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Afghanistan Under the Taliban: Enduring Challenges, Evolving Responses

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Editor



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Introduction

In mid-February 2024, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres led an international conference in Doha to discuss and frame a coordinated approach to Afghanistan. Those who gathered at the meeting included special envoys for Afghanistan from 25 countries, members of Afghan civil society organisations, and representatives from regional organisations such as the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, the European Union, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. It was the second such conference organised by the UN in a year, following the first one in May 2023. The meetings have sought to discuss engagement with the Taliban and work on the recommendations made by the UN Special Coordinator for Afghanistan on the appointment of a new UN Special Envoy for the country.

Representatives from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) under the Taliban were not invited for the first conference in May 2023, and this year, the IEA's Ministry of Foreign Affairs declined the invitation. While this may seem inconsistent with the Taliban's expressed effort

to be included in conversations on Afghanistan, it also reflects the Emirate's current position of relative influence, two and a half years after the fall of Kabul.

In a statement released on X,¹ the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the control of the IEA stated that their participation in the meeting could only be “beneficial” if they were regarded as the “sole official representative of Afghanistan” and given a platform to hold talks with senior officials of the UN. It also urged the UN to take into account the current situation in the country and “rebuff pressure from a few parties”—a reference to the consistent calls from the international community for a more inclusive government.² It also dismissed any prospect of progress in talks with the regime unless the international community ceases their “pressure and coercion tactics”.³

Since coming to power in August 2021, the Islamic Emirate has been expanding its relations with the countries in the region as well as with the United States, advocating for its *de jure* recognition. At the time of writing, no country has officially recognised the Islamic Emirate even as they have increased their diplomatic and economic engagements with the group. Many countries, including China, Russia, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, have allowed the Taliban to take over the country's embassy within their borders. This is despite the Emirate's regressive policies on women and girls, the state of the minority religious and ethnic groups, and the curbs on freedoms such as those of the press and media.

Two and a half years since the Taliban returned to Afghanistan, the emergence of new theatres of conflict in other regions has perhaps pushed Afghanistan to the periphery of global focus. While calls for forming an inclusive government have persisted, the countries in the region, and the United States, have attempted to secure their interests by establishing a communication framework with the Emirate. While daily fightings have reduced in Afghanistan—with anti-Emirate resistance groups facing bleak prospects, unlike in the 1990s—terrorist groups like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) have escalated their activities in the country.⁴ They have been targeting

both the Taliban and their functionaries, as well as the minority Shia community and civilians. The UN Secretary-General also raised concerns about the resurgence of Al-Qaeda in the country, as the Taliban continue to provide the group a haven, and the possibility of similar groups proliferating and expanding their operations.

This report refocuses the attention on developments in Afghanistan and provides an understanding of how the countries in the region, and the United States, view the security challenges posed by Afghanistan. Our contributors explore how the responses of these countries have evolved in the past two and a half years, specifically on the question of the degree of engagement and outreach with the IEA, and economic cooperation and the incremental normalisation in ties. The articles also ponder how the situation in the country could change in the near future.

In the first chapter, *Shanthie Mariet D'Souza* highlights India's evolving policy towards the Islamic Emirate following the fall of Kabul, from an *ad-hoc* approach to incremental engagement, with the aim of securing its strategic interests while forging a regional consensus and putting pressure on the Taliban to create a more inclusive and representative government. In the second chapter, *Antonio Giustozzi* explains how China's

engagement with Afghanistan is guided by two primary concerns: the threat of foreign militant groups, and keeping the Western powers, especially the US, at bay.

Aleksei Zakharov, in the third chapter, outlines the three phases of Russia's Afghanistan policy post-August 2021: the initial enthusiasm with the departure of the US; soon followed by concerns about the deteriorating security situation with attacks on the Russian Embassy in Kabul in September 2022; and finally, Moscow's current efforts to increase its economic presence in the country. *Amira Jadoon* then assesses the declining leverage that Pakistan now has in Afghanistan, in the backdrop of the deteriorating bilateral relationship between the two countries amid the growing attacks by the TTP and Taliban's refusal to take action against the group.

For the Central Asian Republics, as explained by *Hamza Boltaev* in the fifth chapter, the considerations about economic cooperation with the Islamic Emirate have taken priority. Similar to other countries in the region, Iran has also continued to engage pragmatically with the Islamic Emirate, as *Vali Golmohammadi* explains in the sixth chapter. However, historical differences

between the two countries on issues such as water sharing and refugees, along with the additional security concerns in the aftermath of the Taliban's resurgence, will put the relationship to test in the future.

In the final chapter, *Elizabeth Threlkeld* and *Sania Shahid* explore how the US's moderate engagement with the group could be influenced by certain factors—the outcome of the 2024 elections in the US and the possible return of a Trump presidency; the state of the Afghan economy; a persistent fall in humanitarian aid and assistance; and the breakdown of the global consensus on non-recognition of the Taliban.

It is our aim that the seven articles in this report provide readers a deeper understanding of how countries are navigating the security challenges posed by the Taliban while protecting their stakes in Afghanistan.

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Regaining a Foothold in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan: India's Way Ahead

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza

Introduction

On 3 August 2021, less than two weeks before the Taliban overpowered the resistance and captured power in Kabul, Afghan Foreign Minister Hanif Atmar phoned his Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar, requesting the Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM) to explore the possibility of convening an emergency session of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to discuss ways to stop the Taliban's violence and human rights abuses in Afghanistan.¹ (India held the presidency of the UNSC for the month of August 2021.) Although an emergency session could not be convened at the UNSC amid the US's attempts to implement the drawdown plan which, in a way, led to the Taliban's return to power, the phone call symbolised the strong

bilateral relations and expectations from the now-deposed Republican government, in which India had made significant investments.

In the 30 months since then, India's policy towards the Taliban continues to be shaped by three factors: (i) taking incremental steps to regain a foothold in Afghanistan to pursue its strategic objectives in the country; (ii) prioritising the needs of the Afghan people; and (iii) maintaining pressure on the Taliban for the establishment of an inclusive and representative government.

Three phases can be identified in the short trajectory of India's post-August 2021 Afghanistan policy.

Phase One: Back to the Drawing Board

The hasty diplomatic withdrawal from Kabul, which saw India evacuating 800 people,² including diplomatic and security staff, private Indian citizens, and Afghan nationals within days of the Taliban taking power, indicated that New Delhi had to rephrase its earlier demand: i.e., from “an inclusive, Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process” and “an immediate, permanent and comprehensive nationwide ceasefire”,³ to the establishment of an “inclusive government” comprising all sections of Afghan society. On 26 August 2021, India’s EAM indirectly referred to an apparent vacuum in India’s policy towards the Taliban. “[The] situation in Afghanistan has not settled, let it settle down,” he said,⁴ indicating the lack of contingency planning for a country whose future was more or less known since the US signed the deal with the Taliban in Doha in February 2020.

This policy vacuum and uncertainty, however, resulted in a meeting at the Indian Embassy in Doha on 31 August 2021, between the Ambassador of India to Qatar and Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, the Head of Taliban’s Political Office.⁵ During the meeting, which took place at the Taliban’s request, India raised its concerns about possible anti-Indian activities and terrorism on Afghan soil. Despite speculations that India was

trying to open a channel of communication with the Taliban, the meeting underlined New Delhi’s willingness to test the waters through an outreach with the Taliban in a new strategic environment. The same approach seemed to be extended as a Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) delegation met Taliban representatives on the sidelines of the Moscow Format dialogue on Afghanistan in the Russian capital on 19 October 2021.⁶ During the meeting, the Taliban expressed appreciation for India’s willingness to provide extensive humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, concerns regarding the Taliban allowing terrorist activities directed at India to be launched on Afghan soil lingered, finding repeated mentions in the statements of the EAM in various forums. New Delhi, however, continued to define its ‘wait-and-watch’ approach as “prudent” and “patient” and one that is not led by the policies of other nations.⁷

Phase Two: Tentative, Incremental Steps

The policy paralysis towards Afghanistan and the Taliban was somewhat addressed as the year 2022 began, by which time New Delhi had decided to resume its proven approach: providing humanitarian assistance to regain goodwill among

Afghans. On 22 February 2022, a convoy of 50 trucks carrying 2,500 metric tonnes (MT) of wheat, packed in bags stamped with “Gift from the people of India to the people of Afghanistan”, entered Afghanistan after traversing Pakistan. Several shipments of wheat, medical supplies, winter clothing, and other items have been sent since then.

Three factors may have shaped this new policy. First, 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, had engaged the Taliban, pursuing a completely contrasting policy might undermine India’s prospects of securing its strategic objectives, including preventing terrorism originating in Afghanistan. Second, India must be seen as responding, in some manner, to the Taliban’s repeated outreach for assistance, resumption of diplomatic contact, and completion of economic and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. Third, this provided a much-needed opportunity for New Delhi to use its leverage with the Taliban to put pressure on Pakistan.

The policy was further firmed up by May 2022, as an MEA team visited Kabul—the first official one since August 2021. The team met with senior Taliban members, including its acting foreign

minister and interior minister, and held discussions on India’s humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan.⁸ On 22 June 2022—possibly as an outcome of the visit—India reopened its embassy and deployed a technical team led by a director-level diplomat.⁹ The team travelled on military aircraft with a consignment of relief assistance following an earthquake outside the city of Khost, which had killed over 1,000 Afghans. The Taliban hailed the move as a “diplomatic upgrade” by India. New Delhi sought to downplay it, insisting that the role of the team is to “closely monitor and coordinate the efforts of various stakeholders for the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance.”¹⁰

During this phase, though its mission of re-establishing presence in Afghanistan was achieved, New Delhi became partially vulnerable to fulfilling the Taliban’s demands. India, however, remained undecided about gradually moving towards engaging the Taliban in the same manner as its neighbours. It was undeniable that India had stopped categorising the Taliban as a terror group from whom it must stay away. In a regional meeting of security officials on Afghanistan in Dushanbe in May 2022, India’s National Security Advisor (NSA) appeared to be designating the former insurgents as a “quasi-official entity”.¹¹ In a significant departure from past policy, he called

for enhancing the capability of Afghanistan to counter terrorism and terrorist groups which pose a threat to regional peace and security.¹² In the subsequent months, the openness to enhancing the Taliban administration's capacity was extended to Afghanistan's banking sector. New Delhi agreed to extend technical cooperation to officials of the Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) in October 2022.¹³

Phase Three: Forging a Regional Consensus

Since October 2022, limited forward movement has been observed in India's policy towards the Taliban. On the one hand, New Delhi has been trying to deal with the Taliban's demands, which include asking India to resume its economic activities in Afghanistan and installing its representatives in the Afghanistan embassy. At the same time, there appears to be a firm conviction in policy circles that India's Afghanistan approach would need to evolve as part of the comprehensive regional consensus on the road ahead. Any opportunistic deal-making with the Taliban that legitimises the Islamic Emirate is bound to harden the former insurgents' worldview which, in the medium to long term, will be detrimental to India's strategic interests. Not surprisingly, New Delhi appears to be returning to the demand for an "inclusive and representative government" in Afghanistan—one that serves the interests of the Afghan people while encompassing India's strategic concerns, including the threat of terrorism.

However, the absence of a regional consensus on the future of Afghanistan and the disinterest of Western countries in the affairs of the country constitute twin challenges for India. Non-recognition of the Islamic Emirate and token demand for the installation of an inclusive government notwithstanding, most countries in the region have sought to do business with the Taliban, seeking economic and investment opportunities and turning a blind eye to the Taliban's continuing violation of the rights of girls, women, and ethnic minorities. This seems to have emboldened the Taliban, which is willing to risk international isolation while holding on to its policies.

Although India seeking involvement in regional initiatives to decide Afghanistan's future cannot be strictly limited to this phase alone, it has sought to take the lead to evolve a consensus, especially about the threat of terrorism and the need for an inclusive and representative government. The second demand is bound to upset the Taliban. Nevertheless, New Delhi has sought to use the forums of the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.¹⁴ Additionally, it has taken steps to make common cause with five Central Asian states that share a border with Afghanistan.

The Way Ahead

India's strategy and options in Afghanistan are not without constraints. While its humanitarian assistance programme can continue unimpeded, the political and strategic objectives continue to face a dead end. In the coming months, it will have to walk a tightrope between responding to the increasing Taliban demands and evolving a

regional and global consensus for a transformation in Afghanistan's political landscape. New Delhi will have to devise an innovative and forward-looking policy that will ensure that its interests are protected by a multistakeholder engagement that involves a three-tier strategy for forging a consensus within Afghanistan, the region, and the international community regarding the future of Afghanistan.

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China's Current Stakes in Afghanistan

Antonio Giustozzi

China considers Afghanistan as a source of uncertainty that needs to be managed, with militant groups threatening security in the countries in the region. China also faces the risk of hostile powers leveraging the unstable environment in the region to threaten Chinese interests. State collapse is certainly something China would not desire in Afghanistan as it would further heighten the uncertainty.

The new Taliban Emirate presents itself as an unabashed authoritarian government that can deliver peace and security to Afghanistan after more than 40 years of war. If the Taliban's claims are warranted, it can offer value to China and, in principle, allow for some common ground. Should the uncertainty emerging from violent regime change in Afghanistan be addressed, China

would become more interested in developing its infrastructural networks in Afghanistan and opening its mining sector for exploitation.

The Threat of Militant Groups

From China's perspective, the December 2022 Islamic State's attack on the Kabul Longan guesthouse raised concerns about the safety of its investments and economic activities in Afghanistan.¹ Most of the small number of Chinese businessmen who were in Afghanistan in 2022 left the country thereafter.² In 2023, the Islamic State in Khorasan intensified its anti-China propaganda, even threatening attacks on Chinese territory.³ Even if these threats were inflated, China has always been aware of the presence of a few hundred Uyghur militants in Afghanistan, including up to 200 who

were under Taliban protection as of August 2021.⁴ The Taliban were quick to relocate them away from the borders of Tajikistan and China, but a number of them refused to comply and either joined the Islamic State or went into hiding.⁵ As the number of Uyghurs within the ranks of the Islamic State grew, China grew increasingly worried that Chinese businessmen and workers in Afghanistan would be vulnerable to hostility.⁶

The Chinese government has been reluctant to provide military and security assistance to the Emirate. The Taliban have in their possession light weapons and do not require heavy weapons, though they would benefit from a more capable air force equipped with drones and surveillance equipment. In other words, China could help the Taliban decisively at little cost to itself. In 2023, Huawei agreed to install thousands of security cameras in Afghanistan's cities whereas Taliban requests for drones and other security equipment were not satisfied.⁷ Perhaps China is worried about being viewed as supporting an isolated regime or becoming a higher priority target for the Islamic State. Perhaps they would have liked the Taliban to hand over their Uyghur guests.

Ultimately, although the Taliban refused to hand over Uyghur militants to China, they did force the militants to relocate away from the border and placed them under surveillance. Sources

familiar with Chinese officials also believe that the Taliban are mounting a serious effort to eliminate the Islamic State from Afghanistan.⁸ Thus, even if China is not fully satisfied with the Taliban's performance in handling foreign jihadism, they have good reason to be more satisfied than any other neighbouring country.

Keeping America Away

Despite US support for the previous regime and the long US-Taliban war, China's worries about US influence are not entirely unwarranted. Taliban sources in Kabul have in the past mentioned China's irritation every time news of Taliban-US cooperation emerged, especially about intelligence sharing.⁹ US-Taliban relations have been held back by the latter's suspension of women's education, but it is widely understood that the head of the Emirate's intelligence service, Abdul Haq Wasiq, has a good relationship with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Defence Minister Mohammad Yaqub is also known to share good relationships with US diplomats.¹⁰

An important advantage for China is that, within the Taliban, there is no objection to engagement with China, though there might be differences about the speed and extent of such engagement. No other country, within the region and beyond, enjoys such a status in the eyes of

the Taliban. Arguably, therefore, as of December 2023, from China's point of view, there was no immediate danger of the US gaining ground in Kabul.¹¹

Towards Diplomatic Recognition

The Taliban's tactics of distancing the Emirate from China, following the enthusiasm of the initial months, bore fruit in 2023, as the Chinese government began taking serious steps towards diplomatic recognition. In September, China became the first country to post an ambassador to Kabul, and on 1 December 2023, in another first, it accepted the credentials of the Taliban-appointed ambassador in Beijing. At that point, formal recognition appeared close.¹²

So far, China has operated within the unwritten regional consensus on the new regime in Kabul: there will be no formal recognition until the Taliban meets the key demands of neighbouring countries—inclusiveness, moderate policies, and a commitment to combat terrorism.¹³ In reality, these key demands vary, with countries such as Russia and Iran being more worried about the Taliban's lack of inclusiveness and others such as Pakistan more concerned about the Taliban's unwillingness to act decisively against foreign jihadist groups. China, at least according to

Taliban perceptions, belongs to the second group, as it has no Afghan protégés that it would like the Taliban to share power with.¹⁴ Indeed, there is no sign that China is putting any serious pressure on the Taliban to be more inclusive or to adopt more moderate policies.

The Taliban's suspension of education for girls is likely designed by the Emir to sabotage efforts by members of the Cabinet in Kabul to engage with Western countries. These non-moderate policies, therefore, are China's best guarantee that Western competitors will be kept at bay.

Economic Interests

This author's sources in Kabul say that, while China now accepts the Taliban's requests for goodwill and rewards the Taliban's attention towards Chinese interests, they believe that China covets lithium mining in Afghanistan and that formal recognition would be linked to assurances that China is going to be awarded the tender. The Taliban, on the other hand, want to ensure that lithium mining would result in a steady flow of revenue.¹⁵

Chinese business interests in Afghanistan were evident from the beginning. Soon after regime change in Afghanistan, Chinese businesses, despite being puzzled by the new regime and its idiosyncrasies, began looking towards Afghanistan with renewed interest. This interest was reciprocated by the Taliban. They did not have much choice;¹⁶ from the beginning, the new regime's relations with Pakistan were problematic, while Western countries were unresponsive to the Taliban's early efforts to please them, such as by keeping girls' schools open, suspending the full implementation of Islamic law, and keeping their doors open to the incorporation of non-Taliban elements in government. The Taliban soon realised that unlocking Western aid would be impossible in the short term; therefore, focusing efforts on neighbouring countries was prioritised, and China emerged as the partner of choice.

The Emirate has made it clear that Afghanistan's national resources are open for exploitation and that it welcomes infrastructural projects as well. In 2022, an estimated 500 Chinese businessmen flocked to Afghanistan to explore opportunities.¹⁷ At the same time, the Emirate encouraged Chinese companies already holding contracts to restart operations, including the China National Petroleum Corporation, which had a contract to extract oil in the Amu Darya basin, and the China Metallurgical Group Corporation which had a contract to extract copper in Logar.¹⁸

Overall, these efforts yielded little results, even if, in early 2023, the Amu Darya oil fields were re-contracted and oil started flowing later in the year.¹⁹ An Islamic State attack on a guesthouse used by Chinese visitors led to hundreds of Chinese businessmen leaving the country.²⁰ At the same time, Taliban's enthusiasm for China as an economic partner became muted because of slower than expected Chinese progress towards diplomatic recognition and the cautionary advice received from Afghan businessmen about working with Chinese companies under the previous regime.²¹ After several months of China and the Taliban evaluating each other, by the end of 2023, it appeared as if Beijing believed that diplomatic recognition, rewarded by lithium mining concessions, could reset relations and deliver a consolidation of stability in Afghanistan as well as profitable business for China.

Conclusion

The Taliban and China showed signs of adapting to each other by late 2023. The Taliban signalled that they would not necessarily favour China in any future race to the country's mineral resources unless there was some reciprocity. They issued a spate a mining tenders, in which there was a clear effort to ensure that investors would not sit on their concessions indefinitely but would instead start production relatively soon. They also ensured that, alongside two Chinese companies, a set of Turkish, Iranian, British, and Afghan companies won contracts.

China heeded these soft warnings and simultaneously monitored developments. By the second half of 2023, they reached the conclusion that the Taliban can ensure stability in Afghanistan and that the best way to keep the Taliban away from the US is to reward the Taliban with gradual steps towards diplomatic recognition. With the political and security environment stabilised, Beijing seems ready to move into business mode.

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Three Phases of Russia's Engagement with Afghanistan Post-2021

Aleksei Zakharov

Over the last two years, Russia's approach to Afghanistan has undergone different phases—from the *schadenfreude* on America's withdrawal and enthusiasm over the Taliban's swift takeover of Kabul, to apprehensions about the deteriorating security situation, to looking ahead and seeking ways to expand its economic presence in the country. By virtue of its location at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, Afghanistan holds critical significance for Russia's geopolitical ambitions in Eurasia. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan could bring many benefits to Moscow's economic and security interests in the region, but as the proverb says: "Honey is sweet, but the bee bites." No matter how close Russia has become to the Taliban over the last decade, the limitations of engagement with the grouping persist.

Fluid Approaches

Phase 1: Emotional Upliftment and Security Concerns (August 2021-August 2022)

Russia was among the first countries to reach out to the Taliban after the latter's grab of power in August 2021. Amid the turmoil, including the frantic task of many countries to evacuate their diplomatic personnel, the Russian Embassy in Kabul remained in operation. Moreover, the Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitry Zhirnov held meetings with Taliban representatives, calling them "adequate people", who are, unlike the previous "puppet government", capable of putting things in good order.¹

Even as all branches of power in Moscow converged on rejoicing at the US's withdrawal, the inherent divisions in assessing the developments in Afghanistan were also evident within the Russian foreign-policymaking mechanism. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was forward looking and optimistic about prospects of cooperation with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and assumed the stance that “the Taliban has changed,”² implying, it seemed to observers, that it would not resort to the ideology and practices it followed during its earlier rule in the 1990s. The Security Council, however, refused to take the Taliban's promises at face value and, wary of possible fallouts, was quick to launch a series of consultations with regional partners, including India.

Even as the “interim government” comprised only men and a nominal ethnic diversity that fell short of expectations, Moscow continued the diplomatic engagement with the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). The Taliban was invited to the Moscow Format meeting in October 2021, where its delegation met with representatives of India, Iran, and Pakistan and managed to solicit humanitarian aid from these countries.³

After the US's withdrawal from Kabul, the line of communications on the Afghan issue between the US and Russia remained open. November 2021 saw the extended troika (US, Russia, China, Pakistan) meeting in Islamabad and the US Special

Envoy on Afghanistan Thomas West visiting Moscow, where he discussed American and Russian approaches to security threats emanating from Afghan soil with his counterpart Zamir Kabulov and the Security Council's Deputy Secretary Alexander Venediktov.⁴ Inevitably, the Russia-Ukraine military conflict derailed the Russia-US relationship and made the Afghan settlement a no-go area for bilateral talks.

In March 2022, Russia accredited the first IEA-appointed diplomat. Announcing this step, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov lauded the Taliban's efforts “to keep the state afloat” and pointed out “certain positive results in the counter-terrorism area” and with respect to human rights.⁵ Apparently, concerns about the legitimacy of the grouping and its terrorist clout are valid for Russia, as the Embassy of Afghanistan in Moscow, albeit run by the Taliban, is still flying the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's tricolour flag.

Phase 2: Disillusionment (September 2022-February 2023)

A sign of trouble for Moscow's Afghan policy was the explosion at the Embassy of Russia in Kabul on 5 September 2022, which claimed the lives of two Russian diplomats and eight Afghan nationals

and was purportedly carried out by the Islamic State (Islamic State Khorasan Province, IS-K). There were two different perspectives in the Russian strategic community on the origins of this attack. While the first supposed that the terrorist act stemmed from the Taliban-IS-K ideological conflict,⁶ the second linked it with Taliban infighting and assumed that it might have been a false flag operation by the Haqqani Network to thwart Moscow's contacts with the Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar-led faction.⁷

The terrorist act emerged as a reminder about an ever-elusive stability in Afghanistan and Moscow's exposure to security threats. Yet, Russia had not reconsidered its diplomatic presence in Kabul and decided to move ahead with the provisional contract on supplies of gasoline, diesel, liquefied petroleum gas, and wheat.⁸ That deal, according to the acting Afghan Commerce and Industry Minister Nooruddin Azizi, was beneficial to Kabul owing to a good discount from the Russian side.

At the same time, neither the Taliban government officials, nor the Taliban's diplomats from the IEA Embassy were invited to the Moscow Format meeting in November 2022, which was officially linked with the grouping's failure to form "a truly inclusive government"⁹ but was more likely due to Moscow's displeasure at the security situation in Kabul. Notably, the joint statement requested the Taliban to take "more visible steps against all terrorist organizations, and to firmly fight, dismantle and eliminate them" and "strongly condemned the terror attacks targeting innocent

Afghan civilians at public places, including [...] the Russian Embassy in Kabul."¹⁰

Moscow's disenchantment with the Taliban was also evident in Kabulov's "disillusionment" with how the Taliban was handling the situation: "It did a great job by kicking out the Americans and all puppet governments. But it has not learned how to run a government... [T]he Taliban should take institutional steps to improve the situation or at least to open a way for such improvement, which we cannot see at the moment."¹¹ He also announced Russia's diplomatic initiative—a G5 core format including China, India, Iran, and Pakistan conceived to form and implement "regional consensus" and "let the current rulers of Afghanistan know that they should listen to us."¹² The proposal, however, failed to take off. As Kabulov told *TASS* on 3 April 2023, no headway was made for the format as a result of Pakistan's objection to India's joining.

Phase 3: Incremental Economic Engagement and Mixed Political Signals (March 2023-Present)

Whereas the divergences over the war in Ukraine have scarcely left any space for promoting the so-called 'Greater Eurasian Partnership' as a bridge between Europe and Asia, Moscow has not explicitly given up its attempts to transform Eurasia into "a continental common space of peace, stability, mutual trust, development and prosperity."¹³ Although it appears even more difficult to achieve

than ever before, Russia’s foreign policy concept of March 2023 highlights that this goal also implies reaching “a comprehensive settlement in Afghanistan”, which could open up a way “for [country’s] integration into the Eurasian space.”¹⁴

Apart from grand geopolitical views and various attempts to craft a regional response to the situation in Afghanistan, Russia has been mulling involvement in several projects on Afghan territory. For example, Russia is part of a tripartite project with Iran and Pakistan aimed at developing the Afghan coal power sector. Russia’s Republic of Tatarstan signed a US\$1-billion contract to implement various infrastructure projects on Afghan soil. Russian pipe producers continue to take an interest in building the Afghan section

of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, while the RZD’s experts take part in the technical team exploring the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railroad construction.¹⁵

The trade cooperation between Russia and IEA is still nascent. Russia accounted for just 4 percent of total IEA’s imports in FY2022-‘23, which is much lower than the shares of Iran (20 percent), Pakistan (18 percent), and China (16 percent). Unlike Pakistan and India, Russia is also not a major export destination for Afghanistan’s products (Table 1).

Table 1: IEA’s Largest Sources of Imports and Exports (April 2022-April 2023), in US\$ millions

Country	Imports	Country	Exports
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	Türkiye	18
India	218	Kazakhstan	13

Source: Sputnik Afghanistan¹⁶

In July 2023, Russia became the second country after Iran to open its business centre in Afghanistan. Several companies, mainly based in Tatarstan like Kamaz, Tatneft, and KR-Group, are eyeing entry into the Afghan market while admitting that it is still too early to speak about any specific agreements.¹⁷

Moscow's dual approach of selective engagement with the Taliban and seeking for ways for the grouping's containment¹⁸ is best illustrated by the public outreach to the Afghan opposition. In a span of three months, from August to November 2023, leader of National Resistance Front (NRF) of Afghanistan Akhmad Massoud made two visits to Moscow: first, to hold talks with the Spravedlivaya Rossiya party and second, to take part in the conference on Afghanistan, organised by the same party and which saw the participation of a dozen other opposition representatives. The event took place despite the discontent of the Russian MFA, which renounced the conference, calling it "a private initiative"¹⁹ and criticising the organisers for not inviting Taliban representatives. This points to a lack of concerted strategy in Moscow and a looming fault line within Russian policymaking on how to engage with Afghanistan.

Moscow's Reality Check

Now that Afghanistan is free from US and NATO military presence, Moscow is attempting to fill the void while embracing new geostrategic and economic opportunities. It has, however, proven to be easier said than done. While Russia's Afghan policy has merged economic overtures with political ambiguity and security apprehensions, it requires a reality check.

First, the security situation under the Taliban's rule has improved only marginally. Regardless of some progress in combating terrorism, Afghanistan is still a primary source of terrorist threat for Central and South Asia²⁰ and a place where terrorist attacks regularly claim people's lives. Second, under an avatar of the IEA, Afghanistan has not turned into a better place for doing business and remains a complicated destination for investments. This makes the implementation of ambitious economic projects on Afghan soil or running through Afghan territory unlikely.

Third, from the geopolitical angle, crafting "a common Eurasian space" in the context of the war in Ukraine would be like flogging a dead horse. As the two years of IEA have shown, the integration of Afghanistan in any geopolitical or geo-economic framework is a far-fetched idea, and Moscow would probably have to temper its grand ambitions.

Finally, Moscow's perception of the cause-effect relationship in the Afghan crisis also requires rectification. As prominent Russian experts note, it is the Taliban themselves, not an external power, that is responsible for the situation in Afghanistan.²¹ A course correction may be helpful in shifting the

excessive focus from the US's legacy in Afghanistan to a more realistic view of the Taliban's perceived evolution and its ability to emerge as a national movement.

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Rude Awakening: Pakistan's Limited Leverage Over the Afghan Taliban

Amira Jadoon

The return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan in August 2021 was a watershed moment that was met with apprehension by the international community. The reaction in Pakistan, however, was notably different as it was optimistic. Then Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said Afghanistan had broken free from the “shackles of slavery”, welcoming it as an opportunity to foster a supportive regime next door.¹

However, the resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan, driven largely by the revival of the Tehrik-e-Taliban² (TTP) as well as the Baloch insurgency,³ along with continued threats from Islamic State-Khorasan⁴ (ISK), has tempered Pakistan's initial enthusiasm. Since then, there has been a sober realisation of Pakistan's reduced leverage over the Afghan Taliban. Beyond an unhinged TTP finding refuge in Taliban's new Islamic Emirate of

Afghanistan (IEA), the fragile relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been further marred by hostile public exchanges between the leaders of both countries, demarcation issues, skirmishes along the Durand Line (the 1,600-mile Afghanistan-Pakistan border), trade hurdles, and the expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan.

In this evolving geopolitical landscape, Pakistan grapples with the limitations of coercive diplomacy as it struggles to effect change in the Taliban's policy towards the TTP in a meaningful way. Despite Islamabad's anticipation of allegiance and its insistence on reciprocal loyalty, the reality that has unfolded since the Taliban's ascent to power in Afghanistan has given Pakistan's military and civilian leaders a stark awakening.

The current impasse over the TTP represents an inflection point between the Taliban and Pakistan, encapsulating decades of mutual suspicion intertwined with strategic benefits. In the post-2021 era, however, the Taliban's interests have been recalibrated away from their historical alignment with Pakistan, necessitating a strategic reassessment by Islamabad to accommodate the current political and security contours of the region.

The Costly Pursuit of Strategic Depth

Historically, bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been tense. Following Pakistan's independence in 1947, Afghanistan was the only state that opposed its UN membership, primarily due to Kabul's rejection of the Durand Line.⁵ During Daoud Khan's era in Afghan politics, the country's approach on the Durand Line remained revisionist, with support for Pashtun and Baloch nationalist movements.⁶ Eventually, Pakistan operationalised a different strategy in Afghanistan: a pivotal opening was the era of the Soviet-Afghan proxy war of the 1980s that laid the groundwork for the Pakistan-Taliban relationship and reinforced Pakistan's strategy of employing proxy militant groups. However, it also paved

the way for Al-Qaeda to subsequently establish a home base in the region, creating deep logistical and operational channels which militants would exploit for years to come. Following the Taliban's rise to power in 1996 and the creation of the IEA, Pakistan developed a strong relationship with its new leadership, aiming for lasting strategic depth in Afghanistan.

Although Pakistan was a key US partner in the war on terror (WOT), it also maintained relations with the Taliban, specifically by providing sanctuaries, underpinned by its goal of strategic depth. Pakistan's dual role during this period would win it few friends internationally, but it also instigated a tide of anti-Pakistan militancy and a network of militants supporting and drawing legitimacy from their association with the Taliban insurgency. Perhaps more importantly, during this period, the Taliban also sought to reduce their reliance on Pakistan, as the organisation came to control and contest more territory within Afghanistan, establishing independent sources of financing, including smuggling, extortion, and taxation of the lucrative narcotics trade.⁷ Signs of the Taliban's eagerness to reduce their reliance on Pakistan was on full display when the former sought to engage with the US directly and organised an office in Qatar, circumventing Pakistan.⁸

Pakistan's Dilemma: The Taliban's Renewed Vision

The Taliban's capture of Kabul was greeted positively by Pakistani leaders,⁹ as Pakistan anticipated that the Taliban would compel the TTP to halt its cross-border assaults on Pakistani territory. The TTP is well-known to have maintained deep ideological and operational linkages with the Taliban, supporting their insurgency over the years against US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan.¹⁰ TTP leaders assisted the Taliban logistically and operationally, boosting the latter's recruitment channels for trained fighters and suicide bombers.¹¹ The TTP also extracted benefits from its relationship with the Taliban, enhancing its resources and credibility, and gaining access to refuge in Afghanistan from drone strikes and military operations in Pakistan's tribal areas.¹² Following US withdrawal, the TTP's trajectory became increasingly dependent on the Taliban's evaluation of their utility vis-a-vis Pakistan's offerings.

In the Taliban-governed Afghanistan after 2021, the Taliban have clearly indicated their refusal to get embroiled in Pakistan's domestic

problems.¹³ Although the Taliban government expressed its willingness to facilitate talks between Pakistan and the TTP,¹⁴ in August 2021, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid relayed that the "issue of the TTP is one that Pakistan will have to deal with, not Afghanistan."¹⁵ The unlikelihood of the Taliban taking decisive action against the TTP can be attributed to several factors. First, given the Taliban's increased self-reliance within Afghanistan and their enthusiasm to establish global connections, they are less inclined to adhere to Pakistan's demands regarding the TTP.¹⁶ Second, the longstanding support of the TTP for the Afghan insurgency has fostered a sense of loyalty within Taliban ranks, making any action against the TTP a potential source of internal discord among Taliban members. And finally, as the Taliban confront domestic struggles such as the persistent threat of the ISK and local opposition, targeting TTP will likely not be a priority. In this context, Pakistan has resorted to a strategy that incorporates measured military action, assertive diplomatic language, and a range of other pressure tactics designed to amplify the consequences for the Taliban should they persist in providing refuge to TTP members.

The Limitations of Pakistan's Coercive Diplomacy

The Pakistani leadership has endeavoured to influence the Taliban's stance towards the TTP, but many of its efforts are grounded in outdated viewpoints and strategic assumptions that overlook the substantial shifts within the regional landscape and the Taliban's revised outlook for their future. Consequently, the past two years have witnessed a series of complex diplomatic and coercive attempts that have largely been ineffective, reflecting a disconnect between Pakistan's strategies and the evolving geopolitical realities.

The Taliban officially deny providing any shelter or support to the TTP,¹⁷ while emphasising their commitment to maintaining positive relations with Pakistan and respecting its territorial integrity. Perhaps to demonstrate their commitment, the Taliban mediated talks between Pakistan representatives and TTP leaders, which eventually collapsed, prompting Pakistan to signal its seriousness and compel policy change by launching strikes in Afghanistan's Kunar and Khost provinces.¹⁸ After almost a year of inconclusive talks, the TTP ended its months-long

ceasefire in November 2022, unleashing a deadly and violent campaign against Pakistani security personnel.¹⁹

Frustrated with their lack of leverage over the Taliban and experiencing a 79-percent rise in violent attacks by armed groups in the first half of 2023,²⁰ Pakistani civilian and military leaders have resorted to publicly rebuking the Taliban for providing refuge to the TTP. Pakistan has turned to alternative measures to create political and economic pressure on the Taliban, including border closings and re-openings,²¹ increased costs of transit trade,²² disruption of delivery of goods containers,²³ and repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees from Pakistan.²⁴ The expulsion of "illegal foreigners", which is an especially thorny issue, has not been received well by the Taliban, who have reminded host countries to not "forcefully deport Afghans without preparation" and to keep in mind the "principles of Islamic brotherhood."²⁵ In November 2023, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Taliban administration urged Pakistan to cease the expulsion of Afghan nationals,²⁶ while acting Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqub Mujahid warned that the "Pakistani regime should weigh the consequences of everything it does and sow as

much as it can reap.”²⁷ Reports about the Taliban’s refusal to accept earthquake relief assistance from Pakistan due to a social media post by Pakistan’s interim prime minister Anwar ul-Haq Kakar further signaled the Taliban’s desire for self-reliance despite internal challenges.²⁸

Public naming and shaming, or attempts to use economic coercion, have yielded few benefits for the Pakistani state, but they have done much to heighten distrust and tensions. Such measures are unlikely to compel the Taliban to change their policy towards the Durand Line²⁹ or to take widespread measures against the TTP or its new front, Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), which claimed responsibility for the suicide attack in Dera Ismail Khan that killed 23 soldiers.³⁰ The attack was a reminder of the escalating security challenges in Pakistan, which only compound the nation’s socioeconomic and political woes. This latest assault, which triggered a formal protest from Pakistan³¹ to IEA leadership, drew an emphatic response from the Taliban, challenging the notion that all attacks, even those occurring deep within Pakistan’s borders, could be pinned on Afghanistan.³²

Looking Ahead

Pakistan’s approach towards Afghanistan demands an urgent transition to an evidence-based policy framework attuned to the changing calculus of political actors and contours of regional geopolitics. The bargaining equation between the two nations has undergone a profound transformation, with a more outwardly independent Taliban with revised priorities and a broader array of potential external partners³³ that diminish Pakistan’s traditional leverage. This necessitates a departure from current forms of coercive diplomacy which have shown to be counterproductive; a nuanced strategy would combine positive inducements with coercive measures in multiple domains, leveraging various actors and channels of dialogue and engagement to identify shared preferences and policy frameworks.

In order to counter the multifaceted nature of extremism and political violence that the country faces and to ensure human security—a prerequisite for political and socioeconomic reforms and prosperity—Pakistan must adopt a holistic approach that intertwines societal resilience, national policy reform, and regional cooperation. At the societal level, fostering

community resilience against extremism is crucial. This involves improving physical and socioeconomic security, enhancing healthcare services, and implementing a tolerant education system to reduce extremism and polarisation. Attention should be given to emerging political actors, particularly women, who are increasingly active in politics, but also in realms of political violence.

Nationally, Pakistan's policy must transition from a reactive to a proactive stance, which includes targeting militant groups networks, leadership, financial and recruitment channels, and strategic messaging capabilities. Concurrently, it is imperative to enhance governance measures that address underlying grievances, provide avenues for citizen engagement and public dialogue, and move the population away from extremist narratives. On the regional and international fronts, cooperation among governments is

indispensable to address the interconnected nature of militant networks and ideologies and dismantle the transnational elements of South and Central Asia.

Overall, Pakistan's strategy should be a balanced amalgamation of local resilience building, proactive national policies, and collaborative regional efforts. Such a multifaceted approach is essential to effectively tackle security challenges while avoiding the escalation of tensions with any single regional actor, such as the Afghan Taliban, thereby contributing to a more stable and secure region.

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Central Asia's Relations with Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

Hamza Boltaev

The Taliban's lightning-fast takeover of Afghanistan received rather calm and "wait and see" reactions from nearly all the Central Asian Republics (CAR), with Tajikistan being unusually outspoken about the events unfolding in its southern neighbour. Although the CARs did not welcome the Biden administration's swift decision on the allied forces' sudden departure from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, they reluctantly adapted to the reality. Since then, the Central Asian countries' respective policies towards a Taliban-led Afghanistan have shared certain similarities, with trade-driven pragmatism being their most important characteristic. This article explores the affairs of the CARs with Taliban-led Afghanistan, which are largely shaped by Western countries' reticence in recognising the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan.¹

Many countries in the region are in a state of strategic ambiguity; even though the CARs have officially chosen to avoid any recognition and formal engagements with the Taliban, they have kept doors open for any necessary contacts. This pragmatism could, in the future, give rise to another deeper issue: the erosion of trust between these republics and Western countries. This situation could result in "reciprocal doubt" where, on one hand, improved relationships of the CARs with Taliban-run Afghanistan could, over time, create some unease and potentially be assumed by the West as a shift towards the recognition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan; and on the other, Western countries' direct and indirect exchanges with the Taliban could raise doubts in the eyes of the CARs towards the West.

Uzbekistan

For Uzbekistan, the issue of recognition has not been an obstacle to maintaining trade relations with Afghanistan. In 2022, Uzbekistan exported more than US\$750 million worth of goods to Afghanistan; imports from Afghanistan were at a far lower value of US\$9.3 million.² Uzbekistan also sees Afghanistan as a potential trade route; therefore, it was a principal supporter of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Qobul-Peshowar railroad project, kickstarted in March 2022, soon after Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan agreed to the construction.³ However, the Qoshtepa Canal Project, which the Taliban is pursuing, appears to be the most pressing challenge to Afghan-Uzbek relations. Due to the absence of any official contacts, it has been almost impossible for Uzbekistan to legally incorporate Afghanistan into the broader regional water regulatory system for Central Asian nations' water affairs.

Kazakhstan

Kazakh-Afghan relations have also been improving in the last two years. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine seems to have pushed Kazakhstan to diversify its trade relations with Russia, in addition to the greater need for minimising logistical interdependence with its northern neighbour. To this end, according to strategists in Astana, Afghanistan might be crucial; as Deputy Prime

Minister and Minister of Trade and Integration Serik Zhumangarin pointed out, "Politics is politics, economics is economics."⁴ Kazakh-Afghan cooperation covers domains like trade, construction, and mining. In 2022, trade turnover with Afghanistan doubled that of 2021 to reach US\$987.9 million,⁵ with exports constituting a big share. In January 2023, Afghanistan became one of the top ten trading partners of Kazakhstan. Afghanistan has also been the largest market for Kazakh grain and flour.⁶ Moreover, the Kazakh-Afghan business forum, held in Kabul in April 2023 and which witnessed the announcement of the trading house in Kabul, is another testimony to the deepening economic cooperation between the two sides.

Kazakhstan has also been actively exploring the possibility of participating in railway development projects in Afghanistan. Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Mavlavi Amir Khan Muttaki met with the Kazakh Ambassador to Afghanistan Alimkhan Essengeldiyev on 12 March 2023 in Kabul to discuss the matter.⁷ Kazakhstan is also considering the possibility of bypassing Uzbekistan in exporting goods, especially grain and flour, to Afghanistan, citing Uzbekistan's higher rate of transit charges.⁸ On this note, Turkmenistan⁹ is said to be interested in both developing new transportation systems through its territory and offering a discount of

30 percent to Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has also been eyeing to participate in Afghanistan's mining industry, with two Kazakhstani mining companies, KazMunaiGas and Kazgeologia, reportedly interested in establishing a presence in the market.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan has been following in the footsteps of the other CARs in its Afghanistan approach and has become more pragmatic. The Tajik government also openly announced the acceptance of a thousand Afghan refugees into its territory.¹⁰ However, it would later reverse this policy, close the borders, and send many refugees back home.¹¹ Tajikistan's changing tone could signal the need for practical relations with Afghanistan, as there are pressing challenges that require some degree of engagement—these include issues of trade, terrorism, border clashes, drug trafficking, and refugees.

For Tajikistan, Afghanistan is too large a market to be ignored. The total volume of trade between the two countries reached US\$52.7 million in the first half of 2022.¹² In the first half of 2022 alone, Tajikistan exported a total of US\$44.9 million of electricity to Afghanistan.¹³

Turkmenistan

The relationship between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan has often been eclipsed by other concerns that are strictly confined to the region. The essence of these relations lies in cooperation in areas like energy and new transport corridors. To this end, Turkmenistan has continued to maintain practical relations with the Taliban government. The Taliban government's former acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited Ashgabat in mid-January 2022 to discuss the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas project and the Turkmen-Afghan-Pakistan (TAP) high-voltage power transmission project.

Turkmenistan is also interested in the development of cargo transportation through Afghanistan. Therefore, Turkmenistan is eyeing participating in the modernisation of transport infrastructure in Afghanistan¹⁴ that includes construction of highways and railways, and improving customs procedures. Apart from the transportation and trade cooperation, Turkmenistan, as a downstream region of the Amu Darya basin, is deeply concerned with the construction of the Qoshtepa Canal in northern Afghanistan. On 4 August 2023, Turkmenistan hosted the first-ever trilateral summit between Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, in

Ashgabat, where parties shared their concerns about the rational use of transboundary water resources. Among other issues, the “protection, and rational use of water resources”¹⁵ was identified in a joint statement released after the summit. Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are continuing a practical dialogue on a number of other issues, including border clashes and the threat of terrorism.

Kyrgyzstan

Bilateral trade was a dominant force in the relations between Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. In the first half of 2023, trade turnover reached US\$13.2 million, with agricultural products being the most traded goods.¹⁶ During this period, Kyrgyzstan imported a little over US\$2 million worth of goods from Afghanistan, which is characteristic of the CARs’ trade cooperation with Afghanistan. Since the Taliban’s return to power, the export of goods from Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan has increased, from around US\$1.2 million in 2020 to US\$21 million in 2022. This could be attributed to the rebounding trade cooperation after the end of COVID-19-related restrictions. Apart from trade, Kyrgyzstan seems to be mainly concerned about the security challenges that could spread into the country from a Taliban-governed Afghanistan.¹⁷ Additionally, both sides have been continuing discussions over the CASA-1000 project, which is aimed at supplying Afghanistan with Kyrgyz electricity.¹⁸

Conclusion

Central Asian countries’ Afghanistan policy has so far been dominated by a careful calibration of their pragmatic interests, alongside avoiding any official exchanges, as well as recognition of the Taliban government, which might give the wrong signal to nations that do not have typical relations with the Taliban government. Although the engagements of CARs with the Taliban government experienced some lows in the early period of Taliban rule, pragmatism and policies centred around prioritising economic interests eventually prevailed. Moreover, the CARs are exploring ways by which they can keep their doors open to allow for a mutually beneficial economic cooperation with the Taliban-run Afghanistan without incurring antagonism from the international community.

The “collective approach” adopted mainly by Western countries towards the issue of recognition could also be implemented by the CARs towards more practical economic cooperation without any political engagement with the Taliban government. At the same time, Western countries’ affairs with the Taliban could trigger some unease in the CARs. CAR-West relations on the Taliban issue could result in both sides distrusting the other.

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Turbulent Geopolitics, Uneasy Neighbour: Iran's Pragmatic Engagement with the Taliban

Vali Golmohammadi

Afghanistan has long been an uneasy neighbour to Iran. Tehran cautiously welcomed the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 following the withdrawal of the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces; at the time, Iran viewed the evolving post-American landscape as an opportunity to bring peace and stability to its neighbour.¹ Recognising the Taliban as part of the reality of Afghanistan,² Iran has started to adopt a more pragmatic engagement policy while continuing to not officially recognise the self-proclaimed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). Accordingly, Iranian authorities have also begun rebranding the Taliban as a "reformed group" to

justify engagement with a Sunni extremist group that has long been considered hostile to Iran.³ By keeping the diplomatic doors open to dialogue and reconciliation, Iran expected the Taliban to consider Iran's security and political concerns over urgent issues such as the influx of Afghan refugees migrating into Iran, sustain water supply to the eastern provinces of Iran, counter ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) terrorist activities, and, more specifically, form an inclusive government. However, two years after the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan, it seems that Iran's expectations have not been realised.

Geo-Strategic and Security Incentives

Iran's pragmatic engagement with the Taliban is primarily influenced by its strategic calculations. Tehran has a number of key security readings of Afghanistan's domestic politics and intra-Taliban equations. First, the Taliban are major power shareholders in Afghanistan, and it is unlikely that their survival will be threatened by other domestic political actors. Although there are significant differences between the political factions of the Taliban, the faction based in Kandahar holds the clout, more than the others based in Kabul. The main armed opponent of the Taliban currently is ISIS-K, and the Taliban has the will to confront this group militarily with the help of external support. Despite theological differences, Iran and the Taliban share a common security threat from the ISIS-K insurgency, which remains the top insecurity source in Afghanistan. Iran has concluded that any actions taken against the Taliban would diminish their capacity to combat ISIS-K.⁴

Second, Tehran is mapping out the developments in Afghanistan within the broader context of changing regional geopolitics. Iran is wary of the geopolitical competition and influence of other regional and global powers in Afghanistan, particularly Pakistan and Saudi

Arabia, which could threaten Iran's interests in the region. Under the shifting regional circumstances, Iran's pragmatic engagement with the Taliban presents a complex dilemma. While it may serve Iran's immediate interests in terms of security, trade, and influence in Afghanistan, it also has the potential to inadvertently benefit its regional rivals. This dynamic underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of regional power struggles in the context of Afghanistan's evolving political landscape. By avoiding hostile actions that could alienate the Taliban, Tehran is likely to seek more tolerance with the Taliban to strengthen its leverage to counter the influence of regional rivals.⁵

Third, Iran has a significant Sunni Muslim population in its southern and eastern regions, and there are concerns that the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan could embolden Sunni extremist groups with sympathisers in Iran. Iran is highly cautious in its approach toward the Taliban, avoiding hostile actions that could exacerbate tensions or provide opportunities for these groups and their external supporters to increase their destabilising activities in Iran's south and east provinces.⁶

Fourth, while Iran's strategic calculus has historically prioritised its immediate neighbours, particularly the Middle East, Afghanistan has nonetheless held a degree of strategic significance for Iran. The fact is that Iran has not viewed Afghanistan as a core component of its strategic depth in the same way that it does with countries like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.⁷ Therefore, Iran's non-confrontational response to the Sunni-extremist Taliban is driven by a concern to address pressing security issues rather than pursue a long-term strategy aimed at establishing enduring influence in Afghanistan.

Iran's Geo-economic Interests

Beyond geo-strategic and security considerations, Iran's engagement with the Taliban is influenced by geo-economic motivations. Iran has a 35-percent share in Afghanistan's imports market. In 2023, Iran exported 6.384 million tonnes of commodities worth US\$2.689 billion to Afghanistan.⁸ On 5 November 2023, Tehran hosted an Iran-Afghanistan Joint Economic Committee meeting for the first time after the new government in Afghanistan took office, resulting in five memorandums of understanding on cooperation in different economic sectors. 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 between the neighbouring countries. Iran and Taliban delegations also agreed to take the necessary measures to increase the level of trade to US\$10 billion per year.⁹

Transit is also a crucial aspect of economic relations with Afghanistan as it holds both economic and geopolitical significance. Iran considers Afghanistan to be an important part of its trade map, which includes other key regional players such as China, India, and Pakistan. India, in particular, sees Afghanistan as a gateway to Central Asia, which it can use to challenge Pakistan's strategic depth. As a result, India has invested heavily in Afghan infrastructure, developed the Chabahar port, and signed a tripartite treaty with Tehran and Kabul.¹⁰ Energy is another crucial factor to consider when examining the prospect 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. This has provided Iran with economic leverage inside Afghanistan to shape its political relations with the Taliban.

Apart from obstacles raised after the Taliban returned to power, the prospect of Iran-Afghanistan economic relations depends more on the outlook of Iran's sanctioned economy. Restoring the nuclear agreement, easing sanctions, and revitalising the Iranian economy are essential prerequisites for enhancing economic ties with Afghanistan, regardless of who controls the country. For Tehran, China and Pakistan are the main competitors in Afghanistan's market, and India is considered a main partner. The prospect of Iran's share in Afghanistan's economy will be determined by the fate of the Chabahar port and the Chabahar Corridor project, which aims to facilitate the transportation of goods to Afghanistan. Iran-India transit cooperation in Chabahar port will play an important role in this regard. In the foreseeable future, although Iran will maintain its dominance in the fuel and energy sector, the two countries' cooperation in the transit sector is the most vulnerable point of Iran's economic presence in Afghanistan. Despite the differences with Pakistan, Afghanistan's Taliban intended to prioritise Pakistan's alternative transit routes and seaports to the Chabahar port.¹¹

Going through Fire and Water: The Way Forward

From a broad perspective, the 20-year state-building project in Afghanistan has failed, yielding only instability and unending conflict. The fragile

American-led order in Afghanistan has collapsed, the IEA's order has not yet been established, and its power has yet to be transformed into authority. Taliban leaders are not inclined to form an inclusive government structure or engage in meaningful dialogue with various Afghan groups. They also refrain from any long-term political agreement with the international community regarding the future of Afghanistan. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the international community will recognise the IEA in the years to come.

Iran still does not have a clear picture of the future political order in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. If the foundations of Afghanistan's political order are influenced by the three traditional fault lines of religion, language, and ethnicity—and if the IEA seeks to exploit these fault lines—it poses a serious threat to the security and national interests of Iran. The fact is that Shia-Persian Iran is uneasy with the prospect of a Sunni extremist Pashtun group monopolising and consolidating power on its doorstep. Despite this, Iran has become accustomed to the fact that the Taliban is part of the undeniable reality of a post-US Afghanistan and is making increasing diplomatic efforts to co-exist with them by setting aside longstanding animosities.

Over the past two years, Iran has cautiously adopted an appeasement policy towards the Taliban, but the relations of the two sides have not yet reached a balance and remain problematic. From Tehran's perspective, the Taliban's occasional border incursion, the violation of Iran's water rights to the resources of the Helmand river, and the influx of Afghan refugees into Iran are aimed at strengthening their political leverage against Iran to gain the IEA recognition. Although Iran has already handed over the Afghanistan Embassy in Tehran to the Taliban, by hosting Afghan opposition leaders—including Resistance Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Massoud and former Herat warlord Ismail Khan—Tehran has maintained its levers to balance Taliban's possible incursion. Meanwhile, the Fatemiyoun Brigade, an Afghan Shia militia organised by Iran's IRGC Quds Force, still serves as a potential asset for Iran in case their tension with the Taliban escalates.¹²

Another driver accounting for the outlook of Iran's relations with the Taliban is related to domestic considerations of Iran's Afghanistan policy. From the very beginning, Tehran's Afghanistan policy has sparked internal divisions, with conservatives and reformists debating whether to support or oppose the Taliban's resurgence to power. There are two main internal approaches to interacting with the Taliban:

reformists see the rise of the Taliban as a long-term threat to Iran's national security and seek to confront them, while conservatives believe that the Taliban has changed its anti-Iran nature and are inclined to engage with them pragmatically.¹³ In the public sphere, the anti-Afghan sentiment is on the rise. Amid prevalent opposition to the presence of Afghan refugees in Iran, Iranians increasingly perceive Afghans as a threat to national security and societal integrity.¹⁴ There are worries regarding the radicalisation of Afghan refugees, who are estimated to be around five million in number. What is certain is that there is still no national consensus in Iran regarding interaction with the Taliban, and this constrains the government's options in approaching the IEA.

In short, despite the current pragmatic engagement, occasional tensions and mistrust will define Iran's relations with the Taliban in the years to come. A dilemma for Iranian authorities is how to counter the threat of ISIS-K and balance the regional and trans-regional rival's increasing influence in Afghanistan without recognising and legitimising the Taliban. The potential sources of tension—such as the suppression of Afghan Shias, drug trafficking, influx of Afghan refugees into Iran, and water-sharing disputes—will likely continue to overshadow Iran-Taliban relations.

However, it is unlikely that Tehran would risk any major confrontation with the Taliban over these concerns. Tehran appears to have concluded that their preferred option is to co-exist with the Taliban while they observe the unfolding events in Afghanistan. To address its geo-strategic and security concerns, Iran seeks to be involved in

regional diplomatic dialogues and multilateral initiatives on Afghanistan, collaborating with influential like-minded actors like Russia, China, India, and Tajikistan to exert pressure on the Taliban to form an inclusive and responsible government.

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Pragmatism and Pressure

Points: U.S.-Taliban Engagement

Elizabeth Threlkeld and Sania Shahid

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the United States (US) has pursued an on-again, off-again engagement strategy with the group in an effort to secure its interests. This outreach has found some purchase, albeit limited, on issues such as the release of captive Americans, the resettlement of Afghan partners, and the facilitation of aid delivery. Where engagement has been less effective is in addressing the Taliban's increasingly draconian restrictions on the rights of women and girls and lack of inclusivity. These issues remain serious impediments to the relaxation of sanctions and movement toward recognition. Despite these challenges, Washington has determined that it is better able to both secure US objectives and support the people of Afghanistan through a moderated engagement strategy than by doubling down on existing coercive measures.

Shifting dynamics could test this approach. First, while Afghanistan has been notably insulated from geopolitical competition, China's moves towards *de-facto* recognition could put pressure on the existing international consensus against recognising the group. Second, waning foreign humanitarian assistance from donors amid multiple crises, combined with continued concerns over sanctioned individuals controlling funds, could complicate efforts to realise a more sustainable economic model. Finally, the US presidential election this November raises questions about the longevity of engagement efforts and shifts in approach under a potential Trump administration.

In the context of these challenges, the independent assessment prepared for the United Nations last November represents a useful way forward for better-coordinated and consistent international engagement in Afghanistan. This includes a roadmap for Afghanistan's reintegration into the international community contingent on actions taken by the Taliban. It also includes the appointment of a Special Envoy to lead international engagement with the group. Despite concerns from the Taliban and their refusal to attend recent UN-led talks in Doha, the independent assessment's recommendations are practical steps worthy of a continued diplomatic push at a time when Washington's options are limited and the window for outreach may be narrowing.¹

Two Years In, On Again, Off Again

Following the Taliban's sweep into Kabul, both the US and the Taliban were thrown into a period of intense tactical coordination regarding evacuation flights and airport security. Aligned imperatives facilitated this engagement: the US needed to evacuate its citizens and Afghan allies, and the Taliban sought to ensure a full US drawdown. The result was a unique opening for limited cooperation between the two sides that would otherwise have not been possible, given their mutual animosity and the political scrutiny on the Biden administration following the takeover.

As the dust settled through the fall and winter of 2021, the US pursued a policy of tentative engagement. Taliban representatives in Doha tried to assure the international community that they had changed following their draconian rule in the 1990s. Washington adopted a pragmatic approach that combined the provision of humanitarian assistance with steps to prevent the collapse of Afghanistan's economy. Key among these were the general licences issued by the Treasury Department, which sought to facilitate some transactions with Afghanistan despite existing sanctions. Simultaneously, Washington engaged in quiet outreach to Taliban representatives on issues including counterterrorism, inclusivity, and the rights of women and girls. The US resisted calls from the Taliban for diplomatic recognition, sanctions relief, and the unfreezing of Afghan central bank assets, which Washington had undertaken following the Taliban takeover.

The Taliban's March 2022 decision to prevent the reopening of girls' secondary schools was the first of several events that temporarily derailed high-level engagement.² This move, alarming in its own right, also contradicted assurances from the group's Doha representatives and dashed hopes of progress towards a key policy goal, raising challenging questions over future engagement.

Without access to Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada and his small group of Kandahar-based advisors, Washington was limited to more open but less influential Taliban officials who were willing to engage internationally. These concerns over access, combined with public pushback against the group's limits on girls' education, forced a rethink of US outreach.

A months-long lull in high-level outreach to the group followed, likely intended to signal the seriousness of the school closure issue from Washington's perspective. Even when the US renewed its engagement at the beginning of July, it was only partial. Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West met with the group to discuss "earthquake relief, economic stabilization, terrorism, [and] counternarcotics" while raising concerns over human rights issues.³ He was not joined in those meetings by his counterpart Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights Rina Amiri. In a statement on X, she offered support for West's engagement "on issues where there's traction, such as economic stabilization & the humanitarian response" while noting she had not seen similar progress from previous engagements on her issue set.⁴

Only four weeks later, a US drone strike killed Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in downtown Kabul, derailing this dual-track approach. While President Biden framed the strike as a demonstration of the US's over-the-horizon

counterterrorism capacity, the fact that the 9/11 planner was reportedly living in a guesthouse belonging to Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani exposed the Taliban's continued ties to terror groups.⁵ Washington accused the Taliban of violating their commitments under the Doha Agreement while the Taliban denied knowledge of al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul.⁶

Despite another pause in high-level meetings following the strike, the US demonstrated its willingness to continue engaging on a narrow set of interests and achieved two milestones in September 2022. First, the US and Qatar succeeded in negotiating the release of Mark Frerichs after two years in Taliban custody, making him the fourth detained American freed since August 2021. Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi saw the event as heralding a "new chapter" in relations with Washington.⁷ Second, the US announced the creation of the Afghan Fund, under which it moved US\$3.5 billion in Afghan central bank assets to a Swiss-based trust, administered by an international board, to help stabilise Afghanistan's economy. While the Taliban rejected this continued foreign control, the creation of the trust was a significant move that has the potential to provide sustainable support to Afghanistan's economy.

Although high-level meetings resumed in early October, a series of increasingly repressive Taliban edicts on the rights of women and girls placed such engagement on hold. Prohibitions on female students attending universities and women employees of NGOs and the UN were especially damaging. Despite pressure from the international community, the Taliban was becoming more, not less, restrictive. In February 2023, Washington responded with expanded visa restrictions on Taliban members responsible for these policies.⁸

Despite these challenges, the US and the international community continued quietly engaging with the group to find a way forward on vital humanitarian assistance and governance issues. A high-level UN conference on Afghanistan in May 2023 was followed by a meeting with both SRA West and Special Envoy Amiri and the Taliban in July. They discussed “the country’s economic situation, human rights, humanitarian needs, security commitments, inclusivity, [and] counter-narcotics issues.”⁹ The follow-up to the UN conference was held in Doha in February 2024 and notably included Afghan civil society members but not the Taliban, who declined the invitation as they would not be the “sole official representative of Afghanistan.”¹⁰

Pressure Points on the Horizon

Over the past two years, Washington has adopted a pragmatic approach in weathering ups and downs while working to secure US interests in Afghanistan. Three shifting dynamics may test this approach.

A key factor in facilitating the existing engagement strategy has been broad agreement within the international community on the non-recognition of the Taliban. Unlike the 1990s, when Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE recognised the Taliban regime in Kabul, in the current scenario, no state has extended recognition. Instead, even geopolitical rivals in the region and globally have made similar demands for greater rights for women and girls and more inclusive governance, in addition to action against terror groups. This consensus appears increasingly tenuous. China recently took a significant step in the direction of *de-facto* recognition by posting an Ambassador to Kabul, who presented credentials to the Taliban, and welcoming a Taliban representative in Beijing.¹¹ Although the US will continue to maintain unique influence with the

Taliban through its hold over sanctions decisions and central bank assets, a breakdown in the international consensus on non-recognition would greatly complicate Washington's engagement strategy.

Another factor to watch is the state of Afghanistan's economy in the context of diminishing humanitarian assistance. The US has been the largest donor of much-needed aid to Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, providing nearly US\$2 billion since August 2021. Already, assistance flows are slowing with the proliferation of competing crises around the world; the UN reported that its request for 2023 assistance to Afghanistan was only 30 percent funded as of August 2023, leaving a US\$2.3-billion shortfall.¹²

The US is pursuing options to expand beyond strict humanitarian assistance to support livelihoods and private sector growth to stimulate Afghanistan's economy. However, it is likely to remain constrained in these efforts given concerns regarding the Taliban's ties to terror groups and continued sanctions. These challenges have reportedly hampered US efforts to recapitalize Afghanistan's central bank, and there are few signs of improvement.¹³ Should Afghanistan's humanitarian situation deteriorate further in the absence of sufficient donor assistance, Washington could experience a greater challenge in balancing

its support for Afghanistan's people with its concerns over how the Taliban could direct funds under their control.


Another key variable in the US's engagement strategy is the outcome of the 2024 presidential election. While a second Biden administration is likely to remain open to limited, if perhaps diminishing, engagement contingent on Taliban actions, a second Trump administration seems unlikely to continue this level of outreach. This approach could include a reduced appetite to engage or provide humanitarian support paired with efforts to maintain control over Afghan central bank funds. Alternatively, a future Trump administration could prioritise economic interests in Afghanistan, seeking access to mineral resources at the expense of human rights and counterterrorism concerns. Either way, a future Trump administration is likely to be less willing to coordinate with other international stakeholders on Afghanistan, risking further fracturing of existing diplomatic efforts. As of now, it is difficult to say whether the Taliban have factored US political timelines into their negotiating strategy and what impact such calculations would have. Regardless, the uncertainty over the future political dispensation in Washington will further complicate engagement through November 2024, and potentially beyond.

Future Framework for Engagement

In November 2023, the United Nations released an independent assessment on international engagement in Afghanistan by UN Special Coordinator for Afghanistan Feridun Sinirlioğlu.¹⁴ The report notes a lack of coherence in stakeholder approaches and recommends 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. It also recommends the development of a roadmap to guide Afghanistan's reintegration into the international system contingent on a series of actions taken by the Taliban.

The UN Security Council adopted a resolution in December 2023 calling on the Secretary-General to appoint a Special Envoy, with China and Russia abstaining. China cautioned that further consultations were needed with the Taliban before any such appointment was made in order to lay the groundwork for productive engagement. 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.¹⁵

Concerns within both the Security Council and the Taliban are important to address through continued engagement and creative diplomacy. A different position title or quieter approach, for example, may be helpful in this regard.

Should it be possible to overcome these concerns, an effective Special Envoy-type representative with a broad mandate could bring much needed coordination and direction to the international community's efforts in Afghanistan.¹⁶ While the US will continue to play a key part in this regard over the coming months, building a more robust role for the UN could offer helpful continuity going forward while insulating the process from geopolitical tensions and political timelines to the extent possible. Especially if this approach is buttressed by patient regional diplomacy, it represents a workable engagement strategy despite increasingly limited options and difficult circumstances. 

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