

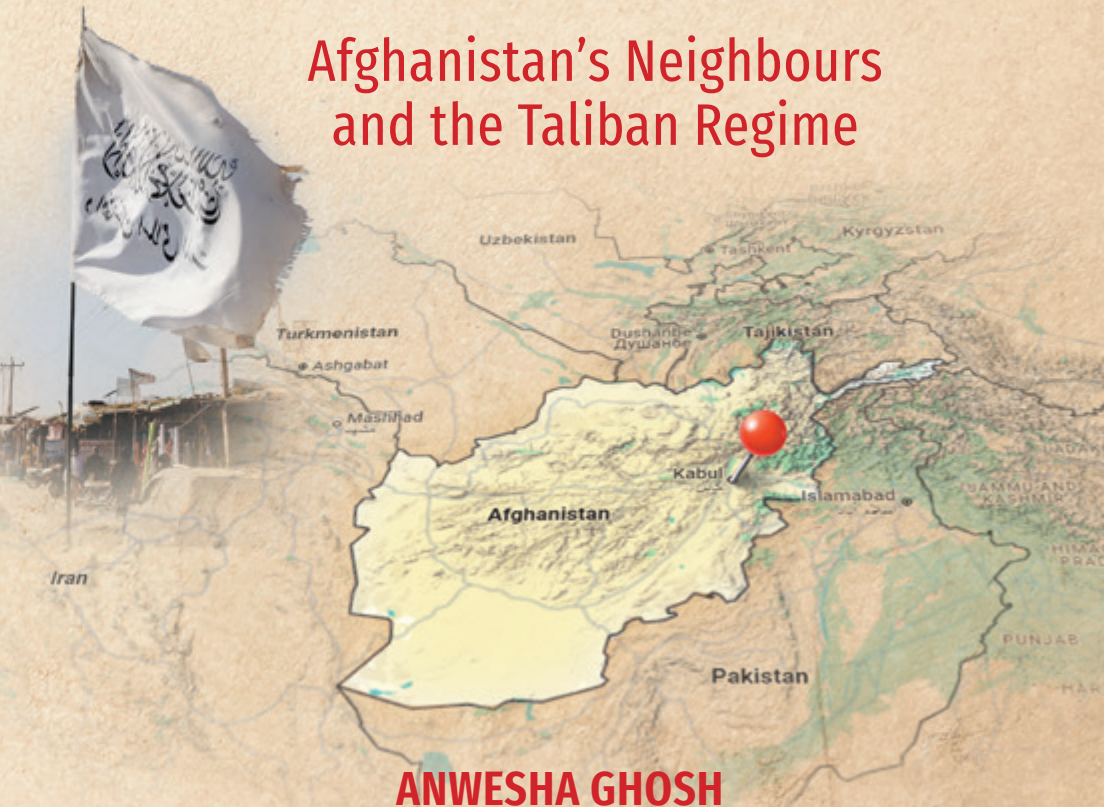


Indian Council
of World Affairs



Navigating New Realities

Afghanistan's Neighbours and the Taliban Regime



ANWESHA GHOSH





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Navigating New Realities

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ABSTRACT



After two decades of insurgency, the Taliban triumphantly entered Kabul on August 15, 2021, and seized power in Afghanistan. The Taliban's offensive came as the United States withdrew its remaining troops from Afghanistan, as outlined in a 2020 Peace Agreement with the group. The return of the Taliban to power raised concerns and scepticism among Afghanistan's neighbours about the Taliban's ability to govern Afghanistan effectively and the potential ramifications the regime might have for the neighbouring countries. In the course of the past three years, the Taliban has attempted to transition from an insurgent group to a functional administration. Subsequently, Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, namely Iran, Pakistan, China, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, have also tried to adjust to the new realities of Afghanistan. This Sapru House paper attempts to provide a broad overview of relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. It begins by discussing the immediate response to the Taliban takeover in the neighbouring capitals and then highlights some of the major concerns and interests that have shaped each of the seven immediate neighbouring countries' engagement with the Taliban regime bilaterally. The paper then looks at the regime's thrust on the region since coming to power. Subsequently, based on the issues that have been impacting the changing contours of relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours in recent years, the paper identifies six issues, namely: (i) the Taliban's alleged support for terror groups that target the neighbours of Afghanistan (which have been collectively identified as anti-government terror groups); (ii) water dispute; (iii) border

insecurity; (iv) refugee movement; (v) growing threat of ISKP; (vi) and drug trafficking from Afghanistan. The paper also discusses them by utilizing specific frameworks collectively to argue that the mentioned factors are likely to influence the course of relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours in the days to come.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, immediate neighbours, terrorism, security threat, water dispute, refugees, drug trafficking, border insecurity.



INTRODUCTION



In the wake of the Taliban's triumphant return to Kabul on August 15, 2021, marking the end of a two-decade insurgency, Afghanistan entered a new chapter in its tumultuous history. The swift takeover coincided with the withdrawal of US troops following a 2020 Peace Agreement with the Taliban. As the group transitioned from an insurgent force to a governing body, concerns and scepticism proliferated among Afghanistan's neighbours regarding the group's capacity to effectively govern the war-torn nation. This pivotal moment prompted neighbouring countries, including Iran, Pakistan, China, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, to reassess their relations with the newly Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The post August 2021 period witnessed a complex interplay of political, economic, and security considerations as these nations recalibrated their policies in response to the Taliban's resurgence. Against this backdrop, the Sapru House Paper aims to profile the individual approaches of the seven immediate neighbours of Afghanistan in the post-August 2021 era. It tries to capture how the responses of these countries have evolved on the question of the degree of engagement and outreach to the Taliban regime, economic cooperation, and the incremental normalization of ties. It highlights some of the major concerns and interests that have impacted Taliban-ruled Afghanistan's relations with each of its neighbours bilaterally. The paper then looks at the regime's thrust on the region since coming to power. Subsequently, based on the issues that have been impacting the changing contours of relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours in recent years, the paper identifies six issues,

namely: (i) Taliban’s alleged support for terror groups that target the neighbours of Afghanistan (which are collectively been identified as anti-government terror groups); (ii) water disputes; (iii) border insecurity; (iv) refugee flow (both in and out of Afghanistan); (v) growing threat of Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP); (vi) and drug trafficking from Afghanistan. The paper also discusses them by utilizing specific frameworks collectively to argue that the mentioned factors are likely to influence the course of relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours in the days to come. This research, however, doesn’t claim that the mentioned issues are the only factors influencing Taliban-ruled Afghanistan’s relations with its neighbours; it chooses to focus on the mentioned factors because of their recurrent nature between August 15, 2021, and December 31, 2023 (the timeline of the study) and based on their potential to impact regional dynamics in the future.

Navigating the New Frontier: Afghanistan’s Neighbourly Relations Since the Taliban’s Resurgence

More than 20 years ago, the six countries bordering Afghanistan signed a declaration¹ expressing their shared commitment to help rebuild the country and a desire for ‘peace and stability in the region’ after the fall of the then Taliban government. The situation in Afghanistan at present is a far cry from what those six countries—China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—envisaged in 2002. The abrupt withdrawal of the United States and allied forces and the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021

1 “Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations”. UNSC, December 24, 2002. Available at: https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/AF_021222_AfghanistanGoodNeighbourlyRelationsDeclaration_0.pdf



As the United States and its allies' governments moved on from Afghanistan, turning their attention to other global issues, Afghanistan's seven immediate neighbours, namely, Pakistan, Iran, China, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, were left with no choice but to acknowledge the geo-political realities of Afghanistan under the Taliban and address those in their own way.

has generated a host of new security and development challenges. Over a dozen transnational militant and terrorist groups are now present in Afghanistan. Discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, and religion is pervasive, as are human rights abuses. Already difficult humanitarian, developmental, and economic conditions have further deteriorated into a crisis that is unlikely to end as long as the Taliban administration—diplomatically isolated and under a range of international sanctions—remains recalcitrant in meeting demands to form a more inclusive government, uphold the rights of women, and deal with terrorist groups.

As the United States and its allies' governments moved on from Afghanistan, turning their attention to other global issues, Afghanistan's seven immediate neighbours, namely, Pakistan, Iran, China, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (see Map 1), were left with no choice but to acknowledge the geo-

Four years into the Taliban regime, many of these countries have tried to accept the new realities of Afghanistan and have tried to develop a mechanism to engage with the Taliban administration without formally recognizing it.

Map 1. Afghanistan and its Neighbours



Source: google maps (<https://www.google.com/maps/@35.8983022,64.9123935,5z?entry=ttu>)

political realities of Afghanistan under the Taliban and address those in their own way. Many of these neighbouring countries had started engaging with the Taliban even before the group took over power in Afghanistan, and therefore, the responses to the Taliban takeover have been different in various state capitals. However, four years into the Taliban regime, many of these countries have tried to accept the new realities of Afghanistan and have tried to develop a mechanism to engage with the Taliban administration without formally recognizing it. The following segment looks at how Afghanistan's neighbours responded to the Taliban takeover and subsequently throws light on the major issues impacting each country's relations with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.



PAKISTAN

Prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan had supported the group for years, providing both resources and safe havens. The return of the Taliban was seen as a strategic victory for Pakistan. The Taliban's rise in Afghanistan was initially seen favourably by Pakistan's government and strategists, with former Prime Minister Imran Khan openly endorsing it. Having managed to establish a friendly government in Kabul after nearly two decades, the then Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan made a euphoric observation, stating Afghans have 'broken the shackles of slavery'.² As clearly evident, the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan was seen favourably by Pakistan, and because of the decade's old association between the two, it was assumed that the Afghan Taliban would safeguard Islamabad's interest in Afghanistan. Therefore, it was not surprising when Pakistani authorities handed over the Afghan Embassy and Consulates to the Taliban even without officially recognizing the government in Kabul in October 2021.³

The presence of then Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Chief Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed in Kabul⁴ within a few days, supposedly to help the Taliban shift from insurgency to governance, further provided credence to the belief that the new rulers of Afghanistan were under the heavy influence of Islamabad. The significant representation of the Haqqani network (which has proved to be a valuable asset for

2 "Afghans have broken 'shackles of slavery': Pakistan PM Imran Khan". The Hindu, August 16, 2021. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/afghans-have-broken-shackles-of-slavery-pak-pm-imran-khan/article35939794.ece>

3 "Taliban Install Diplomats in Pakistan Embassy, Missions" VOA, October 29, 2021. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-install-diplomats-in-pakistan-embassy-missions-/6289591.html>

4 "Everything will be Okay: ISI chief during visit to Afghanistan". The Times of India, September 5, 2021. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/everything-will-be-okay-isi-chief-during-visit-to-afghanistan/articleshow/85942409.cms>

Pakistan's security establishment) in the 'interim' cabinet further attested to that idea. Islamabad became one of the principal backers of the Taliban's 'interim' government and lobbied for its recognition as well as urgent financial assistance from the international community. However, in the course of the next few months, the resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan, driven largely by the revival of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as well as Baloch insurgency and threats from Islamic State Khorasan, has tampered Pakistan's initial enthusiasm with regard to the Taliban. Some of the other drivers of engagement between the neighbours were skirmishes along the Durand Line and the issue of the expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan.

1. Demarcation of the Durand Line

The 2,670-km Durand Line is named after British civil servant Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, who signed an agreement with Amir Abdur Rahman, the then-Afghan ruler, on November 12, 1893, to establish a border between British India and Afghanistan. Successive Afghan governments, following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, have argued that the legitimacy of the line expired in 1993, as the validity of the agreement was for 100 years. The Durand Line not only divides the two countries but also cuts through the Pashtun tribal areas. In Pakistan, Punjabis and Pashtuns make up the two major ethnic groups along the Durand Line. In Pakistan, Pashtuns constitute about 15 percent of its population. In Afghanistan, Pashtuns make up the largest ethnic group, comprising about 42 percent of the country's population.⁵ While Pakistan has recognized the Durand

5 "Afghanistan and Pakistan Ethnic Groups. An ethnolinguistic map of showing different language and cultural groups across Afghanistan and Pakistan." National Geographic, August 2022. Available at: <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/afghanistan-and-pakistan-ethnic-groups> (Accessed on 28.11.22)



Line as its western border, no Afghan government (including the Taliban regime between 1996 and 2001) has accepted the Durand Line as a legitimate border with Pakistan.

As a result, Pakistan's attempts to establish fences and border posts along the disputed border in recent years have been met with stiff resistance from Afghanistan. At the end of 2021, reports and videos were circulated showing the Taliban forces uprooting barbed wires erected by Pakistan security forces in the eastern Nangarhar province along the Durand Line.⁶ Similar incidents were reported earlier this year when the Taliban fighters were seen destroying fences and Pakistani check posts along the border in Nimroz province, which led Pakistan's former Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi to acknowledge the presence of 'some complication' in the Afghan-Pakistan border region.⁷ Since the Taliban takeover, there have been several instances of clashes across the Durand Line between the Taliban and Pakistan military, especially in the eastern and southern parts of the country. In response to the recent escalation across the border, Kabul and Islamabad have formed a joint committee to assess the situation.⁸ Reportedly, Kabul has appointed a committee of 15 tribal elders so that the issues between the two sides can be

6 "Taliban tear down barbed wire fence put up by Pak forces as Durand Line border tension brews." WION, December 22, 2021. Available at: <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/taliban-tear-down-barbed-wire-fence-put-up-by-pak-forces-as-durand-line-border-tension-brews-438954> (Accessed on 28.11.22)

7 "After Taliban removed fencing from Pak-Afghan border, FM Qureshi admits there are 'complications' Read more." ANI News Agency, January 3, 2022. Available at: <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/after-taliban-removed-fencing-from-pak-afghan-border-fm-qureshi-admits-there-are-complications20220103182813/> (Accessed on 28.11.22)

8 "Pakistan-Afghanistan relations on boil? Fresh border clashes erupt along Durand Line." Times Now, November 22, 2022. Available at: <https://www.timesnownews.com/world/pakistan-afghanistan-relations-on-boil-border-clashes-reported-along-durand-line-article-95681376> (Accessed on 26.11.22)

resolved through negotiations.⁹ Afghan news media reported that the tribal elders are trying to solve the problems via negotiations and quoted a tribal elder stating that in case the negotiations fail, all tribes will stand with Afghanistan.¹⁰

2. *The Afghan Taliban's alleged support for the Pashtun Islamist militant group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)*

TTP has undertaken several deadly attacks in Pakistan since 2007. After the Peshawar military school attack in 2014, the Pakistan military cracked down on the TTP safe havens in the country, which forced many of the TTP members to flee to neighbouring Afghanistan. Like the Afghan Taliban, the TTP is also a predominantly Pashtun group. Although it is unclear how much sway the Taliban has over the TTP's actions, they released several TTP leaders from Afghan prisons after seizing power in Kabul, and the TTP leadership is believed to have taken refuge in Afghanistan.¹¹ The intensification of TTP attacks in recent years has become a matter of grave concern for Pakistan. Over the years, Islamabad maintained that the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan has fostered the TTP insurgency. With the Taliban back in power in August 2021, it was hoped that the armed group would rein in TTP fighters, but the opposite happened. The TTP brought about a sharp increase in jihadi violence in Pakistan. In 2021, there were

9 "Afghani families displaced after Taliban, Pakistani military clash along Durand Line." ANI News, November 23, 2022. Available at: <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/afghani-families-displaced-after-taliban-pakistani-military-clash-along-durand-line20221123230936/> (Accessed on 26.11.22)

10 "Paktia families displaced by clashes with Pakistan." The Tolo News, November 22, 2022. Available at: <https://tolonews.com/science-technology-180867> (Accessed on 25.11.22)

11 "Taliban release TTP's Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, other terrorists from Afghanistan prisons." India Today, August 18, 2021. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/taliban-maulvi-faqir-mohammad-terrorists-afghanistan-prisons-kabul-1842162-2021-08-18> (Accessed on 07.12.22)



294 attacks – a 56 percent increase since 2020 and 45 of those in December alone. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces, both lining Pakistan’s more than 2,600-kilometre (1,600-mile) border with Afghanistan, have experienced almost daily attacks since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in August 2021, killing hundreds of Pakistani security forces and civilians.¹² At least two of their assaults targeted Chinese workers and the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, which made Pakistan’s principal ally China extremely anxious.¹³ In most instances, such incidents led to the closure of key border crossings by Pakistan in a bid to put pressure on land-locked Afghanistan, which is severely dependent on Pakistan for its lack of access to the sea. The Torkham – a key northwestern border crossing, for example, is one of the checkpoints that has been closed a number of times, mainly following clashes between the security forces for varied reasons, including repairs to the border fence by Pakistan.¹⁴ However, such a response has not been sustainable and, in most cases, had to be reopened for a few days.

At the beginning, things looked somewhat optimistic when the Afghan Taliban facilitated a three-month ceasefire deal between the Government of Pakistan and the TTP and struck an agreement on June 4, 2022, where they agreed to extend the ceasefire indefinitely

12 Daud Khattak, “Taliban Takeover In Afghanistan Bolsters Pakistan’s Insurgency.”Gandhara.org, January 13, 2014. Available at: Taliban Takeover In Afghanistan Bolsters Pakistan’s Insurgency (rferLorg) (Accessed on 1.12.22)

13 “China Is Unnerved by Increasing Attacks on Chinese in Pakistan”. The Diplomat, September 28, 2021. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/china-is-unnerved-by-increasing-attacks-on-chinese-in-pakistan/> (Accessed on 1.12.22)

14 “Trade resumes as Pak and Afghanistan reopen Torkham border after 10 days”, Business Standard, January 25, 2024. Available at: https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/trade-resumes-as-pak-and-afghanistan-reopen-torkham-border-after-10-days-124012300285_1.html

With the Taliban back in power in August 2021, it was hoped that the armed group would rein in TTP fighters, but the opposite happened. The TTP brought about a sharp increase in jihadi violence in Pakistan.

in order to continue negotiations.¹⁵ However, in November 2022, TTP announced the end of the ceasefire agreed with the government in June and issued orders to its fighters to carry out attacks across the country, which resulted in the rise of violence in Pakistan. Since the Taliban's takeover, Pakistan has witnessed a 73 percent¹⁶ surge in terrorist attacks, including the devastating January 2023 attack on a Peshawar police mosque¹⁷ that caused over 300 casualties. In October 2023, the Afghan Taliban issued a fatwa, or Islamic decree, that banned its fighters from waging violence outside Afghanistan without specifically mentioning Pakistan, but it was obvious that the same was aimed at the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan.¹⁸ In 2023, amidst increased TTP violence, a high-level delegation from Islamabad visited Kabul to discuss the security threat faced by Pakistan with the Afghan Taliban but the outreach failed to generate

15 "Afghan Taliban mediate Ceasefire between Pakistan and Pakistani Taliban". Indian Council of World Affairs, June 13, 2022. Available at: https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=7474&lid=5011

16 "Did Pakistan Really Benefit from the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan?" The Diplomat, August 15, 2023, Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/did-pakistan-really-benefit-from-the-taliban-takeover-in-afghanistan/>

17 "Dozens killed in Pakistan mosque blast". Al Jazeera, January 30, 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/30/peshawar-pakistan-mosque-explosion-casualties>

18 "The Azadi Briefing: Afghan Taliban Bans Fighters From Waging 'Jihad' In Pakistan". RadioFreeEurope, October 27, 2023. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/azadi-briefing-afghan-taliban-pakistan-jihad-indonesia-refugees/32656456.html>



the desired result. In April 2022¹⁹ and March 2024²⁰, Pakistan carried out air strikes aiming for TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan in response to what it perceived as a lack of response on the part of the Taliban. Pakistan publicly warned the Afghan Taliban to take a side—either take care of the TTP inside Afghan territory, expel them, or face the consequences of choosing the wrong. It was evident that Islamabad’s patience was running out with the Afghan Taliban when Pakistan’s caretaker Prime Minister Anwar ul-Haq Kakar announced that the Taliban leadership was supporting the anti-Pakistan insurgency of the TTP, which had contributed to a major increase in violence in Pakistan, leading to 2,867 Pakistani fatalities since the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.²¹ Later, Pakistan’s Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Asif Durrani, followed up on Kakar’s critique of the Taliban, noting that ‘peace in Afghanistan, in fact, has become a nightmare for Pakistan’.²² While Pakistan has blamed Taliban for providing sanctuary to TTP, the Taliban have been clear that terrorism in Pakistan is Pakistan’s internal problem and the onus of dealing with TTP lies with Islamabad.

3. *Expulsion of Afghan nationals from Pakistan*

On October 2, 2023, Pakistan’s caretaker government took a drastic decision to deport all ‘undocumented immigrants’, including 1.7

19 “At least 47 dead in Afghanistan after Pakistan attacks: Officials.” Al Jazeera, April 17, 2022. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/17/afghanistan-death-toll-in-pakistan-strikes-rises-to-47-official>

20 “‘Cousins at war’: Pakistan-Afghan ties strained after cross-border attacks”. Al Jazeera, March 19, 2024. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/19/cousins-at-war-pakistan-afghan-ties-strained-after-cross-border-attacks>

21 “Pakistan to Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan: Choose Bilateral Ties or Support for Militants.” VOA, Nov 8, 2023. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-taliban-ruled-afghanistan-choose-bilateral-ties-or-support-for-militants-/7346720.html>

22 “Pakistan accuses Afghan Taliban of controlling TTP” The Tribune, November 12, 2023, Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2446070/pakistan-accuses-afghan-taliban-of-controlling-ttp>

million Afghans, if they did not move out voluntarily by November 1.²³ The expulsion of Afghan asylum seekers by Pakistan only added to the list of issues that further contributed to Islamabad's fraying ties with Kabul.

Afghan refugees have sought refuge in Pakistan since the early 1980s. Over the years, there have been 7–8 big attempts to deport them; however, those drives fizzled out after Kabul and Islamabad developed some understanding. However, the treatment of Afghan refugees is said to have deteriorated significantly in Pakistan in recent years, as they have been persistently blamed for security failures within the country. According to reports, more than 130,000 Afghans have left Pakistan since the order was issued, thereby creating bottlenecks on either side of the crossing points.²⁴ The Taliban in Afghanistan said some 60,000 Afghans returned between September 23 and October 22, 2023, and more than 80 percent of these had left via the northern Torkham border in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and the Chaman crossing in Balochistan province, where the majority of Afghan refugees live.²⁵ The recent daily returnee figures are three times higher than normal, according to the Taliban Refugee Ministry.²⁶ In a statement issued on October 31, the Afghan Taliban asked Pakistan not to forcibly deport Afghans without giving them sufficient notice.²⁷ Pakistani authorities have decided to open a series of centres across the country to process

23 "Pakistan orders illegal immigrants, including 1.73 mln Afghans, to leave." Reuters, October 3, 2023. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-orders-all-illegal-immigrants-leave-after-suicide-bombings-2023-10-03/> (Accessed on 31. 10.23)

24 "Taliban urges Pakistan to grant more time for undocumented Afghans to leave." Al Jazeera, November 2, 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/1/taliban-urges-pakistan-to-grant-more-time-for-undocumented-afghans-to-leave> (Accessed on 2. 11.23)

25 Afghans return to Taliban rule as Pakistan moves to expel 1.7 million, Reuters, Op.cit.

26 Ibid

27 Ibid



In Afghanistan, the influx of returning Afghans has exerted pressure on already limited resources that are stretched by international sanctions on the banking sector and cuts in foreign aid after the Taliban takeover.

hundreds of thousands of undocumented Afghans ahead of mass deportations.²⁸ The UN refugee agency UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said Pakistan's plans create 'serious protection risks' for women and girls forced to leave.²⁹

In Afghanistan, the influx of returning Afghans has exerted pressure on already limited resources that are stretched by international sanctions on the banking sector and cuts in foreign aid after the Taliban takeover. The Afghan Ministry of Refugees said it intends to register returnees and then house them in temporary camps. A camp has been established in the Lalapor district of Nangarhar province to manage the newly returning refugees from Pakistan.³⁰ The Taliban administration said it would try to find jobs for the returnees. However, with the unemployment rate more than doubling since the Taliban takeover, that would be a challenging task. The Taliban administration needed substantial aid and humanitarian assistance to deal with the rehabilitation and repatriation of the returnees from the international community. But the waning interest of the Western world, given the changing global order, may render the availability of foreign assistance to Afghanistan even more difficult.

28 "Pakistan to open holding centres ahead of Afghan deportations." Duetsche Welle, November 1, 2023. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231031-pakistan-to-open-holding-centres-ahead-of-afghan-deportations>

29 Afghans return to Taliban rule as expel 1.7 million, Reuters, Op.cit.

30 "Taliban slams Pakistan's riot order on refugees, calls expulsion 'inhumane, unfair and barbaric'", India Narrative, October 5, 2023. Available at: <https://www.indianarrative.com/world-news/taliban-slams-pakistans-riot-order-on-refugees-calls-expulsion-inhumane-unfair-and-barbaric-152739.html>

Islamabad's had three specific expectations from the Afghan Taliban after they took over Kabul: (a) handing over of the TTP; (b) sustaining respect for the Durand Line; and (c) taking steps to remove India's influence from Afghanistan. More than three years into power, the Afghan Taliban has not fulfilled any of Pakistan's expectations, and thereby frustration in the Pakistani establishment

The degree of complication in the relation between the two neighbours can be understood from a statement given by Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, Syed Asim Munir, in January 2024, where he said: 'The life of a single Pakistani is more important than the entire Afghanistan'.³¹ The Afghan Taliban did not respond to Munir's remarks but earlier said that Pakistani officials should not blame Afghanistan for their failure and being unable to provide security in their soil. Islamabad's had three specific expectations from the Afghan Taliban after they took over Kabul: (a) handing over of the TTP; (b) sustaining respect for the Durand Line; and (c) taking steps to remove India's influence from Afghanistan. More than three years into power, the Afghan Taliban has not fulfilled any of Pakistan's expectations, and thereby frustration in the Pakistani establishment (evident from the above-mentioned statements) is not out of place.

IRAN

Iran saw the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan as, in effect, a surrender to the Taliban. Thereby, when Kabul fell to the Taliban in August 2021, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei,

31 "Pakistan's Munir Accuses Afghanistan of Supporting Balochistan Insurgents" Tolo News, January 26, 2024. Available at: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-187130>



publicly welcomed the new reality in Afghanistan using carefully crafted words.³² He indicated that Iran’s policy towards Afghanistan will be reciprocal, influenced by the degree of sensitivity shown by the Taliban towards their interests and priorities in the region. While this did not shun the need for a long-term strategy, it signified Tehran’s reservation about trusting the Taliban completely. Nevertheless, Iran was among just a handful of countries that kept their embassies operational in Kabul when the Taliban took over. Initially, Iran resisted handing over Afghan Embassy in Kabul to a regime it doesn’t recognize, reiterating its commitment towards an inclusive government with representatives from all communities. However, by February 2023, there were reports that Tehran had joined a small but significant number of countries that allowed Taliban diplomats to take charge of the Embassy of Afghanistan in Iran.³³ Iran viewed the evolving post-American landscape as an opportunity to bring peace and stability to its neighbour.³⁴ Recognizing the Taliban as part of the reality of Afghanistan,³⁵ Iran has started to adopt a more pragmatic engagement policy while continuing to not officially recognize the self-proclaimed ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’.

Over the past few years, Tehran has been publicly redefining its relations with the Taliban, an erstwhile arch-enemy. In 1998, Iran

32 Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei’s statement in Platform X after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. @Khamenei.Ir, August 28, 2021. Available at: https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1431554721844797442

33 “Iran to handover Afghan Embassy in Tehran to Taliban” ANI, February 24, 2023. Available At: <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/iran-to-handover-afghan-embassy-in-tehran-to-taliban20230224224118/>

34 “Iran Says U.S. “Failure” in Afghanistan a Chance for Durable Peace,” Reuters, August 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-says-us-failure-afghanistan-chance-durable-peace-2021-08-16/>

35 “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson: The Taliban are Part of the Reality of Afghanistan,” Entekhab, February 1, 2021, <https://www.entekhab.ir/002Vwu>

Iran, irrespective of who held in power, has always been wary of Afghanistan, but the changed international context and the charged internal environment have encouraged Tehran to be more receptive to the idea of engaging with the Taliban.

and the then Taliban regime in Afghanistan almost went to war after nine Iranian diplomats were allegedly killed by the Taliban.³⁶ However, after 9/11 and the Taliban insurgency against the NATO/United States in Afghanistan, Iranian-Afghan tensions took a back seat, as Tehran welcomed the difficulties the Taliban created for the US military presence there. However, it was only in 2015 that relations between Tehran and the Taliban started to attract international attention.³⁷ From that point on, Iran gradually made its contacts with the Taliban public. A month before the collapse of the Afghan Republic, Iran hosted a talk between an Afghan government representative and the Taliban in Tehran in a bid to look for a political solution to Afghanistan's crisis.³⁸

Iran, irrespective of who held in power, has always been wary of Afghanistan, but the changed international context and the charged internal environment have encouraged Tehran to be more receptive to the idea of engaging with the Taliban. After the Taliban takeover, Iranian authorities started rebranding the Taliban as a 'reformed

36 "Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats' Deaths." New York Times, September 11, 1998. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/11/world/iran-holds-taliban-responsible-for-9-diplomats-deaths.html>

37 "Why did the Taliban go to Tehran?" The Guardian, May 22, 2015. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/may/22/taliban-delegation-official-visit-tehran-iran-isis>

38 "In Tehran talks, Iran offers help to resolve Afghan crisis" Reuters, July 7, 2021. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/tehran-talks-iran-offers-help-resolve-afghan-crisis-2021-07-07/>



group’ to justify engagement with the Sunni extremist group that has long been considered hostile to Iran.³⁹

Iran’s engagement with the Taliban is also influenced by geo-economic motivations. The data issued by the Taliban administration on exports and imports for the years 2022–2023 indicate that Iran has the largest (20 percent) share and is also an important export destination for Afghan goods (see Table 1 below).⁴⁰ At the end of 2023, Iran and Afghanistan signed five economic cooperation agreements related to transportation, civil aviation, mining, and free trade zones.⁴¹

Afghanistan's Import		Afghanistan's Export	
Iran	1.472	Pakistan	1.225
Pakistan	1.164	India	417
China	1.135	Uzbekistan	49
UAE	831	Tajikistan	39
Turkmenistan	480	UAE	37
Kazakhstan	281	Iran	28
Russia	271	Iraq	23
Uzbekistan	232	Turkiye	18
India	218	Kazakhstan	13

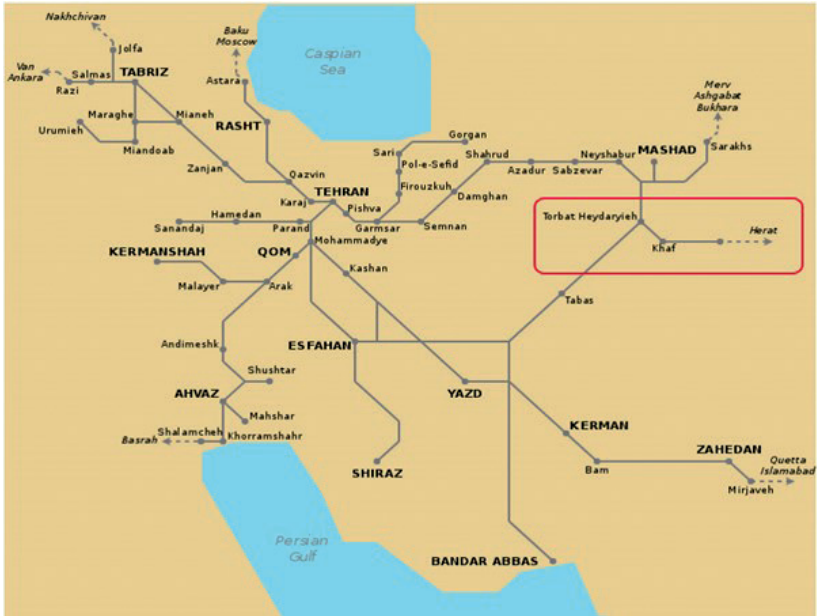
(Date Source: Sputnik Afghanistan)

39 Ali Fathollah-Nejad and Hamidreza Azizi, “Iran and Taliban After the US Fiasco in Afghanistan,” The Middle East Institute, September 22, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-and-taliban-after-us-fiasco-afghanistan>

40 Sputnik Afghanistan, “Подробный перечень основных импортеров афганских товаров в прошлом году [Detailed List of the Main Importers of Afghan Goods Last Year],” Telegram post, March 31, 2023, <https://t.me/sputnikaf/20534>; Sputnik Afghanistan, “Кто продал в Афганистан больше всех товаров? [Who sold the most goods to Afghanistan?],” Telegram post, April 13, 2023, Available at: <https://t.me/sputnikaf/20825>

41 “Exploring Iran-Afghanistan collaboration: Kabul’s Pursuit of Trade Diversification”. Special Eurasia, December 4, 2023. Available at: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/12/04/iran-afghanistan-cooperation/>

Map 2. Khawaf-Herat Railway Project



In October 2023, Iran's Ambassador to Kabul indicated that Tehran and Kabul have agreed to create an Iran-Afghanistan chamber for trade development to provide facilities in the transit sector and to invest in the agricultural sector.⁴² Furthermore, the Afghanistan Railway Authority has agreed with the Iranian Railway Consortium concerning the utilization of the Khawaf-Herat railway (See Map 2). As per the agreement, Iran plans to transport 100,000 tons of goods via this route in the initial year, with an annual increase of 100,000 tons thereafter.⁴³ The two sides have also reached an agreement to establish additional working groups, with the responsibility of identifying any obstacles that may hinder economic collaboration

42 Ibid

43 Ibid

between the neighbouring countries. Iran and Taliban delegations also agreed to take the necessary measures to increase the level of trade to \$10 billion per year.⁴⁴ Transit is also a crucial aspect of economic relations with Afghanistan, as it holds both economic and geopolitical significance. The Chabahar port, developed by India, is an important element in this regard.⁴⁵ Energy is another crucial factor to consider while examining the prospects of economic ties between Iran and Afghanistan. Iran is expected to maintain relative dominance in energy and fuel exports, both in electric power and gasoline.⁴⁶ These factors have also provided Iran with economic leverage inside Afghanistan to shape its political relations with the Taliban. Moreover, the prospect of enhanced cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan is significant because it offers a pathway to augment trade and boost revenues for two nations grappling with economic challenges caused by Western sanctions.

Iran expected the Taliban to consider Iran's security and political concerns relating to border incursions, the influx of Afghan refugees migrating to Iran, sustain water supply to the eastern provinces of Iran, counter ISIS-Khorasan terrorist activities, and form an inclusive government. So far, Iran's expectations have not been fulfilled. Some key issues that have caused tensions in respect to relations between Iran and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan since Taliban takeover in 2021 have been discussed below:

44 "Iran, Afghanistan Ink 5 Economic Co-op MOUs," Tehran Times, November 10, 2023, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/491175/Iran-Afghanistan-ink-5-economic-co-op-MOUs>

45 On May 13, 2024, India Ports Global Limited and the Ports and Maritime Organization of Iran signed a 10-year deal that allows New Delhi to develop and operate the Iranian port of Chabahar.

46 Vali Golmohammadi "Turbulent Geopolitics, Uneasy Neighbour: Iran's Pragmatic Engagement with the Taliban" in Afghanistan Under the Taliban: Enduring Challenges, evolving Responses. ORF Special Report, no.223, March 2024.

1. *Frequent border skirmishes*

During the Taliban’s current rule in Afghanistan, there have been several minor border skirmishes between Taliban forces and Iranian border guards, along with four significant conflicts. The first major incident occurred in December 2021 in Shangalak village, located in Iran’s Hirmand county, where Taliban border forces mistakenly targeted Iranian farmers who were within Iranian territory. Iranian media attributed such incidents to the Taliban’s poorly trained border guards, noting their unfamiliarity with the complexities of Iran-Afghanistan relations. The second major clash took place in April 2022, in Herat’s Qala district, leading to the closure of the Iranian border post. According to Iran International, social media footage showed Iran deploying military vehicles along the border after the skirmish. In July 2022, the third incident occurred in Afghanistan’s Nimroz province following a border shooting, which

Map 3. Milak- Zaranj Border Crossing between Iran and Afghanistan



resulted in the death of one Afghan soldier and the injury of another. Reports suggested that Taliban forces attempted to raise their flag on Iranian territory. The most significant clash happened in May 2022, when deadly confrontations between Afghan and Iranian guards left at least two Iranians and one Afghan dead, with both sides blaming each other for initiating the violence. In response, Iran closed the Milak-Zaranj border post, a vital commercial crossing.

2. *Flow of Afghan refugees into Iran*

At the time of the Taliban takeover in August 2021, it was estimated that there were over 3 million Afghan refugees in Iran, of whom 780,000 are registered and another 586,000 are admitted with passports and visas.⁴⁷ There is no accurate count of the non-registered refugees, where they live, or what they do. However, although the refugees in Iran come from all areas of Afghanistan and represent all ethnic groups, it is generally believed that they are mostly Tajiks (Persian speakers) or Hazaras (Shia Muslims undergoing persecution in Afghanistan). Much of the Afghan refugee population in Iran is concentrated around the major cities, where they attempt to find work in low-level construction trades.⁴⁸ With the Taliban takeover, the number of Afghans fleeing to Iran has dramatically increased. In 2021, the Norwegian Refugee Council estimated that as many as 4,000–5,000 Afghans were fleeing to Iran each day.⁴⁹ Most attempted to enter Iran illegally around the

47 “Refugees in Iran”. UNHCR Country Profile. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/>

48 “Iran and Afghanistan: Growing Tensions after the Return of the Taliban.” E-International Relations, August 23, 2022. Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/08/23/iran-and-afghanistan-growing-tensions-after-the-return-of-the-taliban/>

49 “Iran Deporting Thousands of Afghan Refugees.” Al Jazeera, November 11, 2021. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/11/afghan-refugees-deported-from-iran-as-humanitarian-crisis-deepens>

southern border near Zaranj. Reports describe Zaranj as overflowing with Afghans seeking to be smuggled into Iran.⁵⁰ While its refugee policy has been relatively inclusive, it has repatriated many refugees back to Afghanistan, sometimes voluntarily and often through force. In March 2023, 11 refugees who were illegally trying to cross the border were shot by the Iranian guards, leading to an uproar and anti-Iran protests inside Kabul.⁵¹ Reportedly, nearly 100 refugees who were trying to enter illegally have met the same fate.⁵² In many cases, the returning refugees simply turn around and attempt to flee to Iran again.⁵³ The refugee situation has created friction between Iran and Afghanistan. Videos showing Afghan refugees being mistreated by Iranian border guards have been shown on Kabul TV, creating anger among Afghans. In Kabul, protesters have demonstrated at the Iranian Embassy and thrown rocks at the Iranian consulate in Zaranj.⁵⁴ This refugee issue is sure to escalate as more Afghans try to flee and Iran continues to send them back.

3. *Dispute over the equitable sharing of water*

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- 50 "Choice for Afghans: Over the Wall or Through the Desert." France 24, France24, March 9, 2022. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220309-freedom-s-choice-for-afghans-over-the-wall-or-through-the-desert>
- 51 "Iran's Border Guards Kill Afghan Migrants In Sistan and Baluchistan." IRANWIRE, March 16, 2023. Available at: <https://iranwire.com/en/news/114836-irans-border-guards-kill-afghan-migrants-in-sistan-and-baluchistan/>
- 52 "Nearly 100 Afghan refugees shot dead by Iranian security forces during past 6 months: Local officials" ANI, February 8, 2022. Available at: <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/nearly-100-afghan-refugees-shot-dead-by-iranian-security-forces-during-past-6-months-local-officials20220208222921/>
- 53 "Amid a crackdown, Afghan Refugees in Iran fear the 'unthinkable': Being sent back". Los Angeles Times, December 16, 2021. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-12-16/afghan-refugees-iran-crackdown-deportation-taliban>
- 54 *For Desperate Afghans, Risky Crossings Into Iran are worth chancing*. The New Humanitarian, May 17, 2022. Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/News-feature/2022/05/17/Afghans-risky-crossings-Iran>



Map 4. Helmand River Basin



Water disputes between Iran and Afghanistan date back to as early as the 1870s, when Afghanistan was under British control.⁵⁵ A British officer drew the Iran-Afghan border along the main branch of the Helmand River. In 1939, the Iranian government of Reza Shah Pahlavi and Mohammad Zahir Shah's Afghanistan government signed a treaty on sharing the river's waters, but the Afghans failed to ratify it. Eventually, in 1973, Iranian Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveida and Afghan Prime Minister Mohammad Musa Shafiq signed the Afghan-Iranian Helmand River Water Treaty of 1973⁵⁶ stipulates that Afghanistan must deliver water to Iran at a rate of

55 "Iran and Afghanistan are feuding over the Helmand River. The water wars have no end in sight." Atlantic Council, July 7, 2023. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-afghanistan-taliban-water-helmand/>

56 "The Afghan-Iranian Helmand River Water Treaty". 1973. Available at: https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/1973_Helmand_River_Water_Treaty-Afghanistan-Iran.pdf

22 cubic metres per second per annum with an additional four cubic metres per second, thereby supplying an annual average of 820 million cubic metres under normal conditions. Since the Taliban captured power in Kabul in 2021, the water sharing of the Helmand River has become an important issue of contention between the neighbouring countries, particularly in recent months.

The 1,300-kilometre-long Helmand River is Afghanistan's longest (See Map 4). It originated in the Hindu Kush Mountains and winds its way through southwest Afghanistan before emptying itself into the Sistan marshes and Lake Hamoun in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province. As mentioned above, the Helmand River is the only river on which Afghanistan has entered into a formal agreement with a neighbour. The opening of the Kamal Khan Dam in March 2021 reignited an old dispute between Iran and Afghanistan over the allocation of water in the Helmand River. Iran claimed it is receiving only about 4 percent of the total amount agreed under a 1973 agreement.⁵⁷ The Helmand River basin has several dams, such as the Kajaki, Grishk, and Kamal Khan Dams across the Helmand River and the Dahla Dam across its tributary, the Arghandab.⁵⁸ At the height of tensions between two sides over Helmand river water, the Taliban inaugurated a new irrigation project that involved completing the construction of the Bakhshabad Dam on the Farah River, which feeds the Sistan Basin from the north.⁵⁹

57 "Iran and Afghanistan face off over sharing Helmand waters." MENA, May 28, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/05/28/iran-and-afghanistan-face-off-over-sharing-helmand-waters/>

58 "Afghanistan Clashes with Iran over Dam Construction". The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, May 2, 2023 Available at: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13443-afghanistan-clashes-with-iran-over-dam-construction.html>

59 Ibid



**With Afghanistan in control of upriver water sources
that feed low-lying wetlands and lakes in Iran's
southeast, the Taliban finds itself with a tool for
leverage in its relationship with Tehran.**

On May 20, 2023, Iran's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, issued a clear warning to the Taliban stating: 'If there was water and the Taliban did not provide it to the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, then it is clear how it should act on this issue'.⁶⁰ A few days earlier, President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran also spoke stern words to the Taliban rulers: 'I warn the rulers of Afghanistan to give water rights to the people of Sistan and Baluchistan... we will not allow the rights of our people to be violated'.⁶¹ The Taliban's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, said in response on May 22 that Kabul was 'committed to the Water Treaty of 1973 but the drought that exists in Afghanistan and region should not be ignored'.⁶² With Afghanistan in control of upriver water sources that feed low-lying wetlands and lakes in Iran's southeast, the Taliban finds itself with a tool for leverage in its relationship with Tehran. While Iran does not recognize the Taliban government, it has maintained cordial relations with the Taliban regime next door. The issue of Helmand river water did cause strains in relations between Iran and the Taliban in recent months. However, Tehran and Kabul, sought to calm things down for the time being as both sides realized that prolonging the

60 "Iran warns Afghanistan to respect its water rights over Helmand River." Iranwire, May 18, 2023. Available at: <https://iranwire.com/en/news/116669-iran-warns-afghanistan-to-respect-its-water-rights-over-helmand-river/>

61 Ibid

62 "Iran And Afghanistan's Taliban Clash as Water Dispute Boils Over". Radio Free Europe, May 30, 2023. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-taliban-water-dispute-/32435442.html>

The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 directly impacted the country's Central Asian neighbours, especially the ones sharing borders with Afghanistan, namely, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, from the very beginning.

tensions would not be in their interest. Nonetheless, the sharing of Helmand river water remains a contentious issue and has the potential to heighten tensions between the two countries in the near future as well.

CENTRAL ASIAN NEIGHBOURS

The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 directly impacted the country's Central Asian neighbours, especially the ones sharing borders with Afghanistan, namely, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, from the very beginning. As the Taliban took control, Afghanistan's former President Ashraf Ghani initially fled to Uzbekistan⁶³; and from there to Abu Dhabi. Around the same time, over 50 members of the Afghan Air Force landed their planes in Tajikistan, even as more touched down in Termez, Uzbekistan.⁶⁴ Initially, humanitarian agencies expressed grave concern about a potentially overwhelming refugee flow over the borders into Central Asia. However, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan allowed only a few high-level delegations to

63 "Afghan President Ghani flees country as Taliban enters Kabul." Al Jazeera, August 15, 2021. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/15/afghan-president-ghani-flees-country-as-taliban-surrounds-kabul>

64 "Afghan military aircraft land in Uzbekistan, move to Tajikistan". Center for Strategic International Studies, August 26, 2021. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghan-military-aircraft-land-uzbekistan-move-tajikistan-updated>



Geopolitical, geo-economic, and security considerations have ensured that these nations, barring Tajikistan, maintain a multi-vector approach towards the Afghan Taliban regime so as to create space for cooperation and collaboration.

access their territory but not to ordinary Afghans. The presence of over 10,000 Russian troops in Tajikistan helped maintain stability and protect the border between the Central Asian states and Afghanistan.

The Central Asian Republics did not welcome the Biden administration's sudden departure from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021; they reluctantly adapted to the changed reality. Since then, the policies of Central Asian countries towards Taliban-led Afghanistan have shared certain similarities, with trade-driven pragmatism along with concerns pertaining to Central Asia-focused terror groups that were engaged in jihad in Afghanistan being their most important characteristics. Geopolitical, geo-economic, and security considerations have ensured that these nations, barring Tajikistan, maintain a multi-vector approach towards the Afghan Taliban regime so as to create space for cooperation and collaboration. This realignment in their approach marks a stark contrast to their acrimonious attitude towards the first Taliban regime during the 1990s. In this regard, it would be interesting to see how Afghanistan's three Central Asian countries have responded to the Taliban regime next door.

Uzbekistan had opened contacts with the Taliban in early 2018 and was one of the first countries to establish direct talks with the Taliban regime after they regained control in Afghanistan. It

has the ambition to restart trade and economic ties, especially for infrastructure projects like the Uzbek-proposed Trans-Afghan Railways. It has opened a new cargo centre in Termez, near the Afghan border, to promote cross-border trade.⁶⁵ Uzbekistan has been pursuing rail and road connectivity towards the Indian Ocean through Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the conference on “Central and South Asian Regional Connectivity: Challenges and Opportunities” held in Tashkent in July 2021, Uzbekistan proposed the development of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharaf-Kabul -Peshawar railroad, which requires an investment of about \$6 billion and could be part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.⁶⁶ In November 2023, the Uzbek delegation visited Afghanistan to discuss trade and transit issues, and reportedly, the Taliban asked Uzbekistan to lower transit fees for cargo moving through the Central Asian country.⁶⁷ Uzbekistan’s readiness to collaborate with Afghanistan is evident from the reports that revealed a ‘trade route map’ aimed at boosting Afghanistan’s exports to Uzbekistan, ‘with the goal of increasing the trade volume between the two countries to approximately \$3 billion’ from the current level of around \$600 million.⁶⁸ Increased commitment by Uzbekistan to improve relations with Taliban-led Afghanistan can also be seen when it hosted the Tashkent Conference in July 2022 with representatives of more than 20 countries and international organisations, including major world powers like the EU and UN, who came together to negotiate with

65 “Uzbek Border Town Adjusts to the Taliban as Neighbors.”VoA, August 15, 2023. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/uzbek-border-town-adjusts-to-the-taliban-as-neighbors/7225572.html>

66 Skand R Tayal, “Chentral Asia’s Connect with Afghanistan” in R. K Sawhney (ed.) “Afghanistan Through the Fog of Instability”(New Delhi, Rupa Publishers, 2022), pp. 62–75.

67 “Trade and Transit Top Agenda as Uzbek Delegation Visits Afghanistan.” The Diplomat, November 2, 2023. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/trade-and-transit-top-agenda-as-uzbek-delegation-visits-afghanistan/>

68 Ibid



What is perhaps most remarkable is just how normal relations between the Taliban and Uzbekistan are, despite the reality that no government, including Tashkent, has officially recognised the Taliban regime following its ascent to power in August 2021.

the Taliban. This was seen as a step aimed at gradually integrating Afghanistan into the international community, working on infrastructure cooperation projects in energy and communication. Additionally, Uzbekistan has been keen on continuing its 10-year deal for electricity supply to Afghanistan. What's perhaps most remarkable is just how normal relations between the Taliban and Uzbekistan are, despite the reality that no government, including Tashkent, has officially recognised the Taliban regime following its ascent to power in August 2021.

Tajikistan has historically been the most vocal opponent of the Taliban regime. Notably, at a time (2018–2020) when Uzbeks, Russia, and Iran, among others, had commenced interacting with the Taliban office in Doha, Tajikistan did not open any known channel of communication with the Taliban. Tajikistan was the only neighbouring country to publicly oppose the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August, calling the regime a threat to regional stability. Following the Taliban takeover, Tajikistan also conducted military drills near its border with Afghanistan alongside troops from members of the Russia-led Collective Security Organization (CSTO).⁶⁹ The Taliban, on the other hand, has accused

69 "Hostilities Grow Between Taliban And Tajikistan Amid Border Closure, Truck Seizures". RadioFreeEurope, May 19, 2022. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-tajikistan-border-truck-seizures/31858508.html>

Dushanbe of hosting and supporting the leaders of the National Resistance Front (NRF) and has even threatened Tajikistan with consequences if Dushanbe continues to meddle in Afghanistan's internal affairs.

After the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Tajikistan emphatically demanded the inclusion of ethnic Tajik in the Pashtun-dominated provisional Taliban cabinet. In the past, it had supported the anti-Taliban resistance forces led by fellow Tajik leader Ahmed Shah Masood and later the NRF led by Masood's son. Tajikistan sent an important signal of support to Tajik Afghan resistance by awarding former Afghan President Burhunuddin Rabbani and former Defence Minister, the late Lion of Panjshir, Ahmed Shah Masood, the country's highest honour, 'The Order of Ismoili Somoni' in September 2021. Indeed, the audience for the award was more likely domestic rather than reflecting or having any consequence for dynamics inside of Afghanistan. Since his rise to power in the 1990s, Rahmon has attempted to mobilize Tajik nationalism, an effort that has become more important in recent years as Tajikistan has faced economic hardship and conflict with its neighbour Kyrgyzstan. Tajikistan has accused the Afghan Taliban of hosting militant groups like Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTT) that aim to destabilize the country. In January, the Tajik President urged the CSTO to create a security belt around Afghanistan, claiming that there were more than 40 terrorist camps with about 6,000 militants in northeastern Afghanistan. The Taliban recruitment from Gorno Badakhshan as part of its cohorts



has added to the animosity.⁷⁰ The main reason for such inclusion has been the conflict between the Gorno Badakhshan population and the Tajik government, which has seen major protests in the past years. Apart from security issues, drug trafficking from Afghanistan remains a major concern for Central Asian countries, Tajikistan in particular. According to the US officials, an estimated 30 percent of narcotics flow from Afghanistan to Russia via Central Asia, mostly through Tajikistan.⁷¹ Since the Taliban introduced a ban on poppy cultivation, it has been observed that synthetic drug (such as methamphetamine) trafficking from Afghanistan to neighbouring countries has experienced a surge, with a drastic, nearly twelvefold increase in seizures of the drug in the past five years, according to a report published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).⁷² Tajikistan ranked 11th among countries with the largest quantities of opiate seizures and is naturally worried about the repercussions.

However, there were certain developments pointing towards diplomatic ties in the past year. A Taliban delegation visited Dushanbe at the beginning of 2023, which was neither confirmed

70 "The Dynamics of Central Asian Engagement with the Taliban Government." MP-IDSAs, February 19, 2024. Available at: <https://www.idsas.in/idsacomments/the-dynamics-of-central-asian-engagement-jwahlang-190224>

71 "Central Asia and the Transition in Afghanistan". COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS, US Senate, 2021. Available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-112SPRT71639/html/CPRT-112SPRT71639.htm#:~:text=According%20to%20U.S.%20officials%2C%20an,human%20capacity%2C%20and%20porous%20borders.>

72 "UNODC: Methamphetamine trafficking in and around Afghanistan expanding rapidly as heroin trade slows". UNODC, September 10, 2023. Available at: <https://unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/pressrels/2023/unisnar1476.html#:~:text=KABUL%20VIENNA%2C%2010%20September%20,today%20by%20the%20United%20Nations>

Tajikistan, so far, has not sent a delegation to Kabul in return but has resumed the export of electricity to Afghanistan, citing economic cooperation and helping the suffering Afghan population while rejecting political cooperation with the Taliban-led government.

nor denied by the Tajik government.⁷³ It is known that the delegation members were not travelling on diplomatic visas but on business visas instead. The Taliban delegation met with local authorities and visited the former consulate in Khorog, the capital of the autonomous Gorno-Badakhshan Region and border town to the Afghan Badakhshan region, in March, which was destroyed by an avalanche the previous month.⁷⁴ Tajikistan, so far, has not sent a delegation to Kabul in return but has resumed the export of electricity to Afghanistan, citing economic cooperation and helping the suffering Afghan population while rejecting political cooperation with the Taliban-led government.

Turkmenistan shares a 744-kilometre border with Afghanistan and has followed a foreign policy of neutrality so far. After the Taliban takeover, the Turkmen government permitted border trade. Turkmenistan is keen to implement the 1,814-kilometre Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, which aims to export some 33 billion cubic metres of Turkmen gas annually. There is also CASA-1000, a Central Asia-

73 "Taliban Claims Delegation Visited Afghan Consulate In Neighboring Tajikistan." RadioFreeEurope, March 26, 2023. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-tajikistan-consulate-visit/32334909.html>

74 Ibid



Contrary to conventional wisdom, the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from the region did not open up a security vacuum. Instead, a more confident Central Asia engaged directly with the Taliban on important projects that have been stalled for years, if not decades.

South Asia power project, which would export excess hydroelectric power from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan into Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan would benefit not only from access to electricity but also from transit fees. The Turkmen leadership is currently seeking good relations with the Taliban regime. It provides humanitarian aid and electricity to Afghanistan and was the first Central Asian country to recognise the takeover of the government by the Taliban.⁷⁵

Overall, after returning to power, the Taliban have been able to usher in an era of relative quiet in Afghanistan. In turn, this has yielded an era of cooperation with Central Asia. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from the region did not open up a security vacuum. Instead, a more confident Central Asia engaged directly with the Taliban on important projects that have been stalled for years, if not decades. Rather than taking their cues from the United States or Russia, the states of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, have charted their own course. This growing cooperation is manifested in increasing levels of bilateral trade

75 "Turkmenistan: Berdymukhamedov passes the mantle (and phone)." Eurasianet, March 22, 2022. Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-berdymukhamedov-passes-the-mantle-and-phone>

as well as the resurrection and revitalization of stalled regional infrastructure and energy projects that have long been the dream of Central Asian states. Yet, there are issues that are causing irritation in relations between Afghanistan and its three immediate Central Asian neighbours.

1. *The Qosh Tapa Water Canal Project*

Initiated by the previous government, the Taliban has continued with the implementation of the Qosh Tapa Water Canal Project. The Taliban announced on March 31, 2022, that a canal project has been launched to use the water of the Amudarya River.⁷⁶ It is known to be 280-kilometre long, 100-metre wide, and 8.5-metres deep. Once completed, it will have the opportunity to irrigate 550 thousand hectares of land in the provinces of Balkh, Jawzjan, and Faryab, bordering Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Its total cost is estimated to be around 680 million dollars (60 billion Afs).⁷⁷ The Taliban has attached great importance to this project and has called it a ‘national and vital project’.⁷⁸ It can be said that they see this project as an opportunity of proving themselves as a provider of services to the people of Afghanistan. Emphasising that they have managed to build Phase 1 with their internal funding ahead of scheduled time, the Taliban try to highlight self-sufficiency in the development of the country. For this reason, intensive activities

76 “The Qosh Tapa Irrigation Canal project in the north of the country has been progressing quickly.” Deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, website, January 2, 2023. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gjmitmg4k_w&ab_channel=%40FDPM_AFG.

77 “Taliban’s Qosh Tapa Canal Step”. Ankara Centre for Crisis and Policy Studies, June 3, 2023. Available at: <https://www.ankasam.org/the-talibans-qosh-tepa-canal-step/?lang=en>

78 “Baradar assess progress of key Qosh Tapa Canal,” ATN News, March 8, 2023, <https://www.ariananews.af/baradar-assess-progress-of-key-qosh-tepa-canal/>, (accessed 25 July 2023)



Qosh Tepa Water Canal Project Plan



Source: Radio Free Europe

are being carried out simultaneously at 120 sites to complete and implement the canal as soon as possible.⁷⁹

Water insecurity is already on the rise in Central Asia, where a third of the region's population lacks access to safe water. The Qosh Tepa Canal, once completed, will only add to the stress on the Aral Basin. It aims to divert around 10–13 BCM from the Amu Darya annually (approximately 10–15 percent), with the highest volume of diversion (approximately 9.5 BCM) occurring in the peak irrigation season from May to August.⁸⁰ The reduction of Amu Darya's flow

79 "The Qosh Tepa Irrigation Canal project in the north of the country has been progressing quickly," Deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, website, January 2, 2023. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJmitmg4k_w&ab_channel=%40FDPM_AFG.

80 Charting Complex Currents: The Qosh Tepa Canal and Central Asia's Water. New Security Beat, August 18, 2023. Available at: <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2023/08/charting-complex-currents-qosh-tepa-canal-central-asias-water/>

The Taliban had fought alongside a range of foreign terror organisations, among them groups, such as Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), which have had Central Asia-centric agendas.

is likely to threaten agriculture, worsen water shortages, and risk aggravating the socio-economic and environmental situation in Central Asia. It will undoubtedly impact downstream regions in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, especially their agriculture, fishing, and cotton industries. Moreover, the rapid pace with which the project is being implemented by the Taliban has also raised concerns about the efficacy and safety of the project. Reportedly, Qosh Tepa is unlined, which means the canal could lose 60 percent of its water in seepage and face water quality issues.⁸¹ Uzbekistan (and, to a lesser extent, Turkmenistan) have already engaged with the Taliban over the canal issue due to its potential impacts, but bilateral approaches have not brought any inclusive solutions to the regional transboundary water challenges. Unsurprisingly, therefore, during the first trilateral summit meeting between the presidents of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in August, cooperation on water resources emerged as a key issue for participating countries.⁸² Whether a collective approach towards the Taliban on the Qosh Tepa Canal can bring results will be known only later.

2. Threat of Terrorism for Central Asia

UN Sanctions Monitor reported in April 2024 that ‘the high concentration of terrorist groups in Afghanistan undermines the

81 “Afghanistan Seeks to Control Its Own Water Destiny.” *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2023. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/afghanistan-seeks-to-control-its-own-water-destiny/>

82 “A Perspective on First Sub-Regional Trilateral Summit in Central Asia.” ICWA View Point, August 28, 2023. Available at: https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=9872&lid=6309.



security situation in the region'.⁸³ Two of the most prominent such groups are Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, the Afghanistan-based affiliate of the Islamic State) and Al Qaeda (AQ). When the Taliban seized power in Kabul in August 2021, they promised that Afghanistan would not be used as a base for terrorist attacks against neighbouring countries or any other country. This pledge was crucial for neighbouring countries and the United States, but the promise lacked credibility. The Taliban had fought alongside a range of foreign terror organisations, among them groups, such as Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), which have had Central Asia-centric agendas.

JA (also known as 'Tajik Taliban'), for example, is a Tajik Islamist Movement currently based out of Badakhshan province in Afghanistan aims to bring down the Rahmon government in Tajikistan.⁸⁴ In July 2021, when the Taliban was capturing provinces in Afghanistan, it was reported that the Taliban had put JA in charge of security in five districts the Taliban seized near the Tajik border in Badakhshan province.⁸⁵ Reportedly, JA militants are currently using video to call Tajik countrymen to take up arms against the government and to not fear being accused of terrorism. One video also called Afghanistan a 'country where the mujahedeen govern', highlighting the group's affinity for the Taliban government.⁸⁶

83 "Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan". Congressional Research Service, April 2, 2024. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10604#:~:text=Reports%20on%20Terrorism-,U.N.,response%20to%20Chinese%20government%20concerns>.

84 "Tajikistan Seeks Regional Partners to Counter Threats from Afghanistan." The Jamestown Foundation, October 31, 2023. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/tajikistan-seeks-regional-partners-to-counter-threats-from-afghanistan/>

85 "Taliban Puts Tajik Militants Partially In Charge Of Afghanistan's Northern Border." Radio Free Europe, July 27, 2021. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-tajik-militants-border/31380098.html>

86 Ibid

This came after JA's attempted crossing at the Afghan border in the Davraz district in early September 2023, which resulted in the deaths of three militants as well as the seizure of a cache of weapons, ammunition, and explosives.⁸⁷ The establishment of TTT in July 2022 further alarmed Dushanbe and highlighted how the security situation in Central Asia linked to Afghanistan has deteriorated since the Taliban took power in Kabul in August 2021.⁸⁸ TTT is reportedly formed in northern Afghanistan to unite people from Tajikistan under the Taliban brand and overthrow the Rahmon government in Dushanbe. The leader is Mehdi Arsalan, aka Mohammad Sharipov, a native of Tajikistan who had previously moved to Afghanistan, where he fought in the ranks of the Afghan Taliban.⁸⁹

IMU is committed to topple the government in Uzbekistan and was once a prominent ally of AQ. After US military operations began in 2001, AQ's focus was in Afghanistan and Pakistan. UN Sanctions Monitor reported that the IMU, along with other Central Asian terrorist groups, has 'greater freedom of movement' in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime.⁹⁰ The IJU is another extremist organisation that splintered from the IMU in the early

87 "Tajikistan kills 3 Jamaat Ansarullah militants on Afghanistan border" Kabul Now, September 6, 2023. Available at: <https://kabulnow.com/2023/09/tajikistan-kills-3-jamaat-ansarullah-militants-on-afghanistan-border/>

88 "Tajikistan Faces Threat from Tajik Taliban". The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, March 27, 2023. Available at: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13750-tajikistan-faces-threat-from-tajik-taliban.html>

89 "Tehrik-e Taliban Tajikistan and terrorist threat in Tajikistan and Central Asia." Special Eurasia, July 25, 2022. Available at: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/07/25/tehrick-e-taliban-tajikistan/>

90 "Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan". Congressional Research Service, April 2, 2024. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10604#:~:text=Reports%20on%20Terrorism,-U.N.,response%20to%20Chinese%20government%20concerns.>



The presence and expanding footprint of militant organisation, such as the ISKP, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, and the TTP close to Central Asian states, are matters of grave concern for them.

2000s and is active in Afghanistan, where it operates alongside the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani Network.⁹¹

The presence and expanding footprint of militant organisation, such as the ISKP, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, and the TTP close to Central Asian states, are matters of grave concern for them. In April and May 2022, respectively, ISKP launched rockets from Afghan territory into the country's northern neighbours of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.⁹² Although these rockets resulted in no casualties or failed to explode, this was the first time Uzbek territory had been attacked from Afghanistan in recent memory. The ISKP has been expanding its presence in the region and is focused on recruiting Central Asians. There are reports that ISKP training camps have emerged along Afghanistan's borders with China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.⁹³ Although TTP's activities are not Central Asia-centric, a development in June 2023 created concerns in Central Asian capitals regarding the group. News emerged that an agreement between the Taliban and Pakistan had been reached to relocate TTP members to Afghanistan's northern region to keep

91 "Central Asia and Central Eurasia Terrorism". Available at: https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/central_eurasia.html

92 "Islamic State Khorasan Claims Rocket Attack on Uzbekistan", VoA, April 18, 2022. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-khorasan-claims-rocket-attack-on-uzbekistan-/6534866.html>

93 "The Islamic State's Central Asian Contingents and Their International Threat", Hudson Institute, Oct 16, 2023. Available at: <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-asian-contingents-their-international-threat>

them away from Pakistan's borders.⁹⁴ The planned relocation involves around 72,000 individuals, including TTP fighters and their family members.⁹⁵ Reportedly, approximately 300 individuals have already been resettled in the northeastern province of Takhar, close to the Tajikistan border, leading to clashes with the area's predominantly Uzbek residents.⁹⁶ Post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan, CARs have relied on the Taliban to prevent non-state actors from operating in northern Afghanistan and launching cross-border attacks. Yet, recurrent ISKP attacks in northern Afghanistan suggest that the Taliban are losing control of the Islamic State. The deteriorating security environment in northern Afghanistan is bad news across the border in Central Asia.

CHINA

China was among the first nations to open a diplomatic channel with the Taliban regime and declared that it was ready for 'friendly and cooperative'⁹⁷ relations with the regime—the groundwork for that prompt decision, however, was laid down much earlier. Over the years, China has maintained direct communication with the Taliban, and both sides have met on several occasions, bilaterally and internationally, underscoring China's warming ties with the Islamist group. A few days before the Taliban takeover, Chinese

94 "Pakistan Cautiously Lauds Afghan Taliban's Moves to Counter Cross-Border Terrorism." Voice of America, July 18, 2023. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-cautiously-lauds-afghan-taliban-s-moves-to-counter-cross-border-terrorism-/7172654.html> (Accessed on 25.8.23)

95 Taliban, Pakistan Reach Settlement on TTP Members' Relocation to Northern Afghanistan, Khaama Press, June 13, 2023. Available at: <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-pakistan-reach-settlement-on-ttp-members-relocation-to-northern-afghanistan/>

96 Ibid

97 "China ready for 'friendly relations' with Taliban, welcomes Afghan development projects." France 24, August 16, 2021. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210816-china-ready-for-friendly-relations-with-taliban-welcomes-afghan-development-projects> (Accessed on 9.4.2022)



China became the first country to appoint an Ambassador to Afghanistan in September 2023, igniting speculations as to whether these developments signal China's readiness to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted a high-profile meeting with a Taliban delegation in Tianjin where he recognised the Taliban as 'a critical military and political force' in the country, which is expected to play an important role in the peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction of Afghanistan.⁹⁸ The host also managed to extract assurances from the Taliban that China's security concerns would be addressed.

Following the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan, China was the first country to pledge emergency humanitarian aid (worth \$31 million) to Afghanistan.⁹⁹ The Taliban regime, which has been facing a humanitarian catastrophe and economic meltdown, welcomed Beijing's prompt delivery of food and medical supplies, and that set the stage for deepening political and economic ties between the two sides.

In March 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a surprise visit to Afghanistan and met his Afghan counterpart in Kabul.¹⁰⁰ Beijing also invited the Taliban to send representatives to the Third

98 "China says Taliban expected to play 'important' Afghan peace role" Reuters, July 29, 2021. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/taliban-delegation-visits-china-taliban-spokesperson-2021-07-28/#:~:text=Nine%20Taliban%20representatives%20met%20Foreign,discussed%2C%20a%20Taliban%20spokesperson%20said>.

99 "China offers \$31m in emergency aid to Afghanistan". BBC, September 9, 2021. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-58496867>(Accessed on 9.4.2022)

100 China's foreign minister makes surprise Afghanistan trip. Deutsche Welle, March 24, 2022. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/chinas-foreign-minister-makes-surprise-afghanistan-trip/a-61249265> (Accessed on 9.4.2022)

Foreign Ministers' Meeting among the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, in the city of Tunxi on March 31, 2022, and this was the first time a Taliban official has attended the meeting of China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.¹⁰¹ The first chapter of this dialogue was hosted in Islamabad in September 2021, immediately after the Taliban seized power from the Ashraf Ghani regime, while Iran hosted the second meeting in late October in Tehran, where the Taliban did not participate.

China became the first country to appoint an Ambassador to Afghanistan in September 2023, igniting speculations as to whether these developments signal China's readiness to recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. However, at that point, Beijing chose to play down the hopes for a formal recognition of the regime by stating that the Taliban will need to introduce political reforms, improve security, and mend relations with its neighbours in order to be considered for full diplomatic recognition.¹⁰² Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Wang Wenbin said 'China believes that Afghanistan should not be excluded from the international community' and that 'diplomatic recognition of the Afghan government will come naturally as the concerns of various parties are effectively addressed'.¹⁰³ China was among the 11 regional and neighbouring countries to be invited by the Taliban when they

101 "China holds multinational meetings to discuss Afghanistan." Al Jazeera, March 30, 2022. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/30/china-holds-multinational-meetings-to-discuss-afghanistan> (Accessed on 9.4.2022)

102 "China became the first country to host Taliban Ambassador". ICWA Viewpoint, December 14, 2024. Available at: https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10268&lid=6538(Accessed on 30.1.24)

103 "China seeks a more 'inclusive' Taliban". Radio Free Asia, December 5, 2023. Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/afghanistan-taliban-ambassador-12052023145223.html>



China blamed the United States for allowing the security situation to deteriorate by ‘hastily’ withdrawing all its troops from the country and leaving behind a ‘mess and turmoil’ for the Afghan people.

hosted their first international meeting in January 2024.¹⁰⁴ Shortly after that, Chinese President Xi Jinping formally accepted the credentials of Bilal Karimi as the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan’s envoy to China in a formal ceremony, along with ambassadors from Cuba, Pakistan, Iran, and 38 other countries.¹⁰⁵

On the diplomatic front, China has made efforts to rally international support and aid for rebuilding Afghanistan, particularly by calling on the international community to lift sanctions and unfreeze Afghan foreign assets. Correspondingly, Beijing and Pakistan have come together to urge the Western powers to engage the Taliban and to provide assistance to the country. The Taliban regime is aware that Beijing’s backing is crucial for obtaining international legitimacy and thus has tried to accommodate Chinese concerns. A UN Report¹⁰⁶ while stated that ‘there are no recent signs that the Taliban has taken steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters in the country’, did suggest that the

104 “Taliban hosts ‘Afghanistan Regional Cooperation Initiative’ Meeting in Kabul” ICWA View Point, January 31, 2024. Available at: https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=10456&lid=6670.

105 “China’s President Receives Afghan Ambassador; Taliban Seek Recognition From Russia, Iran.” Voice of America, Jan 30, 2024. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-president-receives-afghan-ambassador-taliban-seek-recognition-from-russia-iran-/7463837.html> (Accessed on 31.1.24)

106 Letter dated 3 February 2022 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council. Feb 3, 2022. Available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/416/14/PDF/N2141614.pdf?OpenElement> (Accessed on 12.4.2022)

Taliban is placing operational restrictions on a group that is of particular interest to China, like the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) or East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). China, on its part, has carried on with its economic and political engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and has largely maintained silence over its detrimental domestic policies. China has consistently affirmed its respect for Afghanistan's national sovereignty and its autonomy in decision-making. Furthermore, China has explicitly stated its non-interference in Afghanistan's domestic affairs.

China blamed the United States for allowing the security situation to deteriorate by 'hastily' withdrawing all its troops from the country and leaving behind a 'mess and turmoil' for the Afghan people.¹⁰⁷ It believes that it is the US' responsibility and obligation to address the critical situation in Afghanistan. Beijing strongly slammed President Biden's executive order to free 7 billion US dollars (out of more than 9 billion frozen Afghan assets) and split the money between humanitarian aid for Afghanistan and a fund for 9/11 victims. Despite US support for the previous regime and the lost US-Taliban war, China is concerned about the US' continued influence in the region. Whenever news of Taliban-US cooperation has emerged, especially about intelligence sharing, China has been concerned. After the US exit from Afghanistan, there were expectations in some quarters that China would step in and fill the security, economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian void. However, that kind of proactive involvement has been absent. China's footprint in Afghanistan remains relatively modest, and based on

107 "China blames US for Afghan crisis." The Hindustan Times, September 2021. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-blames-us-for-afghan-crisis-101626030047818.html>



the trajectory of engagement with the regime post-August 2021, it can be argued that China's strategy in Afghanistan is guided by its dual interest in Afghanistan.

1. *Security Interest*

In April 2023, China issued its 11-point position paper on Afghanistan, giving a clear indication of Beijing's policy towards the crisis-ridden country and the areas it will prioritize in its engagement with the Taliban moving forward.¹⁰⁸ For Beijing, security remains a priority in its relationship with the Taliban. It would want to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for terrorist groups such as the ETIM, a Uyghur group that Beijing blames for unrest in its western Xinjiang Province. Some analysts viewed the presence of the Chinese Military Attaché by the side of the newly appointed Envoy on September 13, as an indication of the priority security concerns occupy in the dynamics between the two countries.¹⁰⁹ However, there are differing perspectives on the extent to which the ETIM poses a direct threat to China from Afghanistan at present. A UN report suggests that the ETIM numbers (just a few hundred individuals) were already relocated from the bordering Badakhshan region to other parts of the country by the Taliban in what appears to be an effort to restrain their activities against China.¹¹⁰

108 "China's Position on the Afghan Issue". Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, April 12, 2023. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230412_11057785.html (Accessed on 18.9.23.)

109 "China Appoints First Ambassador to Afghanistan Since Taliban Return." Voice of America, Sep 13, 2023. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-appoints-ambassador-to-afghanistan-for-first-time-since-taliban-s-return/7266961.html> (Accessed on 18.9.23)

110 United Nations, Security Council, "Twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities", S/2022/83, February 3, 2022, pp. 16-17.

China's economic interests are diverse, ranging from infrastructure projects to mining and energy development.

Chinese concerns, however, also include Afghanistan being used by terrorist groups as a base for training and organising or distributing propaganda, which could spill over into other countries in Central and South Asia where the Chinese presence is much more substantial in terms of investment and the number of Chinese nationals. Attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan only heighten such concerns.¹¹¹

2. *Economic Interest*

China's economic interests are diverse, ranging from infrastructure projects to mining and energy development. China has expressed its interest in investing in Afghanistan's abundant natural resources, which are estimated to have a total value of approximately \$1 trillion. These resources encompass substantial deposits of copper, lithium, and gold.¹¹² In April 2022, the Taliban approved a \$216 million Chinese investment project for an industrial park outside Kabul, which is expected to host 150 factories.¹¹³ Reportedly, in 2023, Chinese telecom giant

111 Delaney, R., 'China faces an increase in extremist threats in Central Asia, US panel is told', South China Morning Post, May 13, 2022. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3177557/china-faces-increase-extremist-threats-central-asia-us-panel>. (Accessed on 18.9.23)

112 "China Eyes Afghanistan's \$1 Trillion of Minerals with Risky bet on Taliban". Bloomberg, August 24, 2021. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-24/china-s-eyes-1-trillion-of-minerals-with-risky-bet-on-taliban> (Accessed on 19.9.23.)

113 'Chinese businesses make headway in Afghanistan despite Beijing's cautious approach to Taliban', South China Morning Post, August 28, 2022. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3190469/chinese-businesses-make-headway-afghanistan-despite-beijings>. (Accessed on 19.9.23.)



When the United States was negotiating a peace deal with the Taliban, India was apprehensive about the arrangement, worried about the return of a group whose allies had repeatedly targeted the Indian Embassy in Kabul and the country's consulates elsewhere in Afghanistan.

Huawei got approval from the top levels of the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan to install CCTV cameras across provinces, raising concerns that Beijing is advancing towards profiling Afghans to increase its influence in the country.¹¹⁴ Earlier that year, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan reached an agreement to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, supported by Beijing, into Afghanistan.¹¹⁵ Notably, Afghanistan occupies a central position within a region that holds significant importance for Beijing's Belt and Road infrastructure initiative. Hosting each other's envoys in a way signals both China and the Taliban's willingness to forge closer ties with each other.

INDIA

India has a 106-kilometre land border with Afghanistan¹¹⁶ and has had a strong relationship with its neighbour based on historical and cultural ties. India had particularly close ties with the

114 "Is Profiling China's New Game Plan in Afghanistan? Huawei to Install CCTVs in All Provinces." News 18, August 18, 2023. Available at: <https://www.news18.com/world/is-profiling-chinas-new-game-plan-in-afghanistan-huawei-to-install-cctvs-in-all-provinces-exclusive-8540583.html>. (Accessed on 19.9.23_)

115 "China and Pakistan agree to extend Belt and Road Initiative to Afghanistan." WION, May 7, 2023. Available at: <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/china-and-pakistan-agree-to-extend-belt-and-road-initiative-to-afghanistan-590042>. (Accessed on 19.9.23_)

116 "India's International Land border". The Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Available at: <https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/BMIntro-1011.pdf>

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, India's policy towards Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has been shaped by factors such as prioritizing the needs of the Afghan people and in this context is taking incremental steps towards that objective.

democratic Afghan governments and played a significant role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan post-2001. India was one of the largest suppliers of aid and assistance to the Afghan Republic, having contributed close to \$3 billion between 2002 and 2021. When the United States was negotiating a peace deal with the Taliban, India was apprehensive about the arrangement, worried about the return of a group whose allies had repeatedly targeted the Indian Embassy in Kabul and the country's consulates elsewhere in Afghanistan. The worst of those attacks, the 2008 bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul, killed 58 people.¹¹⁷ Unlike other regional countries, India refrained from engaging with the Taliban before they seized power once again in Afghanistan in 2021.

UNSC Resolution 2593 was passed by the UNSC under the Presidency of India on August 30, 2021, with Russia and China abstaining from voting.¹¹⁸ The resolution demanded that Afghan territory should not be used to threaten or attack any country, to shelter or train terrorists, or to plan or finance terrorist acts. While reiterating the importance of combating terrorism in Afghanistan, the resolution also called for action against individuals and entities designated by UNSC Resolution 1267, i.e., Lashker-e-Taiba and

117 "Indian embassy in Afghan capital attacked again." Reuters, October 9, 2009. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE59761X/>

118 "UNSC 2593 is mantra for delisting Taliban shadowy leaders." Hindustan Times, September 11, 2021. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/uns-2593-is-mantra-for-delisting-taliban-shadowy-leaders-101631332467958.html>



For the Taliban, notwithstanding their ideological rigidity, the dire need for development assistance and the quest for the stability of the regime demand engagement with regional countries.

Jaish-e-Mohammed (1999).¹¹⁹ The first public engagement between the two sides took place on August 31, 2021, when the Indian Ambassador to Qatar met Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, the Head of the Taliban's Political Office in Doha, at the request of the Taliban side.¹²⁰ This was followed by a meeting of a Ministry of External Affairs delegation with the Taliban representatives on the sidelines of the Moscow Format Dialogue on Afghanistan in Moscow on October 19, 2021.¹²¹ India has time and again reiterated that its approaches towards Afghanistan are focused on the people of Afghanistan and their well-being.

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, India's policy towards Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has been shaped by factors such as prioritizing the needs of the Afghan people and in this context is taking incremental steps towards that objective. India may have realised that its strategic aloofness could prove detrimental to its own interests. When most of Afghanistan's neighbours, including China, Pakistan, Iran, and four Central Asian states, engaged the Taliban, pursuing such an approach might come at the cost of India's

119 Ibid

120 "Meeting in Doha". Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India, August 31, 2021. Available at: https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34208/Meeting_in_Doha#:~:text=Today%2C%20Ambassador%20of%20India%20to,request%20of%20the%20Taliban%20side.

121 "Indian Delegation Meets Taliban Team on Sidelines of Moscow Format Meet on Afghanistan," India Today, October 21, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/taliban-delegation-meets-indian-official-on-sidelines-of-moscow-format-afghanistan-talks-in-russia-1867249-2021-10-20>.

prospect of securing its strategic objective. For India, it makes sense to try to give some reason, in the form of diplomatic exchanges and developmental assistance, for the Taliban not to permit the export of terrorism from Afghan soil.¹²² For the Taliban, notwithstanding their ideological rigidity, the dire need for development assistance and the quest for the stability of the regime demand engagement with regional countries. In June 2022, New Delhi decided to deploy a ‘Technical team’ at the Indian Embassy in Kabul to re-establish its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan for the first time since the Taliban takeover.¹²³

Post-2021, India’s efforts in Afghanistan have focused on humanitarian aid as well as supporting the people through medicines, vaccines, and food. In order to avert the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, India supplied 40,000 metric tons (MT)¹²⁴ of wheat overland via Pakistan in February 2022 and an additional 20,000 MT via Iran’s Chabahar port¹²⁵ in March 2023 to be distributed through the UN World Food Programme (WFP), along with 45 tons of medical assistance in October 2022, including essential life-saving medicines, anti-TB medicines, 500,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines, winter clothing, and tons of disaster relief

122 “India-Taliban Relations: A Careful balancing act driven by pragmatism”. Middle East Institute, May 30, 2023. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-taliban-relations-careful-balancing-act-driven-pragmatism>

123 “India re-establishes diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, deploys technical team” The Hindustan Times, June 24, 2022. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-re-establishes-diplomatic-presence-in-afghanistan-deploys-technical-team-101656001272895.html>

124 “India Makes New Commitment to Supply 20,000 MT of Wheat to Afghanistan.” The Wire, March 7, 2023. Available at: <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-afghanistan-wheat-supply-new-commitment>

125 “In a first since Taliban takeover, India to deliver aid to Afghanistan via Chabahar port.” Wion, March 7, 2023. Available at: <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/in-a-first-since-taliban-takeover-india-to-deliver-aid-to-afghanistan-via-chabahar-port-569704>



material, among other supplies.¹²⁶ In addition, India's Union Budget for 2023–2024 and 2024–2025 also made special provisions for a \$25 million development aid package for Afghanistan, which has been welcomed by the Taliban.¹²⁷ The Taliban have requested that India finish about 20 incomplete infrastructure development projects across the country.¹²⁸ New Delhi has been constrained to take a call on the issue of VISAs due to security considerations. Immediately after the Taliban takeover, the Indian government announced a new emergency e-visa category for Afghans. The demand for Indian e-visas further sky-rocketed when India cancelled all unutilized visas granted before August 15, 2021 and that resulted in the enormous loss of goodwill for India.

Historically, Indo-Afghan ties have centred on people-to-people connections, irrespective of who is in power. India has been the most favourable destination for students coming from Afghanistan, with more than 60,000 Afghans having completed their studies in India in the past 16 years.¹²⁹ Immediately after India sent its official team to Afghanistan in 2022, there were reports suggesting that the Taliban was seeking training for its army personnel in India.¹³⁰ In the post-Taliban reality in Kabul, keeping its security

126 "India Delivers fresh Batch of medical supplies to Afghanistan". Mint.com, October 11, 2022. Available at: <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/india-delivers-fresh-batch-of-medical-supplies-to-afghanistan-11665476982780.html>

127 "Afghan Taliban Government welcomes budget". The Economic Times, February 3, 2023. Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/afghan-taliban-government-welcomes-budget/articleshow/97561107.cms>

128 "India May Restart 20 Stalled Projects In Afghanistan, Says Taliban: Report". NDTV, December 1, 2022. Available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-may-restart-20-projects-in-afghanistan-taliban-3567520>

129 "Can't return to Taliban, can't stay in uncertainty in India—Afghan students' woes only rise". The Print, August 18, 2022. Available at: <https://theprint.in/feature/cant-return-to-taliban-cant-stay-in-uncertainty-in-india-afghan-students-woes-only-rise/1087581/>

130 "Taliban want army training in India". The Indian Express, June 11, 2022. Available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/jun/11/taliban-want-army-training-in-india-2464223.html>

The present security situation in Afghanistan is a matter of grave concern for India, and it wants to curb any terrorism threat to India arising from Afghanistan under the Taliban-led regime.

considerations in mind, New Delhi started offering 1000 ICCR Scholarships annually to Afghan citizens for online undergraduate and postgraduate programmes starting from the academic years 2023 to 2024.¹³¹ Under the India Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme, Afghan officials attended a four-day virtual course on Indian legislation and business climate at IIM Kozhikode in 2023.¹³² The Taliban have sought India's assistance in rebuilding their country. For a regime that has been diplomatically and financially isolated, its engagement with India also holds much pragmatic appeal, given New Delhi's growing geopolitical influence and longstanding interest in accessing Central Asian markets via Afghanistan. However, it would be interesting to understand the factors that may have propelled New Delhi to engage with the Taliban in Afghanistan:

Security threat: The present security situation in Afghanistan is a matter of grave concern for India, and it wants to curb any terrorism threat to India arising from Afghanistan under the Taliban-led regime. On various international platforms, India has underlined the need to ensure that Afghan territory does not become a source of radicalisation and terrorism (both regionally and globally).

131 Scholarships for Afghan Nationals 2023-2024. Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Govt. of India. Available at: <https://iccr.gov.in/scholarships-afghan-nationals-online-courses-ay-2023-24>.

132 "India is teaching the Taliban how to run an economy", Quartz, March 15, 2023. Available at: <https://qz.com/india-is-teaching-the-taliban-how-to-run-an-economy-1850227155>



The concerns and interests of the regional countries towards the Taliban vary, and so do their policy approaches vis-à-vis the Taliban regime. However, one thing is evident that these countries believe contacts with the regime are necessary, even though the intensity of engagement may differ.

Smuggling of weapons: The United States left behind \$7 billion of military equipment in Afghanistan after 2021, and the dangers of these weapons falling into the hands of terrorists are another concern for India. In 2022, there were reports that bombs and weapons used in Afghanistan by NATO forces and militants were making their way into Jammu and Kashmir, raising fears that they could bolster an Islamist insurgency in the area.¹³³

Regional Stability: India has a legitimate interest in the stability of Afghanistan and in the preservation of the goodwill it has traditionally enjoyed in the country. Afghanistan is important to India's continental economic aspirations, including closer ties with Central Asia and Iran.

The above discussion highlights that the concerns and interests of the regional countries towards the Taliban vary, and so do their policy approaches vis-à-vis the Taliban regime. However, one thing is evident that these countries believe contacts with the regime are necessary, even though the intensity of engagement may differ. The past years indicate that Kabul and its regional partners are trying to develop a modus vivendi in regards to issues of mutual concern, which range from halting transnational militancy, boosting trade, and managing disputes over water and borders. The following

133 "How NATO weapons affect Kashmir militancy". DW, May 18, 2022. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/how-nato-weapons-from-afghanistan-are-impacting-kashmir-militancy/a-61838513>

Many felt that those initial promises were made not only to give an impression to the international community that the current regime would be different from its former *avatar* but also to make a case for international recognition.

section throws light on Kabul's approach towards the immediate neighbourhood and, in the process, discusses some of the factors that may have influenced the formulation of the Taliban's approach.

Taliban's Thrust on the Region

After taking charge of the Afghan capital on August 15, 2021, the Taliban promised women's rights, media freedom, and an 'amnesty' for government officials across the country.¹³⁴ At their first press conference on August 17, Taliban Spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, assured that the Taliban sought no revenge and that 'everyone is forgiven'.¹³⁵ There were also talks about an 'inclusive' government, although it was not clear why the Taliban would want this since it has already emerged as the 'victorious' side. Many felt that those initial promises were made not only to give an impression to the international community that the current regime would be different from its former avatar but also to make a case for international recognition. However, not a single foreign government or multilateral organisation formally acknowledged the Taliban-controlled government. The uniform refusal may have angered the

134 "Taliban offers amnesty, promises women's rights and media freedom." Al Jazeera, August 17, 2021. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/evacuation-flights-resume-as-biden-defends-afghanistan-pullout>

135 "Taliban Declares complete amnesty across Afghanistan." The Economic Times, August 18, 2021. Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/taliban-declares-complete-amnesty-across-afghanistan-says-everyone-is-forgiven/articleshow/85418061.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed on 3.8.2022)



Ever since the Taliban returned to power,
speculations about factionalism within the Taliban
leadership have punctuated headlines.

Taliban's more conservative elements, splitting the movement into two camps: one, a Kabul-based interim government, that sought a thaw with the West; and the other, gathered around the Kandahar headquarters of the hardline Emir, Hibatullah Akhundzada, that rejected this notion.¹³⁶ The Emir's camp, got convinced that the Taliban should bolster their movement's cohesion and the regime's prospects for survival by reintroducing strict policies their earlier regime had decreed in the 1990s.¹³⁷ Rolling out a series of harsh edicts on women's rights in 2022 and 2023,¹³⁸ the Emir showed his defiance of the West and reassured his followers that the Taliban regime would not compromise.

Ever since the Taliban returned to power, speculations about factionalism within the Taliban leadership have punctuated headlines. In the initial days, it was said that the Taliban movement, consisting predominantly of Pashtuns, is divided along ethnic, regional, and tribal lines; in the later period, differences in policy issues were talked about. Around mid-2022, senior leaders of the Taliban had resorted to rare public criticism of each other, reigniting internal rift speculations over whether girls should be allowed

136 "The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy and Afghanistan." International Crisis Group, January 30, 2024. Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/337-talibans-neighbourhood-regional-diplomacy-afghanistan#_ftn3

137 Ibid

138 "Taliban's restriction of women's rights deepen Afghanistan Crisis". International Crisis Group, February 23, 2023. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/329-taliban-restrictions-womens-rights-deepen-afghanistans-crisis>

to receive an education. The Taliban's deputy Foreign Minister, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, publicly criticized the Taliban leadership for banning girls from attending secondary school by stating, 'We must aim for winning the hearts of our people rather than ruling over them with batons'.¹³⁹ The following year, Taliban Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, spoke against the leadership for 'monopolizing' power. He added that the Taliban administration should desist from adopting policies that would drive a wedge between 'the [ruling] system and the people, allowing others to exploit it to defame Islam'.¹⁴⁰ Haqqani's remarks seemed to be directed at the Taliban Supreme Leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada. Renowned Afghanistan expert, Antonio Guustozzi, has argued that the Taliban's suspension of girls' education is likely designed by the Emir to sabotage efforts by members of the cabinet in Kabul to engage with Western countries.¹⁴¹ Not surprisingly, the Taliban remained absent from both the Afghanistan Conferences hosted by the UN in Qatar in 2023 and 2024, where the gender question dominated the conversation. The Taliban's inflexibility, particularly on gender policies, led to a cycle of worsening relations and the shrinking of the diplomatic space with the West even further.

Scholars have argued that as the Taliban gave up hope of winning over the West, its approach shifted towards the region.¹⁴² The Taliban

139 "Unprecedented Differences: Rifts Within The Taliban Come Out In The Open." Radio Free Europe, June 2, 2022. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-rifts-exposed-afghanistan/31880018.html>

140 "Top Taliban Official's Public Criticism Reignites Internal Rift Speculations". VOA, February 13, 2023. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/top-taliban-official-s-public-criticism-reignites-internal-rift-speculations-/6961488.html>

141 Antonio Guustozzi, "China's Current Stakes in Afghanistan". ORF Special Report, No. 233. 2024, pp. 11-16.

142 "The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy and Afghanistan." International Crisis Group, Jan 30, 2024. Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/337-talibans-neighbourhood-regional-diplomacy-afghanistan#_ftn3



insisted on seeking positive relations with the region and beyond. Yet, such statements were often paired with assertions that, as the Taliban do not interfere in foreign countries' internal affairs, others should not meddle in Afghanistan's.¹⁴³ At a time when Afghanistan was facing economic paralysis and a nationwide humanitarian crisis, US President Joe Biden's decision to split \$7 billion of the frozen Afghan assets to fund humanitarian relief in Afghanistan and compensate victims of the September 11, 2001, attacks, further complicated matters between the two sides.¹⁴⁴ Taliban officials also became more vocal about their dissatisfaction with Washington, a sentiment echoed by regional actors like China, Iran, and Russia, which have their own reasons to seek alternatives to a US-led order. However, the neighbourhoods' cautious embrace of Kabul appears to be based not primarily on anti-US sentiment, but on an assessment of what will lead to favourable results they seek with regard to their security and economic concerns. Reportedly, a regional diplomat said, 'The world will not stop and wait for Western sentiment to shift in favour of the Taliban...We are here on the front lines.'¹⁴⁵

The Taliban, on its part, hosted its first international meeting titled 'Afghanistan Regional Cooperation Initiative' in Kabul on January

143 "International community should stop meddling in Afghan affairs: Taliban". Business Standard, April 4, 2024. Available at: https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/international-community-should-stop-meddling-in-afghan-affairs-taliban-122050200180_1.html

144 "Taliban reacts to US plan on frozen assets, says funds belongs to Afghans" Business Standard, February 14, 2022. Available at: https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/taliban-reacts-to-us-plan-on-frozen-assets-says-funds-belongs-to-afghans-122021400093_1.html

145 "Why has China recognised Taliban's envoy to Beijing?" Al Jazeera, February 14, 2024. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/14/is-chinas-recognition-of-afghanistan-envoy-a-diplomatic-win-for-taliban>

29, 2024. According to reports in Afghan media,¹⁴⁶ the key topics of discussion at the meeting included fostering positive interaction between regional countries and the Taliban government, enhancing coordination in regional cooperation, developing a unified regional narrative, and collaborating to harness economic opportunities in the region. The participating countries included India, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Indonesia, and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁴⁷ At the meeting, the Taliban Foreign Minister Muttaqi stated that ‘regional security remains of grave importance’ for the ruling authorities in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁸ As per a statement from the Taliban Foreign Ministry,¹⁴⁹ Muttaqi said that cooperation with regional countries could focus on ‘exploring region-centric and engagement pathways based on common regional benefits, creating a region-centric narrative for positive & constructive engagement with the Afghanistan government to tackle existing & potential threats in the region’. He emphasised

More than three years after the regime change in Afghanistan, the situation within the country continues to evolve, and its immediate neighbours, as a result, are dealing with the evolving realities of Afghanistan.

146 Ibid

147 “Afghanistan’s Taliban Host Multilateral Huddle To Promote Regional Cooperation” Voice of America. January 29, 2024. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-s-taliban-host-multilateral-huddle-to-promote-regional-cooperation/7461769.html>. (Accessed on 30.1.24)

148 “Afghanistan Regional Cooperation Initiative Meeting held in Kabul”. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: The Afghan Official Voice, January 29, 2024. Available at: <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/afghanistans-regional-cooperation-initiative-meeting-held-in-kabul/> (Accessed on 30.1.24)

149 “Afghanistan Regional Cooperation Initiative Meeting held in Kabul”. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: The Afghan Official Voice, 29 Jan, 2024. Available at: <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/afghanistans-regional-cooperation-initiative-meeting-held-in-kabul/> (Accessed on 30.1.24)



the need for positive interactions with the countries of the region and asked the diplomats to convey Taliban's message of a 'region-oriented initiative' to their countries so that Afghanistan and the region can jointly take advantage of new opportunities for the benefit of all.¹⁵⁰

However, given the nature of concerns and issues each neighbouring country has vis-à-vis the current Taliban regime and the ongoing diplomatic crises and security threats across the country's borders, regional countries will be cautious in responding to the Taliban's call. Creating a workable foreign policy for Afghanistan, one that addresses border security, trade expansion, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and water disputes, would require political depth and diplomatic efficiency from Kabul. It remains to be seen how the Taliban navigates and addresses the concerns of its neighbours in the coming days. The following section attempts to throw light on the road ahead for Afghanistan and its immediate neighbours and discusses issues that might impact the trajectory of the relationship in the near future.

Road Ahead for Afghanistan and Its Neighbours?

More than three years after the regime change in Afghanistan, the situation within the country continues to evolve, and its immediate neighbours, as a result, are dealing with the evolving realities of Afghanistan. It is a challenging task to predict with certainty the definite course this dynamic region would take; nonetheless, based on the developments that occurred in the past years, this paper

150 "India among 10 countries to participate in meeting convened by Taliban in Kabul." Hindustan Times, January 29, 2024. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-among-10-countries-to-participate-in-meeting-convened-by-taliban-in-kabul-101706549349569.html> (Accessed on 30.1.24)

The assassination of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, on July 31 2022, in a Kabul house controlled by the acting interior minister raised questions among neighbours about whether the Taliban could be trusted.

identifies certain broad issues that are likely to influence the future trajectory of Afghanistan's relations with its neighbouring countries.

TALIBAN'S ALLEGED SUPPORT FOR ANTI-GOVERNMENT TERROR GROUPS

Afghanistan's immediate neighbours concerned about security treat from Afghanistan. During the US-led era, the task of containment fell to the Western forces, whose counterterrorism operations (despite having flaws) gave the country's neighbours a degree of relief that terrorism issues were given emphasis. The Taliban's return to power heightened concern among the regional countries about the prospect of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for a number of transnational jihadist groups operating from Afghanistan, and they doubted about the Taliban's willingness and ability to rein them in. The assassination of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, on July 31 2022, in a Kabul house controlled by the acting interior minister raised questions among neighbours about whether the Taliban could be trusted. After the US forces killed Zawahiri, the region grew more vigilant about the Taliban providing other militants with safe havens, even accusing them of giving foreign fighters Afghan residency and citizenship documents.¹⁵¹

151 "Taliban issues 3,000 passports to terrorists, says Tajik interior minister", *Afghanistan International*, October 19, 2022.



The Taliban, on its part, has issued decrees to discourage Taliban fighters from undertaking attacks beyond Afghanistan and even proposed a plan to relocate TTP fighters from the AF-Pak border areas, provided Pakistan bears the cost of the proposed plan.

Central Asian states understandably focus on militants in the country's north, near their borders, who have longstanding ambitions to foment rebellion in their countries. According to the UN Monitoring Team report, regional states claim that Afghanistan harbours Al-Qaeda, its local branch, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent; JA; Katiba-e Imam Bukhari; East Turkistan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party; Islamic Jihad Group; Katibah al-Tawhid wal Jihad; the IMU; and others.¹⁵² Many of these smaller groups may not have a large number of fighters, but however tiny, they remain a key priority for China, Russia, and the Central Asian states because the militants in question often belong to Uyghur, Uzbek, Tajik, and other ethnic groups with links to constituencies in their countries.¹⁵³

Compared to militants in the north, their counterparts in the east have more serious transnational risks. While India is concerned about the alleged continued presence of Lashkar-e Tayyiba and Jaish-e Muhammad, the two pan-Islamist groups in Afghanistan that have conducted attacks on Indian soil for decades. The most active group at this point is the TTP, with its Pakistan-centric agenda. The TTP had already become aggressive before 2021 (as

152 Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban", UNSC S/2023/95, February 13, 2023.

153 Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban", UNSC S/2022/419, May 26, 2022.

reflected in graph 1 below), but the Taliban's takeover appears to have significantly emboldened the group, especially after the calling off of a ceasefire in 2022. Jailbreaks during the Taliban's sweep to power set free many TTP prisoners, allowing fighters to leave Afghanistan and resume their war to topple the Pakistani state.¹⁵⁴ Islamabad tried to address this security threat by adapting several tactics: pausing diplomatic efforts to advocate for international engagement with the Taliban; accusing Kabul of violating the 2020 agreement between the United States and the Taliban, which included counter-terrorism provisions; temporarily closing border crossings; and seeking to complete fences and other barriers along a border that the Taliban, like earlier Afghan governments, do not recognise. Frustrated with the Taliban's inaction against TTP, it also adopted certain pressure tactics, such as air and artillery strikes inside Afghanistan, insulting the mass expulsion of Afghan refugees, and restrictions on transit goods bound for Afghanistan, etc.¹⁵⁵ The Taliban, on its part, has issued decrees to discourage Taliban fighters from undertaking attacks beyond Afghanistan and even proposed a plan to relocate TTP fighters from the AF-Pak border areas, provided Pakistan bears the cost of the proposed plan. So far, none of these tactics have delivered the desired results. Javid Ahmad, Non-resident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council, speaking at a webinar on the issue of the Taliban's support for terror groups that target the neighbours of Afghanistan, argued that so far, 'the Taliban regime seem to have preferences both in terms of their current engagement as well as their past engagement, which for now tilts in favour of ensuring that the Afghan Taliban's relationship with its

154 Samina Ahmed, "The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul", Crisis Group Commentary, March 29, 2023.

155 Ibraheem Bahiss, "Pakistan's Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability", Crisis Group Commentary, November 13, 2023.



Due to decades of war and insecurity, Afghanistan lagged behind its neighbours in developing water infrastructure. Meanwhile, other countries have built agricultural sectors that depend on an unhindered supply of water from Afghanistan. The Taliban are now trying to catch up and are pursuing ambitious water projects that are raising concerns in the region.

previous partners remain stable and predictable... The Taliban are not willing to open a different front inside Afghanistan where they have to engage in skirmishes with former tactical collaborators'.¹⁵⁶ It is most likely that various terror groups that target Afghanistan's neighbours will continue to have sanctuaries in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and the Taliban regime may use them as leverage in dealing with the countries in its immediate periphery; that would certainly create room for tensions in the region.

DISPUTES OVER WATER

Years of war and instability have affected Afghanistan's water sector. While the country has a relatively favourable water endowment and enjoys a prime upstream location on the rivers it shares with neighbouring countries, its decaying water sector and severe shortcomings in water resources management leave the country in a state of water stress. Additionally, the impact of climate change, with 80 percent of its water coming from snowmelt and glaciers, made Afghanistan among the most vulnerable countries

156 Javid Ahmad, Non-resident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council speaking at "The Durand Churn: Reassessing Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations" ORF Webinar, December 18, 2023. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xap4eNIH83A&t=355s>

to global warming. About 60 percent of the country's households now suffer water shortages, while hotter winters and precipitous spring seasons are respectively causing droughts and floods.¹⁵⁷ Since its takeover of Afghanistan, the Taliban administration has been undertaking several projects to boost its water infrastructure to address the worsening water situation in the country. It has been observed that water management has emerged as a bone of contention between the Taliban regime in Kabul and neighbouring states. Tensions over water are not a new phenomenon, but they have grown in recent years.

Due to decades of war and insecurity, Afghanistan lagged behind its neighbours in developing water infrastructure. Meanwhile, other countries have built agricultural sectors that depend on an unhindered supply of water from Afghanistan. The Taliban are now trying to catch up and are pursuing ambitious water projects that are raising concerns in the region. Since Afghanistan is an upper riparian state, the neighbours look at Afghan dams and irrigation systems as threats. It is noteworthy that out of Afghanistan's many trans-boundary rivers, only one is subject to a water-sharing agreement. The rest are governed only by international customary law, which calls for 'equitable and reasonable' use of water without clarifying what that phrase entails.¹⁵⁸ Once completed, the Qosh Tepa Water Canal project in the north and the dams on the Helmand River in the south have the potential to adversely impact Afghanistan's relations with its Central Asian neighbours and

157 Tweet by OCHA Afghanistan, @OCHAafg, 1:42pm, May 14, 2023. Crisis Group mapping of Afghan regions affected by floods and droughts between January 1990 and October 2022 shows that rainfall excesses and deficits have become more intense, affecting larger areas for longer periods of time. Available at: <https://twitter.com/ochaafg?lang=en>

158 Mohsen Nagheeb, "Anarchy and the Law of International Watercourses", Northumbria University, 2021.



Iran even further. The quality of construction undertaken by the Taliban has also been a matter of concern for the neighbours. In April 2024, there were reports about alleged water leakage from the Qosh Tapa canal for over a month before a regional environmental watchdog group (Rivers Without Boundaries) blew the whistle. Based on an analysis of satellite imagery, the group attributed the spill to structural flaws in the canal's design.¹⁵⁹ The quality of the construction is also impacted by the rapid pace at which the project is being implemented, and that is largely because the Taliban is looking at it as a project meant to portray their efficient governance (in addition to its practical value) and filling their media outlets with footage shot from drones showing construction in several provinces. So far, the northern neighbours have opted for quiet diplomacy and a non-confrontational approach with the hope that this policy will be the best way of getting the Taliban to cooperate. However, the issue would continue to be a stressful area in the relationship. With respect to the eastern neighbour Pakistan, the water dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the Kabul River has also been simmering. So far, the regime seems to be more invested in the Qosh Tapa Canal and Helmand River dams, but projects on the Kabul River would certainly be on their agenda for

Afghanistan shares borders with seven countries, but the approximate 1500-mile-long Durand Line along Pakistan remains the most conflict-prone, as there is no agreement between the two countries on the border line.

159 "Unexplained spill fuels concern about Afghan canal project." Eurasianet, April 2, 2024. Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/unexplained-spill-fuels-concern-about-afghan-canal-project>

the future, and that should be a legitimate reason for concern for Islamabad in the days to come.

BORDER INSECURITY

Afghanistan shares borders with seven countries, but the approximate 1500-mile-long Durand Line along Pakistan remains the most conflict-prone, as there is no agreement between the two countries on the border line. The Taliban, as a result, has also been reacting to Pakistan's border fencing activities, citing threats to national security. Islamabad, on its part, has accused the Taliban dispensation of harbouring the TTP on the backdrop of its Pashtun identity and providing them with sanctuaries on the Afghan side of the border. The TTP has escalated attacks in Pakistan in the last two years, emboldened by the Taliban's return to power in Kabul. Several approaches were adopted: talks with the TTP, domestic counterterrorism operations, a border fence, and pressure tactics including the expulsion of Afghan refugees, yet nothing has worked. As mentioned earlier, in response to TTP violence in Pakistan, Islamabad has carried out anti-terrorism operations such as air strikes in Afghan territory twice since the Taliban's return to power. Apart from such major actions, there have been several incidents of clashes that have left people wounded and dead on both sides.

Border disputes pit the Afghan and Pakistani governments against each other, and relations between the two sides remain strained for this reason. Due to the clashes, important border crossings like Chaman, Torkham, and Spin-Boldak between the two countries have remained closed but reopened shortly afterwards. The fact that border crossings cannot be kept closed for a long time reveals the density and importance of this border crossing. So, both



Although refugee figures fluctuated over the years, the UNHCR currently estimates over 8 million refugees from Afghanistan reside in various countries, making it the largest protracted refugee population in Asia, and the second largest refugee population in the world.

administrations are in favour of not letting the problems escalate too much. The opening of the border crossing in a short time and Pakistan sending a delegation of mullahs to Afghanistan to discuss border conflicts can be evaluated in this context. Unlike Pakistan's brief cross-border crisis with Iran in January 2024, the situation on the border with Afghanistan has been a continuous one.¹⁶⁰

Although less frequent, Afghanistan has had border clashes with Iran as well, which saw maximum escalation in May 2023 when both sides accused each other of initiating the shooting in which at least two Iranian and one Afghan guard were killed.¹⁶¹ Following the border violence, Iranian authorities closed the Milak-Zaranj border post, an important commercial crossing, which was reopened later. The reasons for the clashes are still unknown, but the shooting at the border post between the Afghan province of Nimroz and Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province comes as Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi accused Afghanistan's Taliban rulers of restricting the flow of water to Iran's eastern regions in violation of the 1973 treaty. The water dispute has clearly emerged as a trigger for border clashes between Iran and Afghanistan, and until the root cause is resolved,

160 "Iran is pushing Pakistan to breaking point". I-news, January 18, 2024. Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/iran-pushing-pakistan-breaking-point-2861199>

161 "What caused deadly Afghan-Iran border clashes? What happens next?" Al Jazeera, May 30, 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/30/what-caused-deadly-afghan-iran-border-clashes-what-happens-next>

there will always be a possibility of such clashes reoccurring and impacting bilateral relations and regional stability.

REFUGEE FLOW

Although refugee figures fluctuated over the years, the UNHCR currently estimates over 8 million refugees from Afghanistan reside in various countries, making it the largest protracted refugee population in Asia, and the second largest refugee population in the world.¹⁶² Five broad waves of Afghan refugees can be identified – The 1979 Soviet intervention of Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 1979 Saur Revolution triggered the first wave of Afghan refugees to the neighboring Iran and Pakistan. The second wave of refugees comprised primarily of the Soviet sympathizers who fled Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The third and fourth waves of refugees from Afghanistan were caused between early 1990s and 2001- due to the intensification conflict and civil war when various Mujahideen factions who were fighting each other in a bid to grab power and when the Taliban seized power for the first time in 1996. Following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 and at the beginning of the US-led era, there was a sense of optimism, million of Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan, ushering a pattern of reverse migration for the first time in Afghanistan’s recent history. However, the deteriorating security situation in the course of the next few years, prompted many Afghans to flee their country and seek refuge elsewhere. The fifth wave of refugee flow out of Afghanistan was witnessed after

162 “Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained”, UNHCR, July 18, 2023. Available at: <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/afghanistan-refugee-crisis-explained/>



The issue of both inflow and deportation of Afghan refugees contributed to the worsening of ties with Pakistan and Iran. The issue of refugees will continue to be a thorn in the Taliban's relations with Iran and Pakistan.

the Taliban seized power in 2021, with an estimated 3.6 million Afghans fleeing their homeland.¹⁶³

Over the decades, Iran and Pakistan have been host to the largest number of Afghan refugees. According to UNHCR, about 5.5 million Afghan refugees and Afghans in a refugee-like situation were residing in these countries around the time of the Taliban takeover in 2021.¹⁶⁴ Subsequently, Pakistan's caretaker government announced on October 2 2023, that it would deport all 'undocumented immigrants', including Afghans, if they did not move out voluntarily by November 1.¹⁶⁵ The Taliban administration had vehemently opposed these decisions, called these moves 'unacceptable', and urged a reconsideration of the matter.¹⁶⁶ Even as Afghanistan went into another downward spiral, after a 6.3-magnitude earthquake hit Herat around the same time, Pakistani authorities decided to move ahead in the process of deporting Afghan asylum seekers in the country. Over 500,000 Afghan nationals were deported

163 "Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained", UNHCR, July 18, 2023. Available at: <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/afghanistan-refugee-crisis-explained/>

164 "Afghanistan Situation" Operational Data Portal UNHCR. Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>

165 "Pakistan orders illegal immigrants, including 1.73 mln Afghans, to leave." Reuters, October 3, 2023. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-orders-all-illegal-immigrants-leave-after-suicide-bombings-2023-10-03/> (Accessed on 31. 10.23)

166 "Pakistan's plan to evict thousands of Afghans 'unacceptable', says Taliban". Al Jazeera, October 4, 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/4/pakistans-plan-to-evict-thousands-of-afghans-unacceptable-says-taliban> (Accessed on 31. 10.23)

back to Afghanistan by Iran and Pakistan by November 2023.¹⁶⁷ In June 2024, the Taliban Administration stated that the eviction of hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran continues unabated, with around 2,000 individuals arriving in the country daily.¹⁶⁸ Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, the Spokesperson for the Taliban's Commission assisting and resettling returnees to their native Afghan districts stated "The two neighboring countries have forcibly deported over 400,000 refugees since the start of 2024, with Pakistan responsible for 75% of the deportations."¹⁶⁹ The forced deportations of millions of impoverished Afghans are likely to have further aggravated the devastating humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, where millions are on the verge of starvation. The UNHCR and the IOM said these developments create 'serious protection risks' for women and girls forced to leave.¹⁷⁰ The Taliban administration in Afghanistan has decried the evictions and sought the reversal of the decision.

The issue of both inflow and deportation of Afghan refugees contributed to the worsening of ties with Pakistan and Iran. The issue of refugees will continue to be a thorn in the Taliban's relations with Iran and Pakistan. In the case of Central Asian neighbours, as mentioned earlier, these countries had closed their borders for ordinary Afghans fleeing the Taliban regime, yet they host some Afghan refugees, and reportedly, they continue to live in limbo and under the constant threat of being deported back to Afghanistan.

167 "Pakistan, Iran Jointly Deport Over 500,000 Afghan Nationals." VOA, November 21, 2023. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-iran-jointly-deport-over-500-000-afghan-nationals-/7364231.html>

168 "Taliban: Pakistan, Iran expelled over 400,000 Afghan refugees so far in 2024." Voice of America, June 10, 2024. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-pakistan-iran-expelled-over-400-000-afghan-refugees-so-far-in-2024/7650196.html>

169 Ibid

170 Afghans return to Taliban rule as Pakistan moves to expel 1.7 million, Reuters, Op.cit.



Since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the threat posed by the Islamic State's regional affiliate, the ISKP, has grown.

Media sources reported that around 200 Afghans were expelled from Central Asian countries between 2021 and 2022.¹⁷¹ Although the refugee factor is not a major concern between Afghanistan and Central Asia at this point, it has the potential to cause tension between the neighbours in the days to come.

GROWING THREAT FROM ISKP

Since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the threat posed by the Islamic State's regional affiliate, the ISKP, has grown.¹⁷² The Islamic State announced the formation of this Afghan affiliate in 2015, and ISKP was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2016. ISKP has launched plots and carried out operations in multiple countries in the recent past, including

Since the signing of the US-Taliban agreement in February 2020, ISKP has increasingly targeted urban areas and foreign assets, as was evident from multiple attacks in 2020, including the Kabul Gurudwara attack, the attack on the Medicines Sans Frontiers clinic in Kabul, the Jalalabad prison attack, the Kabul University attack, and the Kabul school bombing, among others.

171 "Afghan Refugees Face Uncertainty in Central Asia". *The Diplomat*, September 8, 2022

172 "The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia." USIP, June 2023. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-and-south-asia>.

in Russia in March 2024. The ISKP opposes all the governments in the region as well as the major powers allied with them.¹⁷³ The ISKP was initially concentrated in eastern Afghanistan, bordering the region of Pakistan formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The ISKP's core territory remains Pakistan and Afghanistan; however, the Islamic state's core has also conducted multiple attacks in Iran, launched small-scale attacks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and encouraged violence in India.¹⁷⁴ Reportedly, it has switched its strategy from controlling territory to conducting urban warfare. With its transnational membership and ambitions, the ISKP is a threat to all governments in the region, including the Taliban regime, Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian states, and India.¹⁷⁵ It has been behind multiple plots in Europe, and it seeks to develop the capacity to strike the United States as well as attack the US's strategic competitors, both China and Russia.¹⁷⁶

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173 "The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counter Terrorism Gap". CSIS, April 11, 2024. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>

174 "Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan". Congressional Research Service, April 2, 2024. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10604>

175 "The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counter Terrorism Gap". CSIS, April 11, 2024. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>

176 Ibid



Interestingly, the intra-jihadist rivalry is not restricted to the physical domain and has expanded to the cyber domain as well. The ISKP, in particular, has intensified its propaganda efforts to challenge the Taliban's legitimacy and present itself as the custodian of jihadist ideology.

during the August 2021 US military withdrawal. Over the past few years, many of the attacks targeted Afghanistan's Shia minority, the Hazaras. Even before the Taliban's return, educational institutes and maternity wards in Hazara-dominated areas were targeted by the ISKP. Over the years, the Hazaras have been attacked at public gatherings, in schools, mosques, and hospital wards. As per the UNAMA, since the Taliban's takeover, in the first 21 months, around 345 Hazaras were killed or wounded. Between August 1 and November 7, 2023, the UN recorded eight attacks by the ISKP, targeted at civilians, particularly Shias.¹⁷⁷

After taking over Afghanistan, the Taliban regime initially adopted a tough approach to countering the group, which included crackdowns on Salafist communities.¹⁷⁸ The Taliban has had some success in targeting ISKP operatives, including killing a senior operative who was responsible for the group's attacks at Kabul airport. Nonetheless, the ISKP operations reached an all-time high after the Taliban seized power, and they maintained a higher tempo for an unusually long time. Since mid-2021, the group increased

177 "Civilian Casualties since Taliban Takeover: New UNAMA report shows Sharp drop." UNAMA, June 27, 2023. Available at: [https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/civilian-casualties-since-the-taliban-takeover-new-unama-report-shows-sharp-drop-but-some-communities-still-under-threat/#:-:text=Since%20the%20takeover%2C%20UNAMA%20has,%20or%20wounded%20\(250\).](https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/civilian-casualties-since-the-taliban-takeover-new-unama-report-shows-sharp-drop-but-some-communities-still-under-threat/#:-:text=Since%20the%20takeover%2C%20UNAMA%20has,%20or%20wounded%20(250).)

178 The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counter Terrorism Gap". CSIS, April 11, 2024. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>

attacks against the Taliban, killing several senior officials (including provincial governors in March and June 2023), as well as externally oriented operations, including cross-border rocket attacks against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, attacks against the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Kabul, and an assault on a Kabul hotel frequented by Chinese nationals. The Taliban appear to view the ISKP as the primary threat to their rule and have launched offensives against it.

Interestingly, the intra-jihadist rivalry is not restricted to the physical domain and has expanded to the cyber domain as well. The ISKP, in particular, has intensified its propaganda efforts to challenge the Taliban's legitimacy and present itself as the custodian of jihadist ideology. ISKP released a 30-page statement in Pashto following the Moscow concert attack, criticizing and mocking the Taliban in Afghanistan for seeking relations with the United States, Russia, China, and other countries.¹⁷⁹ The Taliban condemned the attack in the hours after it happened and called it a terrorist attack and a violation of human standards. Currently, the Islamic State functions as a military and significant media entity. Since its inception, ISKP has prioritized its digital presence, and does not rely on a centralized website but uses various social media channels to propagate its message. With a robust anti-Taliban stance, ISKP's focus extends globally, regionally, and locally, targeting audiences primarily in South and Central Asia. Propaganda materials are produced in several languages, including Urdu, English, Pashto, Russian, Persian, Tajik, Uzbek, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic, Russian, Dari, and Bengali.¹⁸⁰ The expansive digital propaganda

179 "Islamic State-Khorasan Criticizes Taliban in Statement Praising Russia Attackers." Voice of America, March 25, 2024. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-khorasan-criticizes-taliban-in-statement-praising-russia-attackers-/7542235.html>

180 Ibid



initiative has successfully persuaded more than 30,000 individuals to abandon their families and travel on the path of jihad.¹⁸¹

A recent study¹⁸² has identified three counterterrorism gaps that are being exploited by ISKP in the region; firstly, the terrorist group benefits from governments' tendency to misdiagnose the group as a product of their rivals. Secondly, in the absence of international cooperation, the task of countering ISKP has largely fallen to the Afghan Taliban, which raises a second limitation. In March 2024, a US official said the Taliban 'have made progress combating [ISKP], but they have struggled to dismantle [ISKP]'s clandestine urban cells and prevent attacks on soft targets.¹⁸³ Finally, the international appetite for counterterrorism cooperation has reduced with the rise of strategic competition and as a result of the major conflicts that have broken out in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

The past few years have amply demonstrated ISKP's ability to conduct high-profile attacks in Afghanistan, but what is increasing anxiety about the group is its ability to undertake attacks beyond

181 Awasthi, Soumya. "Digital Battleground: ISKP Vs. Taliban" ORF, April 8, 2024. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/digital-battleground-iskp-vs-taliban#:~:text=Notably%2C%20the%20Islamic%20State%20of,the%20custodian%20of%20jihadist%20ideology>.

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182 The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counter Terrorism Gap". CSIS, April 11, 2024. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>

183 "Terrorism Groups in Afghanistan". Congressional Research Service, April 2, 2024. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10604>

To Afghanistan's south, where Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran converge, is the so-called Golden Crescent, which, along with Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, is Asia's most notorious drug smuggling hub

Afghanistan. The double suicide bombing in Iran and the City Hall attack in Moscow demonstrated that the group is expanding its external operations capacity. Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, the ISKP has pursued a regionalisation and internationalisation strategy in its propaganda production and militant operations. The latter part of this doctrine has led the branch to ramp up targets against foreign diplomatic facilities and nationals in Afghanistan, combined with the rapid acceleration of its external operation activities. The regionalisation component of its campaign has largely been focused on South and Central Asia, but the branch has also been expanding its footprint and focusing on Iran, India, Turkey, and Europe.¹⁸⁴ The ISKP remains one of the Islamic State's largest and most dangerous affiliates at present. It is likely to maintain its transnational network and ability to inspire plots in the region in the future. Its transnational ambitions make it a threat beyond its size and well beyond Afghanistan.

DRUG TRAFFICKING FROM AFGHANISTAN

Drug production in Afghanistan has had a significant impact on Afghanistan's neighbours. Many of these countries are critical

184 "Islamic State Khorasan's Westward Network Expansion into Iran, Turkey, and Europe." *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2024. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/islamic-state-khorasans-westward-network-expansion-into-iran-turkey-and-europe/>



Despite the Taliban interim administration's edict prohibiting poppy cultivation and the trade of all types of narcotics across Afghanistan, drug trafficking from the country remains a matter of serious concern for the neighbours.

nodes in the global narcotics trade that has flourished since August 2021. To Afghanistan's south, where Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran converge, is the so-called Golden Crescent, which, along with Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, is Asia's most notorious drug smuggling hub.¹⁸⁵ Pakistan and Iran are on the southern drug trafficking route from Afghanistan to Asian, African, and western and central European markets, while Iran is also part of the Balkan route that passes through Türkiye. Both share long borders and deep cultural ties with Afghanistan and see high volumes of licit and illicit cross-border movement of people and goods, with border communities dependent on smuggling to sustain themselves. Central Asia, too, remains a major route for drugs, from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. Tajikistan is the most critical country on this northern route and reflects key counter-narcotics challenges in Central Asia.

The rise in synthetic drug production will be a matter of serious concern for the neighbours and the international community in general, and this issue may impact relations between the Taliban regime and Afghanistan's neighbours in the days to come.

¹⁸⁵ "Impact of Afghanistan's Drug trade on its neighbours". SOC ACE Research Paper, November 2023. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/SOCACE-RP25-AfganDrugTradeImpact-20Nov23.pdf>

Despite the Taliban interim administration's edict prohibiting poppy cultivation and the trade of all types of narcotics across Afghanistan, drug trafficking from the country remains a matter of serious concern for the neighbours. In January 2024, acting Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob announced that 4,472 tons of narcotics had been destroyed, 8,282 individuals involved in production and smuggling were arrested, and 13,904 hectares of poppy crops were cleared.¹⁸⁶ The United States and the United Nations have confirmed a massive reduction in poppy cultivation in Afghanistan since the Taliban Supreme Leader banned the crop in April 2022.¹⁸⁷ However, Poppy remains vital to Afghanistan's rural economy. Questions remain, therefore, about what if any support the interim regime will provide for a transition to other crops and, relatedly, how sustainable the ban is through subsequent cultivation seasons if a collapsing Afghan economy does not recover. Moreover, the vacuum created by the ban on opium cultivation has led to a surge in the synthetic drug market, particularly methamphetamine production in Afghanistan. Increases in the number of methamphetamine seizures, together with reports of methamphetamine manufacture

On August 15, 2024, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan completed three years in power. In the past years, the emergence of new theatres of conflict in other regions has pushed Afghanistan to the periphery of global focus.

and increases in treatment registrations in certain parts of the

186 "Taliban Maintain Poppy Crackdown, US Fears Farmers' Return to Cultivation."VoA, January 3, 2024. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-maintain-poppy-crackdown-us-fears-farmers-return-to-cultivation/7425417.html>

187 Ibid



While calls for forming an inclusive government persisted, the countries in the region (as well as global powers) have attempted to secure their interests by establishing a communication framework with the regime.

country, suggest that synthetic drugs are of growing concern.¹⁸⁸ The rise in synthetic drug production will be a matter of serious concern for the neighbours and the international community in general, and this issue may impact relations between the Taliban regime and Afghanistan's neighbours in the days to come.

CONCLUSION

On August 15, 2024, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan completed three years in power. In the past years, the emergence of new theatres of conflict in other regions has pushed Afghanistan to the periphery of global focus. Internationally, Europe and the West in general have limited their involvement in Afghanistan to humanitarian assistance. The United States has stepped back to a primarily counterterrorism monitoring role. While calls for forming an inclusive government persisted, the countries in the

188 "Afghanistan's Opium Survey" UNODC, August 2023. Available at: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/39871/1/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2023.pdf

Internally, the Taliban have been able to consolidate power with Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Amir al-Mu'minin, as the central figure. The country is presently governed by an interim cabinet that is neither inclusive nor representative.

The Taliban have barred women from most areas of public life and stopped girls from going to school beyond the sixth grade as part of harsh measures they imposed after taking power in 2021, despite initially promising more moderate rule, generating criticism from the international community.

region (as well as global powers) have attempted to secure their interests by establishing a communication framework with the regime. Diplomatically, despite the Taliban's efforts to secure recognition and international legitimacy, they have not had much success. Several embassies have either maintained their missions in Afghanistan through the takeover, including Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, and some CARs, or returned to Afghanistan since then, including the European Union, the number has been considerably higher than the number of maintained missions during the Taliban's first stint in power. However, none have formally recognised the Taliban.

Internally, the Taliban have been able to consolidate power with Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Amir al-Mu'minin, as the central figure. The country is presently governed by an interim cabinet

Currently, the anti-Taliban resistance is facing a bleak prospect in the absence of a lack of international support and funding. At present, the ISKP has emerged as the most significant armed opposition to the Taliban regime, having expanded their operations to several provinces targeting the Taliban and their functionaries, as well as the minority Shia community and civilians.



Regionally, Afghanistan's neighbours seem to have become accustomed to the fact that the Taliban is part of the undeniable reality of a post-US Afghanistan and, therefore, have been enhancing diplomatic efforts to co-exist with them by setting aside longstanding animosities.

that is neither inclusive nor representative. Despite international pressure, the Taliban leaders are not inclined to form an inclusive government structure or engage in meaningful dialogue with various Afghan groups. Inside Afghanistan, inter-ethnic relations are quite stressed. Ethnic groups, including religious minorities, faced increasing marginalisation, prejudice, and forced evictions. The policies imposed on the Afghan population have resulted in a continuous, systematic rescinding of human rights, including the right to education, work, freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. The Taliban have barred women from most areas of public life and stopped girls from going to school beyond the sixth grade as part of harsh measures they imposed after taking power in 2021, despite initially promising more moderate rule, generating criticism from the international community. The security situation across the country has improved, especially compared to the final years of the Afghan Republic. UNAMA's assessment report in June 2024 stated that although two anti-Taliban resistance groups, namely the National Resistance Front, and the Afghanistan Freedom Front have conducted verified attacks in the capital and northern provinces in recent months, the armed opposition 'did not pose a significant challenge' to the Taliban's hold on territorial control

since they regained power in August 2021.¹⁸⁹ Currently, the anti-Taliban resistance is facing a bleak prospect in the absence of a lack of international support and funding. At present, the ISKP has emerged as the most significant armed opposition to the Taliban regime, having expanded their operations to several provinces targeting the Taliban and their functionaries, as well as the minority Shia community and civilians. The UN has raised concerns over the high concentration of transnational jihadist groups in Afghanistan, which seeks to destabilise regional sturdiness, and urged the Afghan Taliban to take action against those groups. Although it is unclear what sort of influence the Taliban have on these foreign terrorist groups, so far, it seems the Taliban are not too eager to take any steps against their former allies, especially at a time when their presence can be utilized as leverage in dealing with the neighbouring countries.

Regionally, Afghanistan's neighbours seem to have become accustomed to the fact that the Taliban is part of the undeniable reality of a post-US Afghanistan and, therefore, have been enhancing diplomatic efforts to co-exist with them by setting aside longstanding animosities. Despite the Taliban regime's questionable domestic policies, there is a general realisation that the regime is going to stay in the foreseeable future. As a result, the neighbouring countries have increased their diplomatic and economic engagements with the group, although no country has officially recognised the Taliban administration. In the region, relations with Pakistan have been showing signs of strains over the Durand Line and its fencing by Pakistan and the presence of TTP inside Afghan territory, where local populations suspected

189 "UN documents surge in anti-Taliban attacks in Afghanistan". VoA, June 21, 2024. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-documents-surge-in-anti-taliban-attacks-in-afghanistan/7665035.html>



Currently, many of the neighbouring countries have a diplomatic presence in Kabul, and some have welcomed Taliban diplomats in their capitals. This underlines that such representations do not amount to implicit or explicit recognition but are more of a technical prerequisite for managing co-existence with Afghanistan

of harbouring them have been subjected to artillery and aerial attacks by the Pakistani military to neutralise the TTP attacks inside Pakistan. The expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan has only added to the tensions in relations between the neighbours. Iran, which had cautiously welcomed the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 following the US and NATO withdrawal from the region, remains concerned about the influx of Afghan refugees, water supply, and the spread of ISIS in Khorasan. Central Asian countries policy has so far been dominated by careful calibration of their pragmatic interests, along with avoiding recognition of the regime. Although the engagement of CARs with the Taliban regime experienced some lows in the early days of Taliban rule, pragmatism and policies centred around prioritising economic interests eventually prevailed. Nonetheless, the Qosh Tepa Canal Project (which the Taliban is pursuing) and the threat of terrorism and drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan appear to be among the most pressing challenges to Afghan-CARS relations. China's engagement with Afghanistan is guided by two primary concerns, the threat of foreign military groups and safeguarding economic interests. Beijing is also keen to keep the Western powers, especially the United States, at bay. Finally, India's policy towards Afghanistan following the fall of Kabul has evolved as one of

Barring the issues of the non-recognition of the 'Islamic Emirate' and token demand for the installation of an inclusive government, most countries in the region have sought to do business with the Taliban in order to address their security concerns and to seek economic and investment opportunities; in the process, they have chosen to look away from their domestic policies and continue to violate the rights of women and ethnic minorities.

incremental engagement with focus on the people of Afghanistan, while putting pressure on the Taliban to create a more inclusive and representative government. Currently, many of the neighbouring countries have a diplomatic presence in Kabul, and some have welcomed Taliban diplomats in their capitals. This underlines that such representations do not amount to implicit or explicit recognition but are more of a technical prerequisite for managing co-existence with Afghanistan.¹⁹⁰ These working-level relationships will, in all probability, proliferate in the near future, but they are likely to be more sporadic in nature.

As far Western countries are concerned, they are primarily concerned that Afghanistan could become a safe haven for hostile groups, fearing that jihadist organizations may use the country as a base to launch attacks against the West. In addition to security concerns, there are also normative issues, particularly regarding the Taliban's treatment of women, which has led many governments to maintain a cautious distance from the new authorities in Kabul. It is important to note here that Afghanistan's neighbors do not

190 "The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan". International Crisis Group, Available at: [The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan | Crisis Group](#)



A peaceful and stable Afghanistan, even if it is under an authoritarian regime, may bring benefits to the regional countries' security and economic interests, but as the proverb says, 'Honey is sweet, but the bee stings'.

always act in a coordinated manner due to their own differences and differing interests. As a result, initiatives largely remain in the hands of extra-regional powers, particularly the U.S. and other Western countries, to align approaches and strategies towards Afghanistan. UN's Doha format meetings of Afghanistan have been particularly crucial in this regard. In November 2023, the UN released an independent assessment of international engagement in Afghanistan by UN Special Coordinator for Afghanistan Feridun Sinirlioglu.¹⁹¹ It noted a lack of coherence in stakeholders' approaches and recommended the appointment of a UN Special Envoy to lead international engagement in Afghanistan, the creation of an international contact group, and the continuation of the existing large group format. The Taliban have expressed opposition to the Special Envoy proposal, suggesting they see such a role as inappropriately portraying Afghanistan as a conflict zone requiring special intervention.¹⁹² Interestingly, Russia and China were also not forthcoming about the proposition and had abstained from voting for the UNSC resolution on the appointment of a Special Envoy. Therefore, the international consensus, as it stands now, appears increasingly tenuous.

191 United Nations, S/2023/856, The Independent Assessment on Afghanistan.

192 Kate Bateman and Andrew Watkins, "What to Expect from the Doha Conference on Afghanistan," U.S. Institute of Peace, February 15, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/what-expect-doha-conference-afghanistan>.

The above discussion demonstrates that, barring the issues of the non-recognition of the 'Islamic Emirate' and token demand for the installation of an inclusive government, most countries in the region have sought to do business with the Taliban in order to address their security concerns and to seek economic and investment opportunities; in the process, they have chosen to look away from their domestic policies and continue to violate the rights of women and ethnic minorities. This seems to have emboldened the Taliban, which is willing to risk international isolation while holding on to its policies. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan, even if it is under an authoritarian regime, may bring benefits to the regional countries' security and economic interests, but as the proverb says, 'Honey is sweet, but the bee stings'. Regardless of some progress in improving the security situation internally, Afghanistan is still a primary source of security threats for South Asia and Central Asian countries. Moreover, Afghanistan has not yet turned into a better place for doing business and is likely to remain a complicated destination for investments in the near future as well. As the past few years have shown, the integration of Afghanistan into any geo-political or geo-economic framework is a distant goal.





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