebook post, Ahmed Masood said, 'Defeat is only when you give up fighting for your legitimate rights.' Panjshir, Kapisa, Parwan, Badakhshan, Balkh and Baghlan provinces have major support for the NRF. The Resistance Front expects more people to join the organization to fight the Taliban regime. NRF claims that their cause is both just and necessary. Afghan Tajiks will never give up to stand up for their legitimate rights. It is also expected that the resistance forces will get support from both inside and outside.

Geopolitics explains the relationship between geography and politics. In this process, geography defines constraints and opportunities for geopolitics; thus, it is not only geographic determinism, it is also possibilities. The fall of Panjshir is not only a political crisis but an ethnogeopolitical crisis as it has both ethnic and political roots. The ethnic differences propitiate frictions. It is the breeding ground for civil conflicts. It is typical in the history of Afghanistan. It should not be overlooked at any moment. (Nargis Kassenova, 2014). Thus, it has geopolitical and geocultural ramifications. Being rooted in ethnic and geographical (territorial) issues is the most distinctive characteristic of this crisis. It has the potential to cause regional (political) instability.

The present resistance in Panjshir is mobilised behind Ahmad Massoud. He is son of the charismatic leader Ahmad Shah Massoud. The situation is the same. The only change now is that Ahmad Shah Massoud is replaced by his son Ahmad Massoud. Once again Taliban is back and today, Ahmad Massoud is fighting to save the legacy of Panjshir (Tribune, 2022). Earlier on the leaders of the resistance tried to negotiate with Taliban to establish an 'inclusive government' which was denied by the former. But still, there are many opportunities for resistance. The future possibility of any 'inclusive government' under Taliban is beyond expectation. Thus, one thing is clear that it is not going to be peaceful and democratic. It is even unlikely, that the mere threat could result in political and economic stability. There will be a strong feeling of alienation among non-Pashtuns. Consequently, it will generate support for the depleted resistance movement.

It would be premature to draw any conclusions from the fall of Panjshir. No one is certain that the fall of Panjshir will lead to a lasting peace or violent resurgence after a temporary calm. Afghan Tajiks have a strong culture of resistance. The aggressive brutality is a usual trait of Taliban. The political and economic discrimination against Tajiks will also diminish the chances for peace. If the Taliban misbehave with civilians in Panjshir province, it could be a reason for severe protest from the Afghan Tajiks. If Taliban goes for political violence, it will be detrimental to peace, security and stability of the region. In that case, Afghanistan is going to witness ethnic rivalries. Thereafter sustaining peace in the northern region will be a real challenge for Taliban. The existing research has found that ethnic conflicts never die. Although it remains dormant for a longer period. If the conflicts get aggregated it will have a larger repercussion.

The collapse of the Afghan military and government is a disaster for the cause of peace and freedom for the people of Afghanistan. The long-term implications of recent crisis will play out in the coming years and decades, with major implications not only for the people Afghanistan, but also for its region (Abraham Denmark, 2021). Although there is a decline in the intensity of conflict but Panjshiries are in control of

important (strategic) places. There is all possibility that the armed conflict will not decline in near future. It will get intertwined with ethnic conflict. Thus, it will further destabilize an already fragile region.

Geopolitical Determinants of Instability

After the fall of Kabul when Saleh and Massoud (Jr.) Started resistance against the Taliban it was an isolated Panjshir. They were on their own. They neither had any direct access to border areas nor any direct military assistance from other countries such as Tajikistan, Iran or Russia. Fall of Panjshir was a failure of geostrategy. But even after initial loss, there is no loss to the geopolitical and geostrategic significance of Panjshir. In the aftermath of the fall of Panjshir the geopolitics is moving in new directions. The ramifications of the Rise of Taliban will be different than the situation in '90s. At this date, it is difficult to predict the future geopolitical contours of the Afghanistan and Central Asia. If the Afghan Tajiks continue to sustain the resistance it will result in a regional conflict, or else it will be unchallenged Taliban.

The Taliban were never history in Afghanistan, they have now returned to be a part of its present, and they will seek to project their narrowly circumscribed, medieval vision of Islam even beyond the borders of the country they now control (Nirupama Rao, 2021). Taliban is moving on its concept of an emirate driven by Sharia. It will make a rollback of all liberties. This may not be popular among urban nationals. There will be organised movements to check an Islamic fundamentalist regime. There was a display of collective defiance of Taliban in Jalalabad. Besides incidents of protests against Taliban are reported from different cities. It can only help unite the resistance movement. The eruption of a potential civil war would create an opportunity for the resistance to present itself as a better alternative.

The unfolding situation in Afghanistan marks a human tragedy, and sadly, it will get worse. As we think through the strategic and geopolitical implications of a Taliban takeover, we must never lose sight of the human costs for Afghanistan; the lives lost, the freedoms forfeited, the dreams destroyed (Robert Hathaway, 2021). Episodes of unrest are reported from different areas. The economic crisis will make the narrative of ethnic discontent more acute. The political manipulation of ethnicity is not alien in the region. Any deterioration of the ethnopolitical situation in Afghanistan and in particular in northern frontier areas will contribute to ethnic conflict. It may escalate into a regional conflict with great geopolitical implications. Needless to say, all of these factors may create a new geopolitical landscape fraught with geopolitical uncertainty.

In the new geopolitical reality, there are possibilities of enlargement of cooperation between different resistance organisations. There are reports that Ahmad Masoud was in Iran to meet Hazara leader Ismail Khan (currently in exile there) as part of attempts to strengthen the Afghan opposition. Ismail Khan has fought against Taliban and is now at Mashhad in Iran. There is peace, but is it sustainable? If the future resistance gains wider regional support, the peace is less likely to exist.

The 'sustainable peace' is eluding Afghanistan over centuries (Nalin Kumar Mohapatra, 2020). Afghanistan is likely to become geopolitical quagmire; why? because governing Afghanistan, a deeply divided society ravaged by decades of conflict, is much more difficult than winning an asymmetrical war. The Taliban may have announced an interim government, but nobody has any doubt that the new rulers of Kabul have little intention of forming an inclusive government that represents all major ethnicities in Afghanistan (Vinay Kaura, 2021).

For now, one scenario is expected based on consequential possibilities; establishment of Taliban led Islamic Emirate and the deja-vu of multiple rivalries and repetition of 1996 Afghan civil war. These possibilities will impact adversely the stability and security in the region, having global consequences (Aakriti Vinayak and Anushka Saraswat, 2021). There is no region not to believe Michael Kugelman, who is of the opinion that 'we may be hearing talk about a bloodless transfer of power and an end to a war that was raged for 40 years. But let us be clear; better days are not here. It is not just the fact that a notorious extremist organization will soon, once again, hold political power and not hesitate to use violence to impose order. It is also the fact that many

Afghans won not accept the Taliban. Eventually, new resistance movements will emerge to take it on. We are looking at the possibility of a new civil war.

A Taliban government will also provide more space to terror groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS that threaten Afghanistan and the region (Michael Kugelman, 2021). A Taliban takeover could well create space for al-Qaeda to operate, given the close and continuing partnership between them or Afghanistan could simply fall into a protracted civil war, comparable to those in Syria or Libya and that would fuel conflict amid extremist groups which thrive (Hal Brands, 2021). Afghans are rightly concerned that the 'bloodless' Taliban rise to power will not stay that way. Fighting between the Taliban and their political opponents or intra-Taliban conflict and clashes between militant groups will all contribute to a worsening security situation in the country. As the differences among the terrorist groups will surface, there is also the possibility of armed conflicts. Areas under Taliban rule, particularly rural districts, will likely see a return to pre 2001 brutality (Huma Yusuf, 2021). It will be a challenge for the stability and security of Afghanistan. All these factors will favour resistance movement.

The growth of the Islamic State of Khorasan and its challenge to the legitimacy of Taliban have already been manifested in several attacks since the withdrawal of American forces (Mehmed Ali, 2022). Islamic State of Khorasan claimed responsibility for the attack on Kabul airport that killed 13 U.S. service personnel and at least 170 Afghan civilians. This terrorist organisation has a sizable presence in Afghanistan. Although Taliban is fighting against the Islamic State. It is expected that the ISK will continue to launch attacks even as the Taliban attempts to eradicate them.

Conclusion

There is interdependence of stability and security in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The northern region is a location in the 'geostrategic frontier' of Central Asia. The stable and peaceful northern region of Afghanistan is important for the geosecurity of the region. The countries of Central Asia; Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan share a common border with Afghanistan. Now the countries of the region have to adjust to the new reality. Given the fragility of peace in Taliban led Afghanistan there is the possibility of a rise in terrorism in Afghanistan. The Central Asian countries will not prefer a terror factory in their backyard. That is why the Tajik President Emomali Rahmon also pushed for an inclusive government in Kabul. The inclusive policies by Taliban and pragmatic compromises by resistance groups can avoid the escalation of further conflict. There is a need for a 'regime of accommodation'. A truly democratic, pluralistic and stable Afghanistan can only prevent regional rivalries and the risk of terrorism (Muhammad Imran, 2020). The peace in Afghanistan depends on the emergence of an inclusive regime. Consequently, it is only Taliban who could prevent and resolve the conflict.

References

Aakriti Vinayak and Anushka Saraswat, 2021, Afghanistan's Uncertain Future and Its Implications for China-Pakistan Relations, <https://www.vifindia.org/print/9145>

Abraham Denmark, 2021, The Deteriorating Situation in Afghanistan, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/deteriorating-situation-afghanistan-expertise-wilson-center>

Catherine Putz, 2021, Ahmad Shah Massoud: An Afghan Napoleon, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/ahmad-shah-massoud-an-afghan-napoleon/>

Conrad Schetter, 2005, Ethnoscapes, National Territorialisation, and the Afghan War, Geopolitics , Volume, Issue 1 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040590907712>

Flint, 2021, Introduction to Geopolitics, Routledge, ISBN 9780367686758, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003138549>

Hal Brands, 2021, Biden's Afghan Pull out Is Risky Politics and Geopolitics, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-04-18/biden-s-afghan-pullout-is-risky-politics-and-geopolitics>

Huma Yusuf, 2021 The Deteriorating Situation in Afghanistan, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/deteriorating-situation-afghanistan-expertise-wilson-center>

Mehmed Ali, 2022 The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-islamic-state-threat-in-taliban-afghanistan-tracing-the-resurgence-of-islamic-state-khorasan/>

Michael Kugelman, 2021 Taliban Government in Afghanistan: Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service, R46955

Muhammad Imran el. at., 2020, Geopolitical Dynamics of Afghanistan and Concerns of Regional and Global Actors vis a vis Pakistan, Pakistan Social Sciences Review, Vol. 4, No. III, ISSN 26640422

Nalin Kumar Mohapatra, 2020, Afghanistan's 'Political Insecurity' and the Emerging Geopolitical Calculus in Eurasia, International Studies, Vol 57, Issue 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881720934336>

Nargis Kassenova, 2014, Relations Between Afghanistan and Central Asian States After 2014 Incentives, Constraints and Prospects, SIPRI, 2014

Nirupama Rao, 2021, The Deteriorating Situation in Afghanistan, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/deteriorating-situation-afghanistan-expertise-wilson-center>

Radenko Scekcic, 2016 Geopolitical Strategies and Modernity: Multipolar World of Nowadays, Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, Vol. 1, No. 3, UDC 327, eISSN 18579760

Robert Hathaway, 2021, The Deteriorating Situation in Afghanistan, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/deteriorating-situation-afghanistan-expertise-wilson-center>

Tribune, 2022, Ahmad Shah Massoud's prophetic words: For peace in Afghanistan, Pakistan must be kept away, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/ahmad-shah-massouds-prophetic-words-for-peace-in-afghanistan-pakistan-must-be-kept-away-309236>

Vinay Kaura, 2021, Afghanistan will be an important geopolitical test for Beijing, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/view-afghanistan-will-be-an-important-geopolitical-test-for-beijing/articleshow/86089520.cms>