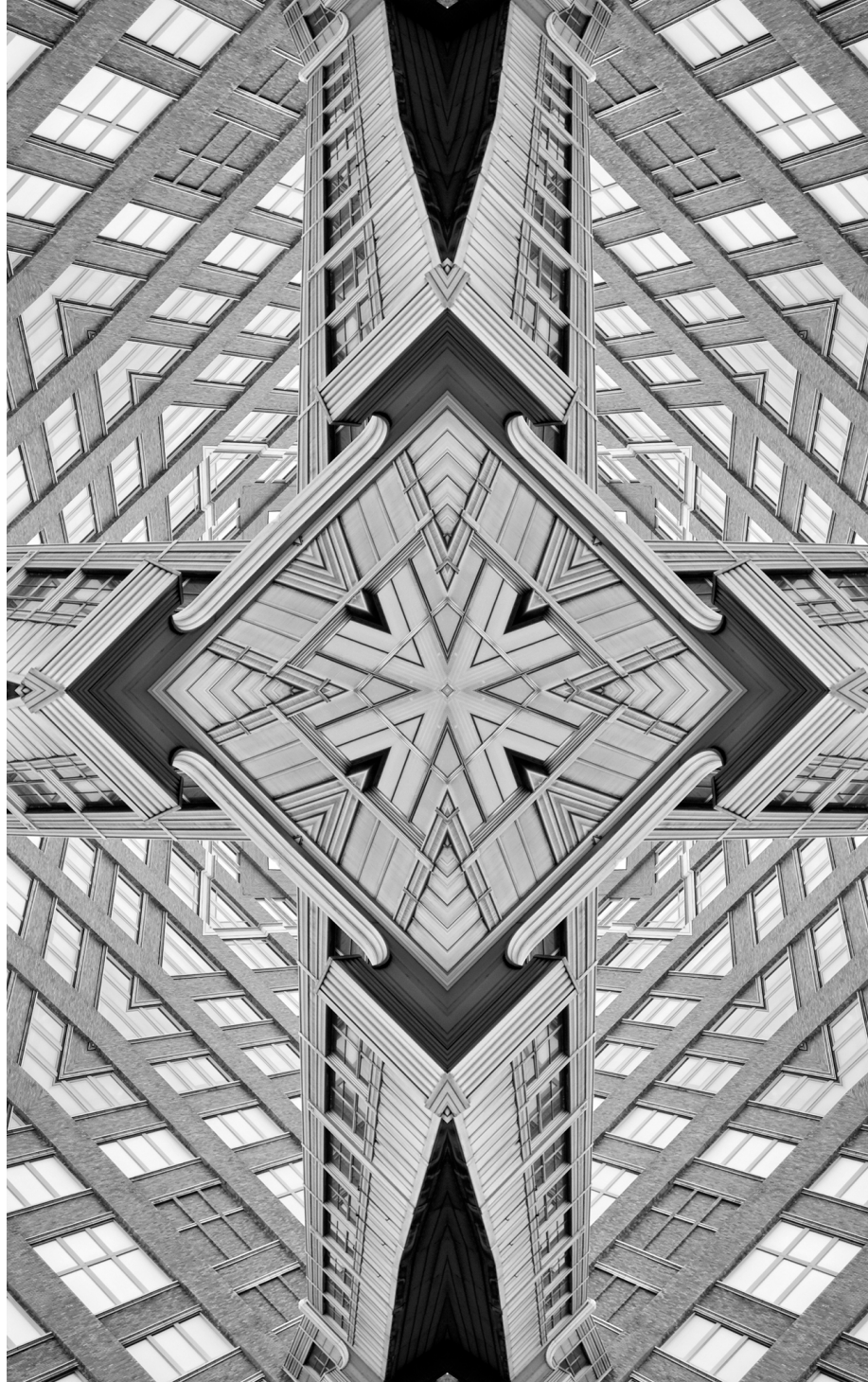


Issue

Brief

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Taliban's Afghanistan: An Emerging Security Challenge for India and Central Asia

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Abstract

Relations between India and the Central Asia Republics (CARs) have matured over the past three decades, primarily in the areas of military technology, defence, counterterrorism, and economy, and culture. Following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and the resultant security, geostrategic, and socioeconomic challenges, India and the CARs must aim to strengthen their ties. This brief assesses the evolving situation in Afghanistan and its implications on the region's security and stability. It also discusses the scope for India and the CARs to solidify their partnership amid the Taliban's emergence as a political force.

India and the Central Asia Republics (CARs)—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—have a long history of cultural and commercial relations, facilitated by geographical proximity and the ancient Silk Road. Ties stagnated during the twentieth century due to Anglo-Russian rivalry¹ and the consequent emergence of nation-states with differing ideologies. However, following the breakup of the Soviet Union, New Delhi adopted a constructive approach to provide aid of around US\$15 million to the five CARs. In 2012, the relationship crystallised further through India’s ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy, which sought to enhance political, economic, cultural, and historical connections with the region.² Central Asia soon became a foreign policy priority for India, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the five CARs in 2015. The next stage of cooperation came with the inking of agreements on defence and military technologies, defence and security cooperation, and counterterrorism,³ and the inauguration of the annual India-Central Asia Dialogue in 2019 to strengthen cooperation in political, security, economic, and cultural aspects.⁴

Over the years, Pakistan has stonewalled India and the CARs’ strategic, economic, and cultural interests by not facilitating any connectivity via its territory.⁵ As a result, New Delhi has explored other options to establish connectivity with hydrocarbon-rich and strategically important Central Asia. In 2015, New Delhi signed a memorandum of understanding with Iran to develop the Chabahar port in the Sistan-Balochistan province. The port became partially operational in 2018. Notably, amid heightened tensions between Iran and the West, India secured a special waiver from the US to continue work on the Chabahar port project, with budgetary allocations increased from INR 450 million in 2019-20 to INR 1,000 million in 2020-21.⁶

Afghanistan is an important part of the Chabahar port project, which India and the CARs see as a game-changer for physical connectivity. New Delhi has invested US\$150 million in the 218-km Zaranj-Delaram Highway, which connects Afghanistan to the Chabahar port via Milak in Iran. The Zaranj-Delaram strategic highway connects 2,000 km of the Afghanistan Ring Road, linking 16 provinces (including Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Ghazni, and Kandahar) to Tajikistan.

In 2018, Uzbekistan floated a 650-km railway project between the Afghan cities of Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif, which is a mere 80 km from the Uzbek border. Tashkent has already invested about US\$500 million in the project and has repeatedly encouraged India's involvement.⁷ The railway line was supposed to connect to the 628-km Chabahar-Zahedan rail track along the Iran-Afghanistan border. The Chabahar-Zahedan railway track was to be jointly constructed by India and Iran, but Tehran alleged that New Delhi was delaying the funding. Subsequently, Iran began the track-laying process on its own, with 70 percent of the baseline for the railway already laid (as of March 2022) and projected completion by 2024 at an estimated cost of US\$463 million.⁸

In 2020, India, Iran, and Uzbekistan also established a trilateral working group on the joint use of the Chabahar port and other connectivity projects. During the second meeting of the trilateral working group in December 2021, emphasis was placed on the Shahid Behesti Terminal at the Chabahar port, and the further development of a transportation corridor between South Asia and Central Asia was discussed.⁹ However, these initiatives have become less viable following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. The evolving situation in that country has hindered the planned connectivity projects between India and Central Asia, even as it is giving rise to new security challenges, including a resurgence of other global and regional terror outfits.

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On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, forcing elected President Ashraf Ghani to flee the country as the Afghan security forces chose not to fight back. This development came only days after the US and NATO forces began their planned withdrawal from the country after 20 years. The Taliban's return was regarded as a strategic failure for the US and its NATO allies¹⁰ and proved the old dictum that Afghanistan is a 'graveyard of empires'.¹¹ Afghanistan's neighbours must now contend with the aftereffects of the Taliban takeover as it has provided a fillip to radical groups that hope to establish their religious utopias in the region. Indeed, given the centrality of Afghanistan in a terrain spanning Southern and Central Asia, tremors of Taliban's return are already being felt in the region.

Since coming to power, the Taliban have assured the international community that they will adhere to international norms and the terms of the 2020 Doha Agreement, under which they gave sureties of not allowing any "international terrorist groups or individuals,"¹² including the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISKP) and al-Qaeda, to use Afghan soil against the US, its NATO allies, and other countries. The same assurances were given to the neighbouring countries individually through bilateral meetings and agreements. However, a May 2022 letter by the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the UN Security Council highlighted the contradictions in the Taliban's assurances and actions. For instance, links between al-Qaeda and the Taliban are either intact or have deepened over the last 20 years. Under the Taliban, the al-Qaeda will likely feel like it operates in a safe haven and has greater freedom of action.¹³ On the other hand, the ISKP has, since August 2021, gained in strength in its operations against the Taliban and innocent Afghan people.¹⁴ The presence in Afghanistan of terror outfits from the neighbouring countries is also a cause of concern. Additionally, rifts and resistance within the Taliban has made the situation in Afghanistan more volatile, with a potential impact across Eurasia.

Consequently, India and the CARs are seeking greater convergence on tackling the compounded security, geostrategic, and geoeconomic threats emerging in the aftermath of the Taliban's return. In January 2022, Modi held a virtual meeting with his counterparts in the CARs to discuss the evolving situation in

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Afghanistan and its implications on regional security and stability.¹⁵ The leaders agreed to continue holding close consultations on Afghanistan and established a joint working group at the senior officials' level.¹⁶

The increased convergence between India and the CARs is the outcome of several common challenges arising from a volatile Afghanistan:

Presence of Global and Regional Outfits

The Taliban's reemergence in Afghanistan has opened a Pandora's box of radicalism, extremism, and narco-trafficking. The presence of terror outfits, such as the ISKP and al-Qaeda and others, has also made the Eurasia region more vulnerable.

Recruitment activities by the ISKP have seen an upward swing in recent months, even as the release of the group's members (thought to number between 500 and 1,000) from Afghan prisons has increased its strength.¹⁷ The ISKP has seen some success with its recruitment activities, mainly due to the Taliban sidelining ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks since its return. For instance, in December 2021, the Haqqani-led Badri 313 Battalion disarmed a large group of Uzbeks from the Taliban's ranks on the pretext of their relations with the ISKP, and a Tajik Taliban leader was also sidelined for the same reason.¹⁸ Another factor driving the ISKP's recruitment is the grievances among some Taliban members about not being paid salaries and Pashtuns being favoured within the group's ranks. As of May 2022, the ISKP is estimated to have between 1,500 to 4,000 fighters.¹⁹ The ISKP has become the most active group against Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and former members of the Afghan army, directorate of Afghan security, and Afghan intelligence are said to have joined the group.²⁰ Furthermore, according to a UN Security Council report, half of the ISKP's members are foreigners. The inclusion of US-trained former security personnel and foreign terrorists has made the group more deadly, and the number of high-profile, complex attacks has also increased. According to estimates, the ISKP was involved in 150 attacks between August and December 2021, an eight-fold increase over the same period in 2020.²¹ The ISKP has also increased its footprints in all Afghan provinces, and has mainly targeted the Shia and Hazara minorities.

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At the same time, al-Qaeda remains in close contact with the Taliban since August 2021. In the months since, al-Qaeda's strength has also increased, with estimates ranging from 180 to 400 members. The group also has many fighters from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India.²²

Taliban's Afghanistan is now an inspiration for other regional terror groups. The Taliban regime views many terrorists and terror groups (such as al-Qaeda) as 'brothers of faith'.²³ However, under global pressure, the Taliban has disarmed and relocated some of these groups away from Kabul. The presence of thousands of militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), Jamaat Ansarullah, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, and Pakistan-based radical terror organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) makes Afghanistan a perfect launching pad for terror activities against regional countries. The TTP became the strongest of these groups following the Taliban's return and began its offensive against Pakistan security forces in March 2022.²⁴ Notably, these regional terror organisations have helped the Taliban recapture Afghanistan and have maintained their training camps in the country. For instance, the JeM has eight training camps in Nangarhar, three directly under the Taliban's control. Similarly, the LeT has three training camps in Kunar and Nangarhar.²⁵

Most of the JeM and LeT cadre is from Pakistan, and many are likely to have already made their way to Jammu and Kashmir, which has seen an increased presence of foreign terrorists. For example, in the first six months of 2022, 32 of the 118 terrorists killed in Jammu and Kashmir were foreigners. In contrast, of the 182 terrorists killed there in 2021, only 20 were foreigners.²⁶ While the exact origin of these foreign terrorists is not known, Indian intelligence personnel believe most of them to be from Pakistan. Additionally, according to the Indian Army's Northern Command chief Lieutenant General Upendra Dwivedi, 200 Pakistani terrorists were ready to infiltrate into Jammu and Kashmir in May 2022.²⁷

The presence of around 3,000 IMU and IJU fighters in Afghanistan is a cause of worry for Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (and the other CARs), which share a 2,387-km-long porous border with the country.²⁸ With the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as their base, these terror outfits organised 19

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attacks that killed 138 people in the CARs, primarily in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic, between 2008 and 2018.²⁹ The IMU is a Salafi-jihadist militant group seeking to overthrow the Uzbek government and install an Islamic, Sharia-driven government. The IMU's ideology is similar to that of al-Qaeda and the TTP, and, as a result, the groups are closely associated.³⁰ Similarly, Tajikistan is particularly tense about the resurgence of the Jamaat Ansarullah, known in Afghanistan as the 'Tajik Taliban', is a cause of worry for Tajikistan as the Taliban has given the group charge of the strategically crucial northern border.³¹

Rising Extremism Through Use of Social Media

Terror outfits like the ISKP and al-Qaeda have increased their presence on social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram, and propaganda websites to target thousands of potential recruits to join their ranks and further their cause globally. The ISKP has also tried to broaden its support in the CARs using the media. For instance, it has ramped up the production and translation of various kinds of material to reach Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik speakers in the region.³² For instance, since February 2022, Al-Azaim, the ISKP's dominant media organ, has published two books and 15 audio recordings in the Uzbek language. The ISKP is also republishing lectures by the charismatic IMU leader Asadulloh Urgenchiy and translating these to the Tajik and Kyrgyz languages.³³

The ISKP has also broadened its campaign against India. For instance, the cover of the July 2022 edition of the ISKP's *Voice of Khorasan* magazine said India was "between pain and hope".³⁴ The group also issued death threats against former BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma for her remarks on the Prophet;³⁵ criticised the Taliban and its leaders for meeting with Ministry of External Affairs Joint Secretary JP Singh in June 2022; and threatened to carry out attacks against Sikhs and claimed responsibility for the attack on a gurdwara in Kabul in June 2022.³⁶

Before his death in a drone attack in July 2022, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had released eight videos on social media calling for jihad. In an April 2022 video, he also expressed support for Indian Muslim women amid the controversy over allowing school and college students to wear hijabs.³⁷ In

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June, following Sharma's remarks, al-Qaeda threatened to carry out suicide attacks in Delhi, Mumbai, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh to "fight for the honor of the Prophet".³⁸

Increased propaganda through social media will likely rejuvenate the idea of establishing a Caliphate from Afghanistan to the European border. Moreover, the use of social media and cyberspace for propaganda will likely attract the disgruntled youth from the CARs and parts of Jammu and Kashmir and may catalyse further terrorist violence in Eurasia.

Taliban's Internal and External Dynamics

Since its return to power, the Taliban has failed to form a functioning inclusive government to provide the Afghan people with basic economic opportunities, health facilities, and even educational options. The interim government consisted of senior Pashtun leaders from the Taliban, without any outside political figures. A split within the group became apparent in March when the government announced it would permit secondary education for girls. The education minister was summoned by the Hibatullah Ahkundzada faction to Kandahar, the Taliban's power base, to assert itself over Kabul.³⁹ The decision was reversed, and girls' secondary schools were closed indefinitely.⁴⁰

Most Taliban officials and ministers in the interim government were educated in *madrasas* (Muslim schools, colleges, or universities that are often part of a mosque) and have no experience in administration. In addition, even the lowest positions in the government have been given to religious leaders, and Taliban forces who manage day-to-day matters like policing still lack any formal training. This inexperience has had an adverse impact on governance in Afghanistan.

The marginalisation of different ethnic groups has remained a source of dismay for many Afghans. The increased attacks on non-Pashtun ethnic communities by the ISKP, raids by the Taliban on Tajik communities, and extrajudicial killings have also aggravated the situation. In addition, increased poverty levels have led to a rise in transnational crimes (such as narcoterrorism) emanating from Afghanistan.⁴¹

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Additionally, the Taliban's policies for minorities and women have caused regional countries and western democracies to ponder over recognising and working with the interim government. As the humanitarian and economic situation worsened in Afghanistan, the European Union and the US increased aid to the country, stressing that this should go directly to groups working on the ground and not to the Taliban government.⁴² Nevertheless, as economic and humanitarian concerns grow in Afghanistan, and in the absence of a truly representative and inclusive government, India and the CARs must remain watchful.

Lack of Regional Cohesion

The reemergence of the Taliban and multiple other terror groups will alter the security scenario for the neighbouring countries and Eurasia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—a Eurasian political, economic, and security grouping—has failed to form a joint mechanism on Afghanistan and the new terror threats emanating from Kabul. This is mainly because of a trust deficit among the SCO member countries, which has reduced the forum of regional heavyweights to a disparate group with no cohesion on regional security issues. The growing fault lines, parochial interests, and self-interest-driven diplomacy have only increased tensions in Eurasia and made regional peace elusive. For instance, China and Pakistan (both SCO members) did not attend the November 2021 regional summit on Afghanistan hosted by India,⁴³ and instead held a “Troika plus” meeting in Islamabad with Russia and the US.⁴⁴

The widening fault lines within the SCO have forced India and the CARs to seek more convergence on regional strategic and security issues. The evolving situation in Afghanistan was discussed during the third India-Central Asia Dialogue in December 2021. During the meeting, it was stressed that “Afghan territory (can) not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts ... formation of a truly representative and inclusive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking”.⁴⁵ Modi and the CARs presidents—Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (Kazakhstan), Sadyr Japarov (Kyrgyz Republic), Emomali Rahmon (Tajikistan), Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov (Turkmenistan), and Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Uzbekistan)—held the first India-Central Asia Summit in January 2022, where they reiterated the need for convergence on

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the growing strategic and security threats emanating from Afghanistan. The leaders not only underscored the importance of security dialogue “in view of the common challenges of terrorism, extremism and radicalisation in the region”, but also condemned the “dissemination of a radical ideology and abuse of cyber space to spread disinformation and incite violence”.⁴⁶ They also decided to establish a joint working group on Afghanistan at the senior official level, and stressed on the need for an inclusive government in Kabul that can combat terrorism and drug trafficking. The leaders also recognised defence cooperation as an important pillar of India-Central Asia relations and agreed to hold joint counterterrorism drills.⁴⁷

“India and the CARs are seeking greater convergence on tackling the compounded security, geostrategic, and geoeconomic threats emerging from Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban’s return.”

The Taliban in Afghanistan is now a political force that cannot be ignored. This is especially true for India and the CARs, who must engage with the group since most of their connectivity projects run through Afghanistan.


Over the last 20 years, India has provided about US\$750 million in humanitarian and economic aid, invested US\$3 billion in the welfare of the Afghan people, and has undertaken “500 projects in critical areas of power, water supply, road connectivity, healthcare, education, agriculture and capacity building”.⁴⁸ This assistance has won India many friends among the local population and the government. Many in the Taliban see India as a sincere friend of the country, and New Delhi extending humanitarian aid since August 2021 has made the Taliban more pragmatic in its approach to India. During his meeting with India’s foreign ministry joint secretary in Kabul in June 2022, Taliban’s acting deputy foreign minister Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai “thanked the Indian government for its humanitarian aid” and said that “Afghan-Indian relations would move forward based on mutual respect and joint bilateral legitimate interests, and would not be influenced by other countries’ inter-rivalry”.⁴⁹ In June 2022, India also reopened its embassy in Kabul to coordinate humanitarian assistance and continuous engagement with the Afghan people under a security guarantee from the Taliban.⁵⁰

By engaging with the Taliban, India and the CARs can pressurise the group on minority and women’s rights. The countries should work closely with humanitarian organisations on the ground to win over the peace-loving Afghans. However, they should not prioritise artificial stability over an inclusive government or democratic rights.

During the Fourth Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in May 2022, Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval said that regional countries must “enhance the capability of Afghanistan to counter terrorism and terrorist groups which pose a threat to regional peace and security.”⁵¹ The CARs and

Conclusion

India must reach a consensus on enhancing these capabilities to strengthen their counterterrorism and counterinsurgency grid. They can consider sharing relevant data with the Taliban and training the group on managing the porous borders to curtail the movement of terrorists. This will undoubtedly ensure a more agreeable Taliban, as seen when it assured New Delhi it would act against groups targeting India if specific information and pinpoint intelligence is provided.⁵²

A cooperative Taliban is key to India's regional connectivity initiatives, particularly the Chabahar port project. The CARs are keen for these initiatives to succeed to decrease their dependence on China, while India views these in the context of countering China's Belt and Road Initiative in its neighbourhood. 

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