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## IF AFGHANISTAN COLLAPSES...

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If Afghanistan collapses □ which it might □ its consequences will be felt far from its borders. Three of its immediate neighbours will be seriously affected. Pakistan and Iran will have to deal with the arrival of a political entity on their borders that will not be able to control and perhaps would seek to create trouble in their neighbouring countries. China has invested significant amounts of resources to exploit Afghanistan's large mineral wealth. It would also want to include the country in the land-based arteries of international commerce it is hoping to build in the near future. Work has already begun on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. A similar corridor is being constructed in Kazakhstan. The hope of linking the two by building a north-south system through Afghanistan will have to be postponed. India has also made large investments in the country; an agreement to upgrade the port at Chabahar was signed this summer by Afghanistan, India and Iran. The Indians are hoping to connect the port with a highway that will go through Iran to Afghanistan. A great deal hangs on stability in Afghanistan for its neighbours and near-neighbours.

The Afghan state, never very strong even at the best of times, has come under pressure from several directions. The Taliban have become active this fighting season, sensing that the withdrawal of the United States and its allies has created an opportunity it must avail while the Afghan military is still struggling to develop into a competent fighting force. Added to the increasing pressure exerted by the Taliban in the country is the arrival of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. ISIS is also seeing an opportunity to create a presence outside the Arab world. Adding to these two pressures is the inability of the country's political system to develop into a functioning democratic entity that can replace the use of violence as a way of expressing interests with political discourse. Then, there is the growing weakness of the economy, which does not have a domestic resource base that can be used for meeting the basic needs of the people.

The growing presence of ISIS in the country became apparent with the July 23 attack on a large group of Hazaras, a Shia-community based in and around the province of Bamian. The group had gathered to protest the government decision to bypass their area in building a power line that

would bring electricity from the power-surplus Central Asia to the power-deficit South Asia. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan- India project was one of the major connectivity projects that had been developed to knit together Central and South Asia. Protest leaders claimed systematic bias against Hazaras by the government. The Hazaras have only in the past decade tried to shake off a long history of oppression. The attack that killed at least 80 people and injured another 230 was not the first time the Shia community had been attacked by Sunni extremists. In 2011, a suicide bombing on Shia shrine killed 63 people. The Hazaras have also come under attack in Balochistan, which had a sizeable presence of the community.

Spokesmen for ISIS quickly claimed responsibility for the Kabul attack. If, indeed, carried out by this group, known as Daesh in Afghanistan, it would be the first major urban attack in the country by radical Sunnis and could signal their first deliberate effort to target the countrys Shia minority. According to one account, hundreds of Hazaras had reportedly fought alongside President Basharal Assads troops in Syria against Sunni groups including the Islamic State in recent years, making Hazaras a likely target for the extremist groups loyalists back in Afghanistan \*□□□□□ the late 1990s, when the Taliban regime held power in Kabul and most of the country, it banned observing Shia religious holidays in public.

ISIS seemed determined to stoke sectarian strife in the country. Shias make up about 10 per cent of the Afghan population with power bases in Kabul and the north-central province of Bamian. There are outside forces that would get involved in case this conflict grows. Iran, which took in huge numbers of refugees from Afghanistans wars, has sought increasing influence in post-war Afghan society. According to Mohammed Alizada, a Hazara member of the Afghan parliament, the Islamic State has two factions in Afghanistan, one made up of moderate former Taliban members and one more foreign-dominated and extreme group. If the latter grew stronger he didnt think the Afghan government would have the capacity to defend Shias against them without the international communitys help.

The international community, led by the United States, seemed inclined to lend a helping hand but without getting too involved in the conflict. This was the approach the Obama Administration had developed during his second term in office. Under the Obama Doctrine, nation-building was to be left to the nations themselves with only marginal help from the United States. In early July 2016, the president announced slowing the planned withdrawal of his countrys troops, leaving about 8,400 through the end of 2017. Many American experts believed that Afghan forces were not yet prepared to defeat the Taliban on their own and that the United States needed to reinforce its message of long-term commitment to the country. But the task of readying the Afghans to do the fighting was proving to be complicated and expensive and may not be sustainable under the current political environment in the United States.