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Afghanistan and the New Global (Dis)Order: Great Game and Uncertain Neighbours

Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, Ed.



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Introduction

On 15 August 2021, the world watched anxiously as the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan and squandered the West's US\$2 trillion.¹ The Taliban rose to power in 1996 with the support of Pakistan. On par with its ideology, the group opposed all aspects of modernisation and clamped down on minorities, education, and women's and human rights.² It also harboured and nurtured extremists, transnational criminals and traffickers for revenues, weapons, and ideological sustenance. This made the organisation a pariah and concern for the world.

The US overthrew the Taliban in Afghanistan in retaliation for the September 2001 attacks, but in the absence of a coherent strategy, the US and its allies dawdled in Afghanistan for 20 years. Originally, the aim was to eliminate al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.³ It then became about defeating the Taliban; by 2002 the aim was to eliminate the extremist ecosystem through democracy. NATO

and its allies thus began reconstructing the armed forces and civilian and military institutions. In 2009, the US's priority yet again shifted to troop surge and aiding and launching airstrikes in Pakistan.⁴ Finally, the US withdrew in 2021 stating that it has achieved its aim of dismantling the al-Qaeda and killing bin Laden.⁵

Despite this dawdling, the US's presence in Afghanistan had also provided security and stability for the region and beyond, by keeping the terrorists, transnational criminals, and traffickers preoccupied and checked. But this seems to be at stake with the Taliban now back in power. Several states have thus resorted to a wait-and-watch approach, hoping that a 'reformed' Taliban will build an 'inclusive government' that will not sideline women or people of other ethnicities.

At the heart of this approach is the vested interests of these individual states. They remain cautious of the security vacuum, refugee crisis, attacks on minorities, transnational crime, and terror networks emanating from Afghanistan. The states would thus extend their recognition to the Taliban regime based on the group's willingness and ability to mitigate the spillover of these threats.

The Taliban's return to power also coincides with a structural and geopolitical shift. Over the span of 20 years, the international structure has been tilting towards a multipolar world, where the US-China competition continues to take the high spot. The West and other regional allies that could not defend the values of democracy are now finding themselves in a tight spot as their influence and rules-based world order continues to be questioned by the revisionist trio of China, Russia and Iran. In this context, the geopolitical and economic positioning of Afghanistan matters significantly for all the regional and major powers. Therefore, setting the stage for the new great game.

A lot seems to be at stake in the international order with this regime change in Afghanistan. This volume explores how the Taliban's takeover will impact the prevalent world order. The essays in this series, updated as of 1 November 2021, will be divided into four broad sections.

The first section, 'The Unfolding Great Game', discusses the new great game in Afghanistan. The West's hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and incapability to stand up for human rights and democracy indicates the decline of the Western world order. On the other hand, China is wasting no opportunity to carve its spheres of influence and order. It will thus formulate its policies based on its realpolitik and approach towards international legal norms. The US's withdrawal has also helped Russia belittle the West and show a commitment to the security of the Central Asian states. In this context, Russia's role and involvement in Afghanistan will only increase. The US's hasty withdrawal has also indicated how little the former understands the interests of regional allies like India, thus highlighting the weakness and challenges of its grand Indo-Pacific strategy.

The second section, 'The Future of Regional Organisations', discusses how the Afghan crisis will impact regional organisations. The European Union lacks a coherent strategy to deal with illicit trafficking, terrorism, and the refugee crisis emerging from Afghanistan. The member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation have also failed to build a coherent strategy as they have prioritised individual interests over collective benefits. The regime change has also begun to disrupt the functioning of the already decaying South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

These regional organisations should therefore act on the Afghanistan crisis to stay relevant and avoid any further damage to their functioning and cohesion.

The third section, ‘The Neighbourhood’s Apprehensions’, explains why the Taliban’s revival worries the South and Central Asian states. In South Asia, all the small states, including the most vulnerable ones like Bangladesh, have resorted to a wait-and-watch approach against the Taliban regime. Their policies are a product of concerns like internal security, domestic politics, external factors, refugees, and economic implications. The US’s withdrawal has also jeopardised the economy and economic security of landlocked states such as Nepal. Similarly, extremism, drug trafficking, refugee crisis, cross-border terror attacks, economic cooperation and the plight of minority communities continue to dictate the Taliban policies of the Central Asian states, including Iran.

The final section, ‘Proxies, Terror, and a Non-picturesque Neighbour’, evaluates the new, old, and thriving landscape of terrorism in Afghanistan. The country continues to witness the presence of the Pakistani deep-state, and the emerging

cooperation and competition amongst various terror outfits. This is likely to impact the security of all neighbours, including in the long-protracted conflict in Kashmir. Thus, even two decades after the war on terror, transnational terror threats remain persistent, and this makes it more valuable for the world to learn strategical, tactical and political lessons from their failed war on terror.

This volume, therefore, attempts to explain how the Taliban’s takeover has affected the prevalent world order by highlighting the new great game, the relevance of the regional organisations, apprehensions of Central and South Asian states, and the terror landscape of the region.

- Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy

The Unfolding Great Game

The Shaming of the Western Liberal Order

Harsh V Pant

These are surreal times in Afghanistan. In a matter of hours, the old order folded like nine pins and all that was left were the ruins of the last two decades. The new order is yet to emerge fully, but the contours of that order can be discerned based on the past experience of the Afghan nation and the region. Even as the Taliban advance entered its final lap, western intelligence was still predicting that Kabul could be taken in a matter of 30 days. But it took less than 30 hours for the Taliban fighters to reach the gates of the Presidential Palace in Kabul from where the incumbent, Ashraf Ghani, had already fled. The West was, in any case, cutting and running but the speed of Taliban advance meant that once again America had to live through the Saigon moment with diplomats being evicted by helicopters and sensitive documents being destroyed. Despite the optics, US policymakers have continued to insist that the Afghan mission has been “successful,” and

a defiant US President Joe Biden, despite finding the chaos “gut-wrenching,” has no choice but to stand by his decision to withdraw.^{1,2}

Even as Afghanistan was crumbling, Biden was pushing back against suggestions that the Taliban could swiftly conquer the country by arguing that, “the likelihood there’s going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely.”³ Less than a month later, western nations were left scrambling to evacuate their citizens and diplomatic staff even while acknowledging that there will be a new government in Afghanistan. The British government underscored this new ground reality when, in a matter of days, its discourse had shifted from asking the Taliban to protect “human rights” to asking the West to work together to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a breeding ground for terror.⁴

After talking of freedom, democracy and human rights for the last two decades, there is little doubt that the West will have to move towards accommodating the Taliban regime in some form. As mostly happens in the rough and tumble of international politics, pragmatism will have the last laugh at the cost of the significant social, economic, and political gains of the past 20 years. Those Afghans who believed in these ideals and worked for them, often risking their lives, today stand vulnerable to complete abandonment by those who, at one time, seemed to be having their back. The hard-won rights for women and minorities as well as for democracy have already been sacrificed at the altar, reaching a modus vivendi with the Taliban.

Myth-making is an integral part of international relations. Some myths emerge organically in response to certain foreign policy manoeuvres but some myths are created deliberately to sustain narratives that have no legs to stand on. For the last few years, sections of the strategic community in the West, and especially the US, started making the case about the need to engage with the Taliban to reach a sustainable solution to the Afghanistan crisis. This case was premised on the myth that the Taliban had evolved from their earlier 1990s avatar and therefore were more amenable to a negotiated settlement to bring an end to the 'forever war' in Afghanistan. This myth was always more about the war fatigue in the body politic of the US than it was

about the ground realities but it was sold as the new strategic paradigm in a part of the world that few in the West understood or even wanted to understand.

This myth-making resulted in a back and forth between the various bureaucracies in Washington first: the civilians versus the military; the State Department versus the Pentagon; the Republicans versus the Democrats. It led to the Obama administration talking about withdrawing troops from Afghanistan but ending up in a last-minute surge. It led to the Trump administration coming to office talking about ending the war but then staying put for a while before finally signing an ill-conceived pact with the Taliban that made the Afghan government in Kabul a veritable sitting duck.⁵ And ultimately, it led to the Biden administration deciding within months of coming to office that it is time to pack up and leave Afghanistan wholesale without any serious thought to the consequences. Ignoring the warnings of his generals, Biden decided to exit Afghanistan in a hurry and while explaining his decision, he continued to insist that a Taliban takeover of the country was not inevitable as the Afghan government troops were as "well-equipped as any army in the world".⁶

The West will be trying to preserve some shreds of dignity from the mess unfolding by telling the world that political reconciliation of some sort in Afghanistan is still possible. But for an outfit that has won this victory against the mightiest military power on the earth through the use of force, any talk of moderation will only be temporary. And in the territories that the Taliban have already captured, they have gone back to their good old-fashioned regressive agenda against women and ethnic and religious minorities that had so shocked the global conscience during their horrific 1996-2001 rule. From young girls being forced to marry Taliban fighters to decreeing oppressive diktats against women, from summary executions of soldiers and political opponents to banning music and television, there is hardly anything ‘evolved’ in this Taliban 2.0.⁷

The Taliban 2.0 narrative crashed at the altar of the ambitions of the old Taliban. It should not have been a surprise to anyone, but the West (and the US in particular) is in the habit of being surprised. The unveiling of a hardline interim government led by Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund, with key roles being shared by high-profile members of the Taliban, is the latest in a series of setbacks the US has faced when it comes to Afghanistan. The 33-member interim government is veritable of who’s who of the global terror leadership. The Taliban had supposedly promised an inclusive

government and it was supposedly accepted in good faith by Washington only to realise now that besides excluding women and minorities, Sirajuddin Haqqani, the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, the founder of the Haqqani network (a US-designated foreign terrorist organization), has been appointed acting interior minister.⁸ The humiliation is total as a new terrorist regime took charge in Kabul just days before the 20th anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks.

There was never any doubt about what the Taliban would do but hope springs eternal in the labyrinthine maze of American bureaucracy where the idea that the US would be able to work with the Taliban to conduct counterterrorism operations against ISIS-K is taken seriously. When asked whether the Taliban is an enemy, Biden’s national security adviser Jake Sullivan suggested that “it’s hard to put a label on it,” because the US is “yet to see what they are going to be now that they’re in control—physical control of Afghanistan”.⁹ Clearly, the last two decades of fighting against the Taliban has not been enough to understand what they are likely to do in Afghanistan once in control.

But western governments will tell their people that some form of accommodation with the Taliban, whether evolved or not, is important for the larger good of the Afghan people as this will mean Afghans taking ownership of their future. While the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Afghanistan will be brushed aside, the strategic consequences of the Taliban's re-emergence will have to be reckoned with by the West for a long time. If, as is being suggested in some quarters, one of the reasons for the US withdrawing troops from Afghanistan is to focus attention squarely on the competition with China, then the credibility of western assurances as a security guarantor after the Afghan debacle are not worth the paper they are written on. The coalition of partners that the West is trying to construct to manage China's rise is likely to face greater fissures as western allies look at the Afghanistan car crash with a degree of foreboding.

The limits of western power today are all too palpable and the embarrassment of Afghanistan is likely to constrain western strategic thinking for decades now. The West, perhaps, could not have built a nation in Afghanistan but the manner in which the withdrawal has unfolded casts a long shadow on the Western ability to manage the emerging, highly volatile global order.

As the Taliban wait to be embraced by the liberal West, those Afghans who decided to believe and stand by the values of democracy and human rights, only to be abandoned in the end, will always stand as a testament to the infirmities of the liberal global order. It is nothing but a sham!

“The limits of western power today are all too palpable and the embarrassment of Afghanistan will likely constrain western strategic thinking for decades to come.”

China's Practice in Recognising Governments: The Case of Taliban

Aarshi Tirkey

The announcement of Taliban's interim government has forced countries and organisations to question if they should recognise Afghanistan's new regime.¹ As of October 2021, India joined nine other countries (including China and Russia) in a statement recognising the “new reality” of the Taliban in power, and considering providing aid to Afghanistan. The statement stops short of formally recognising the interim government.² On the other hand, the Taliban's bid to represent Afghanistan before international organisations—such as the United Nations (UN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—has proved to be significantly difficult.³

China, for its part, endorsed the interim government by stating that this was a necessary step to “end anarchy” and announced a US\$31-million aid package to Afghanistan.⁴ In July, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met a delegation led by the head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, in Tianjin.⁵ At that time, Wang acknowledged the Taliban as a “military and political force in Afghanistan” that was expected to play an “important role” in the country's peace, reconciliation and reconstruction process. Beijing has stated in clear terms that it will respect the “sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Afghanistan”—indicating that China is inclined to give formal recognition to the new government.

China has also abstained from voting on a recent UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution on Afghanistan.⁶ The resolution demanded that the Afghan territory should not be used to threaten any country or shelter terrorists, and expected the Taliban to adhere to its commitments and facilitate safe passage for Afghans and foreign nationals. China, however, expressed doubts about the “necessity and urgency of adopting this resolution and the balance of its content,” and noted that the amendments it had put forth were not incorporated in the final draft.⁷ Moreover, in the UNSC meeting records, Beijing’s representative Geng Shuang gave a positive assessment of the Taliban’s statement to “form an open, inclusive Islamic Government” and hoped that they would “unite all parties and ethnic groups in Afghanistan to establish a broad and inclusive political structure”.⁸

The recognition of governments is a formal act through which one sovereign country recognises another’s claim to statehood or governance.⁹ Government recognition often looks at a two-step inquiry: whether the regime has effective control over the territory, and if the government is legitimate and came to power through constitutional means.¹⁰ In theory, under international law, states should only recognise legitimate governments (those that have come to power on the basis of democratic institutions that recognise the people’s right to self-determination). However, in practice, recognition is either a matter of political expedience, or a move to further a diplomatic or economic agenda. Illegitimate governments that exercise effective

control over a territory may be given provisional recognition, or even legal recognition, based on the political priorities of a country and its bilateral relations with the regime in question.

It is interesting to note that China did not recognise the Taliban group when it had control over Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001.¹¹ Back then, even though the Taliban government exercised effective control over the vast majority of Afghan territory, it was only recognised by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The change in Beijing’s stance in 2021 is perhaps connected to the potential geostrategic and economic benefits that may arise from maintaining good relations with the Taliban—such as, ensuring Afghanistan’s participation in China’s Belt and Road Initiative.¹²

The second requirement of ‘legitimacy’ has been questioned by some scholars, who argue that state practice has been ambivalent—as governments who have come to power through illegitimate means have been granted recognition.¹³ Moreover, it is also questionable as to whether China will want to assess the ‘legitimacy’ requirement when granting recognition to governments. For one, it may view this as an interference in the internal affairs of a country—a principle that Beijing has historically espoused since the Panchsheel Agreement, which promotes respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Second, China often treats norms of international law with caution and regards it as a tool that is often misused by Western countries to further their own agenda. Back in 1945, the international community, based on norms related to government recognition, refused to recognise Mao's People's Republic of China—which was in de facto control of Chinese territory—as the official representative of China's seat at the UN.¹⁴ Under the leadership of Western countries, Chiang Kai-Shek's government-in-exile based in Taiwan was recognised as officially representing China until 1971.

Third, the requirement of legitimacy is closely associated with the neoliberal ideals of democratic elections and self-determination. For Beijing, focusing on this requirement will also raise tough questions for its own behaviour back home—particularly with respect to its autonomous territories. For instance, does Tibet have a legitimate claim to statehood and government based on the right to self-determination of its people? What are the legal and political implications of countries granting formal recognition to the Tibetan government in exile? Weighing the 'legitimacy' requirement will be inconsistent with China's domestic policies towards democracy and self-determination in its autonomous territories.

China's response to the recent political turmoil in Venezuela is also illustrative of this point. Juan Guaidó, the president of the Venezuelan National Assembly, proclaimed himself as the caretaker president of Venezuela in 2019. While he enjoyed democratic legitimacy, he did not enjoy effective control over the country.¹⁵ Many states, including the US, have recognised Guaidó's interim government. However, countries like China continue to recognise Nicolás Maduro's government and denounce what they consider as an interference in Venezuela's domestic affairs. Beijing built a strong political and financial relationship with Venezuela when Hugo Chávez—Maduro's predecessor—headed the country.¹⁶ China's reluctance to recognise Guaidó's government is based on the twin considerations of non-interference and strong bilateral relations with Maduro's administration. However, Beijing's support for Maduro is criticised for endorsing a government that is perceived as corrupt and inefficient.¹⁷

More recently, the February 2021 coup ousted the elected National League of Democracy (NLD) government in Myanmar, and countries had to decide on whether they should accord recognition to the military junta.¹⁸ Since the military establishment has always been suspicious of Beijing, the coup has frustrated years of China's diplomatic and economic engagement with Aung San Suu Kyi's government.¹⁹

Additionally, the violence perpetrated by the military has been condemned internationally, and US and China have reportedly reached a deal to block the military junta from speaking at the UN General Assembly.^{20,21} While China is aware that the NLD would have been a more reliable partner, it has gradually started working towards appeasing the military's State Administrative Council (SAC) in a bid to defend its interests in Myanmar.^{22,23} China has effectively given de facto recognition to the SAC, agreed to fund projects, and has emphasised that its priorities continue to be stability and non-interference in Myanmar's affairs.^{24,25}

Conclusion

The concept of recognising governments in international law is notoriously murky.

China's practice in the recognition of governments do not always digress from those followed internationally, but in some cases—such as in Afghanistan—Beijing is guided by the diktats of geostrategy and realpolitik. Afghanistan is in a state of flux; while the Taliban is clearly in control of the territory, it remains to be seen if an alternative Afghan government is formed. Beijing's inclination to recognise the Taliban has as much to do with the attendant benefits of forging ties with them as it has to do with its historical approach towards international legal norms.

“China's recognition of the Taliban has much to do with the attendant benefits of forging ties with the group as it has to do with Beijing's historical approach towards international legal norms.”

Russia's Role in the New Afghanistan

Nivedita Kapoor

Since the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the rapid takeover by the Taliban, the role of other stakeholders—including Russia, China, and Iran—has witnessed an uptick. Over the years, Russia has steadily enhanced its influence on the Afghan issue—by engaging with the Taliban over the years, convening and participating in the ‘Troika’ or ‘Extended Troika’ talks, or even setting up the Moscow Format talks.^a

Russia's extended presence was highlighted when it hosted the latest round of Moscow Format talks on 20 October 2021, the first international conference to include the Taliban since its return to power in August. The meeting was also attended by representatives from China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and several Central Asian states, bringing a wide range of regional stakeholders together on

one platform. The US, which did not attend due to logistical reasons, extended support to the process.¹

Russia is one of the few countries with a currently operational embassy in Kabul but is yet to recognise the Taliban, which remains on Moscow's list of banned organisations. During the talks, Moscow called for the formation of an inclusive government in Afghanistan and respect for fundamental rights, underscoring that any recognition of the Taliban will depend on its conduct.² Russian President Vladimir Putin added that the country will remove the Taliban from its list of banned outfits if the situation developed “in a positive way”.³

a In 2019, the US, Russia and China formed the Troika on Afghanistan, which became the Extended Troika with the addition of Pakistan. The Moscow Format was set up in 2017 for talks among special representatives from Russia, Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Iran and India. The representatives of five Central Asian countries also attend its meetings. The US has also been invited to its consultation.

Russian Interests in Afghanistan

Russia is interested in a stable Afghanistan to safeguard its security and strategic interests, and has alliance responsibilities under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a military alliance comprising Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan.⁴ Any rise in violence in Afghanistan could spill over into Central Asia and across the Russian borders. Issues related to the flow of refugees, drugs trafficking, and the spread of radicalism are other areas of concern, as is the threat of ISIS. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu has warned about the movement of ISIS fighters from Syria, Libya and other places to Afghanistan, leading Moscow to bolster its capabilities at the military base in Tajikistan.⁵ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted a revival in ISIS and Al-Qaeda activities and expressed worry over the problem of drug production, saying that such activities could spread beyond the Afghan border through the movement of migrants.⁶

Moscow believes that engagement with the Taliban is needed to ensure that its interests are protected. Despite the Taliban's current banned status in Russia, the two sides have been in regular contact and have officially held several meetings since 2018. Before the Taliban took power, the Russian foreign ministry noted assurances from the outfit that it "would not violate the borders of the Central Asian countries." In addition, it pointed to the Taliban's promise to "ward off the threat of ISIS

in Afghanistan and eradicate drug production in the country after the end of the civil war".⁷

The assurances notwithstanding, Russia wants to be prepared if the Taliban were to renege on its promises to contain the spread of terrorism and radicalism. This has been seen in several military exercises with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the past months, both of which share a border with Afghanistan. Even as the Moscow Format talks were underway, CSTO military drills were held on the Tajik-Afghan border, with the participation of about 4000 troops from the member states.⁸ In August 2021, Russia concluded drills with Uzbekistan near the latter's border with Afghanistan and engaged in joint military exercises with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.⁹ Even though Uzbekistan quit the CSTO in 2012, it continues to participate in the military drills. This has been seen as an attempt to ensure Tashkent's security interests due to the emerging situation in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Joint Russia-China military exercises were also carried out around the same time in northwest China, which is located east of Xinjiang, the region that shares a narrow border with Afghanistan.¹¹

Geopolitical Stakes

Moscow has expanded its contact with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan, going beyond its previous contacts primarily with Uzbeks and Tajiks. This is being seen as part of efforts to ensure the preservation of influence across various ethnic groups. This has also brought it into closer contact with Pakistan, which exercises enormous influence over the Taliban, as well as engaging with other regional powers like China and Iran.^{12,13}

Indeed, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has “raised the stakes” for both Russia and China, who now face a real “test” in managing the situation, especially in the security domain.¹⁴ While Russia and China have bilateral engagements with Afghanistan, they also come together on the issue in talks like the Troika, Extended Troika (or Troika Plus), Moscow Format and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). They also share security concerns in Central Asia emerging from the spread of radical ideology, illegal immigration, drugs trafficking and terrorism.¹⁵

These issues also framed the key discussion points during the extraordinary session of the CSTO in August 2021 as well as at the joint SCO-CSTO summit in September 2021. At the latter, Putin suggested resuming the meetings of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group (17), which held

its last meet in July 2021 when the Ashraf Ghani administration was still in power in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Notably, in its September meeting, the SCO did not propose any “concrete plans” for Afghanistan in the framework of the organisation, only calling for an inclusive government and a diplomatic solution.¹⁷

This emerging situation has reaffirmed Russia’s position as a ‘regional security provider’. This would mean taking “greater responsibility,” and dealing with issues like tensions on the Tajik-Afghan border.^{18,19} The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan also gives Russia the opportunity to question the US’s role as a leading power, which it says has failed in the Afghan mission.²⁰ Moscow never wanted a permanent presence of Western troops in Afghanistan lest it negatively impacts its influence. This is also reflected in its strong objections to the US plan to sign basing agreements with Central Asian states to have a military presence close to Afghanistan.²¹

But the US withdrawal also brings heightened uncertainty to the region, prompting both sides to hold regular consultations despite their differences. The US and Russia have called for an inclusive government in Afghanistan and have held discussions under the Troika and Extended Troika formats, with a common interest in containing the spread of terrorism.

While the US did not attend the most recent Moscow Format talks after its special envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad resigned just before the event, it expressed its support for the process. This marked the second time the US has missed the Extended Troika meeting, which preceded the latest round of Moscow Format talks.

Conclusion

Russia, which sees itself as a major Eurasian power, now has a chance to present itself as a responsible, stabilising power in the region. A major step in this direction relates to the provision of economic and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan to assist the local population. The Moscow talks proposed a donor conference under the aegis of the UN while also holding the US and other western countries responsible for the lion's share. Putin has indicated the possibility of Russia undertaking "specific large projects" and even dealing with "domestic security issues".²²

In the meantime, Russia remains worried about threats to broader regional security arising from increasing instability, radical ideology, drugs trafficking and terrorism. The US withdrawal has heightened Russia's role in Afghanistan, reflected in its diplomatic efforts in the past months.²³ Any solution to the current situation in Afghanistan—whether political, security or economic—will require an active engagement with all regional stakeholders, and Russia has the advantage of having built cordial relations with key players in the region. Whether it is successful in bringing these various stakeholders together and emerging as the leading Eurasian power in Afghanistan remains to be seen.

“Russia is interested in a stable Afghanistan to safeguard its security and strategic interests. Any rise in violence in Afghanistan could spill over into Central Asia and across the Russian borders.”

What the Afghanistan Crisis Means for the Indo-Pacific

Manoj Joshi

The events in Afghanistan have underscored something that has been staring us in the face—there is a vast gulf that separates the interests of India and the US in the Indo-Pacific.

We assume here the Indian definition of the Indo-Pacific—which is geographic rather than political—essentially sees a region stretching from “the shores of Africa to that of the Americas,” as last spelt out by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018.¹ The US notion of the Indo-Pacific differs as it begins from the western shores of India to those of the Americas.

The Indo-US strategic partnership does not include the western Indian Ocean and its hugely important littoral, which includes the Saudi peninsula, East Africa, and the shores of Iran and Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia (the very fulcrum of Eurasia).

It was not surprising that the US kept India out of the Doha process, nor saw it useful to have India in the now stillborn western Quad (comprising the

US, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan).² In these circumstances, there was no question of keeping India abreast with the developments in Afghanistan, including the nitty-gritty of the US plans to retreat from there. This, despite the fact that whatever India did in the country—which was not insubstantial in terms of reconstruction efforts—depended crucially on the American security umbrella.

For this reason, South Block went into an overdrive to show that the US-India strategic partnership was alive and well and had even been flourishing in the chaos of Kabul. Efforts were made to show how much coordination and cooperation India got from the US to complete its diplomatic evacuation from the city, while the key role played by the Taliban in facilitating the move was played down or ignored.^{3,4}

Looking into the future now one wonders whether a coherent Indo-Pacific policy is even possible. Having left Afghanistan the way they did, the US is not likely to be in a hurry to make fresh commitments in the region. But the US has been futilely trying to persuade regional countries, including India, to provide it with some kind of over-the-horizon counterterrorism capacity (5).⁵

Regional Dynamics

From the US point of view, a departure from the Middle East makes sense. The Americans no longer depend on oil from that fractious region. Today, their principal concern is probably merely the security of Israel. This will help them focus on their competition with China in their definition of the Indo-Pacific region.

But geography, the immovable part of geopolitics, requires that India remain where it is. And from there, the Afghan disaster does not look pretty. In Afghanistan, India had little choice, but it cannot avoid the blame for having burnt bridges with Iran at the instance of the US.

Yet, as a global power, the US has indicated that it is not just about to walk away from the region. There are things in the works, such as reworked relationships with Iran and Pakistan. A more important signal has come from the creation of a new western Quad comprising of the US, Israel, the UAE, and India. As of now, like its eastern counterpart, the new Quad focuses on trade, public health, joint infrastructure development and maritime security.⁶

The US already has dense security ties with the UAE and Israel, so what needs to be seen is what kind of a role they expect India to play. Unlike the eastern Quad, there is no obvious target for its new western counterpart, although it could be argued that its formation is a response to the steadily strengthening China-Russia friendship that is seeking to rope Iran into a powerful regional grouping. Whether New Delhi agrees to this logic, which means further strains in ties with Teheran, remains to be seen.

New Delhi has certainly suffered a setback in Afghanistan where it has considerable goodwill amongst the populace and close ties with the government. This included cooperation with the Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security, through which it could—and probably did—mount operations in Pakistan.

Just how much influence Pakistan will have with the new Taliban is difficult to gauge, despite having facilitated their resurgence with arms, money, and a safe haven. The Taliban, however, have opened pathways to Iran and Russia, ensuring that Islamabad's hold on their logistics will be reduced. People like acting First Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was detained and ill-treated by the Pakistanis for eight years, have long memories.

But the Pakistanis had an important trump card in the Haqqani network, which is now perhaps the strongest element in the coalition that makes up the Taliban. This has ensured that the interim government in Kabul is heavily weighted in favour of Pakistan.

The China Factor

India's western headaches are likely to increase as Pakistan and China enhance their cooperation and seek to include Afghanistan in their new trilateral. In a phone call on 18 August 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi laid out four suggestions to his Pakistani counterpart Shah Mehmood Qureshi. First, on the need to support the establishment of a broad-based, inclusive political structure in Afghanistan; second, to support the process that will ensure that the country does not become a haven for terrorism again; third, on the importance of the safety and security of Chinese and Pakistani personnel in Afghanistan; and fourth, promoting international cooperation involving Afghanistan.⁷

On the same day, Chinese President Xi Jinping called Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Iraqi President Barham Salih separately. With Iran, Xi expressed strong support for bilateral cooperation and opposition to "external interference". In addition, he supported Iran's "legitimate concerns" over the comprehensive nuclear agreement.⁸ It may be recalled that at the end of March 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year "strategic cooperation pact" during Wang's visit to the region. While details of the agreement are not yet available, it

is reported to contain political, strategic, and economic components.⁹

Whatever may be Pakistan's goals, China will not be interested in stirring up trouble in Afghanistan. Its approach is defensive, aimed at preventing any spillover of either American power or Islamist radicalism in Central Asia. Beijing has substantial financial investments in Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, and now its goal would be to incorporate Afghanistan into it as well.

Already there have been reports on how China may exploit the US\$1-trillion worth of minerals, especially rare earths, in Afghanistan.¹⁰ The Chinese are committed to the Afghan mining sector since 2009 and that they already have some US\$630-million of direct investment in the mining communications and road communications sector there, along with US\$0.5 billion of trade.¹¹

Currently, Indian investments and trade volumes in Afghanistan are much greater than that of China. India has built roads, dams, electricity transmission lines, sub-stations, schools and hospitals, has gifted buses and trained personnel.¹² India and Iran had joined hands to exploit the Hajigak mining deposits as well, but there will now be a big question mark there. The Afghans will view this through the new geopolitical lenses that any new regime in Kabul will wear, and of course, vice versa.

Geopolitical Shifts

Already, there are little shifts in geopolitical developments that bring little comfort. Besides the deepening of the China-Pakistan relationship, there is increased American interest in Islamabad. The US indicated a desire to establish counterterrorism bases in Pakistan, but when Islamabad firmly pushed back on that score, Washington backed off.¹³ But given the US's long investment in Pakistan, that is not likely to be the end of the story.

On the other side of the Indo-Pacific, both the US and China continue to spar, most evidently at the August 2021 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). While the meeting was addressed by Wang and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, India chose to field the Junior External Affairs Minister Rajkumar Ranjan Singh. In the ARF meeting, Blinken attacked China's record on human rights in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang, and raised the issue of the growing Chinese nuclear arsenal.¹⁴ But there was little visible ASEAN reaction and some pushback on the US lecturing on human rights.

Wang revealed that a tentative agreement had been reached at an earlier ministerial meeting on a code of conduct that China is negotiating with the ASEAN for over 20 years.¹⁵ What Wang was seeking to show was that China and the ASEAN were for a diplomatic solution to the problems of the

South China Sea, in contrast to the US, which is rallying India and a European naval coalition for "freedom of navigation" exercises. Beijing wants to include in the code of conduct, whose draft was produced in August 2018, a clause barring military exercise and resource development by extra-regional countries.

The big problem is not the navies and ships, but the economic policy. The US and the Quad are now speaking of an ability to compete with China across the board—from vaccines to climate change mitigation and cooperation in international standards, and innovative technologies of the future.¹⁶

But the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership undermined a viable response to China and there are no signs that the US plans to conclude trade deals with the region in the near term. Likewise, India has decided to stay away from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which makes its task of emerging as an alternative manufacturing center to China much more difficult.

While the architecture of a new security alliance, the new Australia-UK-US (or AUKUS), is clearly visible and a largely diplomatic grouping (the Quad) is already in place, there seems to be no clear architecture for a trade and investment strategy that can counter China.

To go by the officially leaked US Indo-Pacific strategy in January 2021, the US seeks to maintain its primacy in the region, which is an “engine of US, regional and global economic growth” and at the same time “encourage India’s engagement beyond the Indian Ocean Region”.¹⁷ While the document does speak of helping India to “address continental challenges,” this is limited to issue relating to the border dispute with China. As is obvious, this is something that simply does not address a vast stretch of India’s foreign and security policy commitments, especially in Eurasia.

As it is, across the world there are worries about the reliability and credibility of the US as a guarantor of security. One could argue that by cutting off a diseased limb (Afghanistan), the US will become more capable of dealing with challenges like China in East Asia. But a lot depends on how these issues are playing out domestically in the US. It would be foolhardy to take American credibility on external commitments as a given. While there are fewer doubts about US commitments to Europe and NATO, the looser arrangements in the Indo-Pacific leave open many questions. At the end of the day, American reliability will depend on a congruence of interests, rather than this or that agreement or pact.

“India has suffered a setback in Afghanistan where it has considerable goodwill amongst the populace and close ties with the government, including cooperation with the Afghan intelligence service.”

The Future of Regional Organisations

Afghanistan Crisis and the EU's Strategic Autonomy

Rahul Kamath

The Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan is a tragedy perpetrated by the West, and the effects are likely to haunt it for a long time to come. The decision-making and implementation protocols of the European Union (EU) remains ambiguous, and lacks strategic autonomy. The bloc remains politically and socially divided over the Afghan asylum seekers despite adopting a text promising financial support to relevant international organisations and Afghanistan's neighbours to provide a safe and dignified livelihood for the displaced people.¹ This financial support reflects the EU's goal of keeping Afghan refugees away to avoid a reoccurrence of the 2015 migrant crisis.² Europe's reluctance to accept asylum seekers and refugees could revive its Second World War moniker of 'Fortress Europe'.

As the Taliban took over Afghanistan and US troops exited the country, the three major European powers - France, Germany, and the UK demanded more time to evacuate their citizens and Afghan nationals, and French President Emmanuel Macron proposed establishing a safe zone in Kabul despite the Taliban's deployment of forces outside the Kabul airport. Since August 2021, multiple meetings and forums have been arranged to discuss the plausible solutions to the Afghan crisis, with most declarations stressing the need to avoid a migration crisis like in 2015, which threatened European sovereignty. At the Bled Strategic Forum (BSF) held in Slovenia, EU leaders discussed a roadmap to tackle the Afghan crisis but differences in formulating a unilateral policy on Afghanistan remains a key challenge due to conflicting views of the member states as the Central and Eastern European States remain hostile against accepting migrants fearing cultural appropriation.

European Council President Charles Michel called for ‘European Strategic Autonomy’ by urging the bloc to invest more in its security capabilities after the withdrawal of western troops to boost its foreign deployment without the American vigilance.³ Germany and France have often stressed their desire to establish a true European army with a common foreign policy and shared interests.⁴ Such rhetoric has regained support in the wake of Afghanistan’s takeover by the Taliban.⁵ The EU’s growing dependence on the US has been absolute; therefore, the pressure on the EU to fill in the void left by the US has been exacerbated after the latter’s withdrawal from Kabul. NATO, for long, has supported the idea of investing in deployable troops in Europe, but the lack of unison among the member states derails the creation of such an army.

The Afghan situation serves as another wake-up call for Brussels as it must invest in its strategic and security capabilities to act independently, regardless of Washington’s decisions. Some voices in the US had advocated for the country’s indefinite engagement in Afghanistan but President Joe Biden’s decision to recommit to his predecessor’s original deal with the Taliban without consulting his European counterparts signalled the Biden administration’s failing interest in nation-building. The lack of consultation with the EU highlighted Washington’s strategic autonomy at the expense of its transatlantic allies. The US’s withdrawal from

Afghanistan meant other western allies would necessarily follow, giving the EU little time and flexibility to handle the situation in Afghanistan. Even as the situation became more chaotic and violent, the US stuck to its course and withdrew from Afghanistan on 31 August 2021. Meanwhile, the EU had to rely on the Taliban to allow safe passage from the Kabul airport.⁶

Europe will feel the heat of the withdrawal from Afghanistan more profoundly than the US, primarily due to its geographic proximity. European leaders are grappling to avoid the nightmares of the 2015 refugee crisis, which fundamentally altered European politics by spurring the rise of extreme right-wing populist parties across the continent. Afghanistan has unlocked newer fault lines in NATO’s functioning as the US’s foreign policy is shifting under Biden. Hence, the European reliance on the US is likely to wane as leaders aim to invest in and build their own security. Indeed, Joseph Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, advocated for EU’s autonomy—a willingness to protect the European interests in absence of the Americans.⁷

The EU is working on a European Strategic Compass, a document that lists out the EU's defining ambitions for security and defence for the next decade.⁸ The document, which aims to operationalize the EU's strategic autonomy and allow Brussels to tackle Europe's security responsibilities directly, is likely to be adopted in the first half of 2022. The need for such an establishment could not be more urgent as the Taliban's reclamation of Afghanistan is accompanied by renewed terrorist threats, the influx of irregular migrants, drug trafficking, and most importantly, the threat to human rights.

Soon, the EU will have to enhance its crisis prevention and peacebuilding troops because the inability to stabilise the region would bring insecurity closer home. The European Commission has quadrupled its humanitarian aid to €200 million while stopping development aid; however, the major challenge beckoning the EU is finding effective ways to deliver the humanitarian aid in absence of any external presence in Afghanistan.^{9,10} Hence, the EU has planned to establish a humanitarian centre in Termez, Uzbekistan, to facilitate the movement of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. The EU must coordinate with other stakeholders, such as China, India, Pakistan and Russia, at the earliest and be an influential force in the region to enhance information gathering, decision-making, and avoid a major humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

The EU is in no hurry to establish ties with the Taliban or recognise it.¹¹ The EU aims to communicate with the Taliban to influence their ideals while not rushing into recognising the Taliban as the legitimate representative of Afghanistan, said Gunnar Wiegand, the European Commission's Managing Director for Asia, and the Pacific. He further emphasised the list of conditions—respect for human rights and unfettered access for aid workers—that the Taliban must agree to before formal ties are established.¹² The EU mission's functionality in Afghanistan would continue to work from Brussels while waiting for a conducive environment before returning to Afghanistan. But the condition in Afghanistan is deteriorating with renewed terror attacks, and the region is experiencing a humanitarian crisis as food and water shortages worsen. The Taliban regime has crippled the livelihood of millions of girls and women as they are barred from formal education. In a meeting in Qatar, the Taliban held face-to-face talks with the US and the EU, and Brussels pledged €1 billion in aid to Afghanistan to prevent a humanitarian and socio-economic collapse, but the development aid remains frozen owing to a lack of clarity on the Taliban's intentions.¹³

The EU must achieve a bloc-wide consensus before implementing an action plan on Afghanistan, on issues like the migration crisis and the development-security nexus. Germany and France—the two strongest advocates of the European army—go to the polls next year. Any triumph of the far-right in Europe will destabilise ambitions for a truly autonomous EU. This coupled with the Afghan crisis highlights the EU’s need for strategic autonomy while looking away from its traditional transatlantic partner, especially after the AUKUS debacle.

“America is Back” for Biden, but the Europeans need to find a way back from Afghanistan. The EU’s strategic autonomy requires urgent attention even as Brussels must focus on multiple regional crises (such as natural gas shortages and the growing incongruity between the EU and CEE states). The EU must act now to avoid the nightmares of the 2015 refugee crisis. Europe aims to be a global power in the 21st century, and its response to the Afghan crisis will be a test of its virtues, consensus-building and decision-making.

“EU leaders have discussed a roadmap to tackle the Afghanistan crisis, but the conflicting views of the member states remains a key challenges to formulating a unilateral policy.”

How the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Failed to Tame a Belligerent Taliban

Ayjaz Wani

In August 2021, the Taliban recaptured Afghanistan, resorting to a brute military offensive, and creating serious and complex challenges for regional stability and security. The hasty withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return without an intra-Afghan dialogue or negotiations for the formation of an inclusive government was a global strategic failure. These dramatic developments in Afghanistan have catalysed new geostrategic, geosecurity and geoeconomic concerns for Eurasia in particular.

The Taliban's resurgence, replete with its hard-line interpretation of the Holy Quran, is not only an outcome of appeasement by the US administration under Donald Trump and Joe Biden, but also the divergence of regional powers dealing with the Taliban.¹ Although the regional powers can work together under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the

parochial interests of some countries and trust deficits between others are making things murky for long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan and beyond.

Regional Powers and Taliban

The regional countries with geostrategic, geoeconomic and security stakes have been facing a dilemma ever since Biden announced a complete military exit from Afghanistan. Most of these regional powers have met the Taliban confidentially, and some have even used the group for their own geostrategic and security interests in the region. For example, after 2019, Tehran and Moscow helped the Taliban on the pretext of ISIS affiliates in Afghanistan, but used the terror outfit to settle scores with the US.²

The Taliban has visited Tehran and Moscow, held talks with the respective governments, and even facilitated the intra-Afghan negotiations in Iran and Russia.³ Most recently, the Taliban were even invited to attend the Moscow Format Talks held on 20 October 2021.⁴

Pakistan used a dual strategy by backing the US-led military operations and giving sanctuary to the Taliban. From 2002 onwards, the Pakistani security establishment helped the Taliban through recruitment and donations via different religious groups.⁵ On 16 July, then Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said in Uzbekistan that Pakistan had not severed its ties with terror groups and more than 10,000 fighters entered Afghanistan within one month.⁶ Before starting the intra-Afghan peace process, a Taliban delegation from its political office in Qatar, headed by Mullah Baradar and the deputy emir responsible for political affairs, visited Pakistan and held meetings with Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, among others.⁷ Ties between the Taliban and Pakistan's military establishment were further exposed when the Pakistan intelligence chief visited Afghanistan before the Taliban's interim government was formed,⁸ and become even more evident with the increasing diplomatic activities on both the sides.⁹

The reasons were evident as Pakistan felt strategic encirclement given New Delhi's diplomatic and commercial presence in Afghanistan as the most significant contributor for the reconstruction of

the war-torn country.¹⁰ India has consistently remained committed as a facilitator of peace and economic development of the Afghan people and remained aloof from the Taliban, given the proxy war it faces in Jammu and Kashmir. However, after reaching out to some factions of the Taliban in the backdrop of the changing security situation in Afghanistan, India has met the Taliban on the sidelines of the Moscow Format Talks and has desired to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.¹¹

China, on the other hand, used a "narrow approach" and "self-driven diplomacy". Beijing's engagement with the Taliban dates to the 1990s when the northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang became volatile. Given the contested histories, separatism, violent extremism and centrifugal tendencies, Xinjiang's Uyghur Muslims started anti-China agitations in 1980, 1981, 1985, and 1987, culminating in the Baren incident of 1990. China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, met Taliban leader Mullah Omar in 2000 and courted the Taliban and other terror groups to contain any "spillover" of terrorism to Xinjiang. Mullah Omar promised that the Taliban would not allow the Uyghurs to launch attacks on China in Xinjiang, but would continue to remain in the Taliban ranks.¹² Subsequently, when Trump cancelled the talks with the outfit in 2019, Beijing hosted a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.¹³

In September 2021, China offered a high profile stage to a Taliban delegation in Tianjin and continued to keep its embassy in Kabul open even as other countries suspended their diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. They also offered the Taliban US\$31 million in aid and promised additional humanitarian assistance.¹⁴

Will the Taliban Keep Its Promise?

The Taliban has offered lip service to the US and its allies to prevent “international terrorist groups or individuals”, including al-Qaeda and ISIS-K, from using Afghan soil. The Taliban has also offered similar assurances to Russia, the Central Asian nations north of Afghanistan, China, and Iran on tolerating the Shia sect. However, the regional powers remain sceptical of the Taliban given its progress since coming back to power.

In July, China called out the US for its hasty withdrawal and warned that Afghanistan could once again become “the region’s powder keg and a haven for terrorism”.¹⁵ Similarly, the Central Asian republics that share porous borders with Afghanistan faced a peculiar situation when 1,037 Afghan servicemen from the Badakhshan province crossed the borders.¹⁶ This infiltration forced the president of Tajikistan to mobilise 20,000 reserve

troops at the border. He also requested the Collective Security Treaty Organisation for assistance.¹⁷ In May 2021, blasts hit Shiite Hazara dominated areas of Western Kabul in which at least 50 people were killed and more than a hundred wounded. No group took responsibility for the attack, but the Afghan government blamed the Taliban.¹⁸

The violence perpetrated by the Taliban and recapture of power shows that the group’s promise of holding talks on intra-Afghan negotiations for a political settlement is merely lip service. The Taliban has used the trust deficit, divergence, and parochial interests among Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) member countries for its own purposes and to become more belligerent.

In his book *Taliban: Militant Islam, journalist* Ahmed Rashid said that “conflict can suck in the neighbouring countries”.¹⁹ Countries like Iran, Central Asian Republics, Pakistan, and China (via Xinjiang) will bear the immediate impact of the Taliban’s return, while India and Russia will face security and terrorism challenges. Given this situation, the SCO could help the region craft a coherent approach to deal with the Taliban. But the prospects of it seem weak.

SCO and Afghanistan

Formed in 2001, the SCO is a regional organisation comprising nine member states—China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. With Afghanistan, Belarus, and Mongolia as observers, the SCO has mainly focused on regional security issues. The SCO and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure have been at the forefront of the fight against terrorism, separatism, and regional extremism. As Afghanistan faced a peculiar situation after 2001, the SCO created the Afghanistan Contact Group in 2005, which became defunct with the escalation of violence in West Asia. However, after the US-led NATO started withdrawing troops, the Kabul government viewed the organisation as an alternative venue for regional peace and prosperity.

The Afghanistan Contact Group was revived in 2017 and started playing a role in reconciliation and peace through diplomatic channels with the Taliban and the civilian government in Kabul.

However, all regional powers except the Central Asian countries and India used Afghanistan and the Taliban for their parochial geostrategic and geoeconomic interests against the West and each other. This double game has only worked in favour of the Taliban.

At the recent SCO Summit in September, all members reaffirmed a commitment to settle the Afghanistan issue with an inclusive government and pitched for peace, security, and stability.²⁰ But beyond verbal commitments, the SCO member states must revisit their historically divergent policies based on trust deficits and parochial interests towards the Taliban. If the SCO countries do not converge on the Taliban, the prevalence of peace in Afghanistan and in the neighbourhood will be hard to achieve. Such reluctance can jeopardise the socioeconomic development of Afghanistan and have disastrous consequences for regional peace.

“Although the regional powers can work together under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the parochial interests of some countries and trust deficits between others are making things murky for long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan and beyond.”

Weighing the Legal Framework to Suspend Afghanistan from SAARC

Prabhash Ranjan

The planned meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) foreign ministers, to be held on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly session in New York in September, was cancelled over Pakistan's insistence that the Taliban be allowed to represent Afghanistan, which other SAARC countries did not agree with.¹ What happened in New York is a precursor of things to come. Pakistan will assert the Taliban's participation in all future SAARC meetings, not just at the secretariat and organisational level but also in various specialist bodies, such as the South Asian University (SAU) and the SAARC Development Fund.^{a, b} These specialist bodies have governing councils that comprise all

SAARC member states. If Pakistan asserts that the Taliban or its nominees be allowed to represent Afghanistan in these specialist bodies, which will not be acceptable to India, the governing council meetings of these organisations will not take place. This in turn will make these organisations—and SAARC as a whole—dysfunctional. In any case, SAARC and its specialist bodies have miserably failed in realising their potential and fulfilling the collective aspirations of peace and progress of the approximately 1.9 billion South Asians, due to the unending India-Pakistan hostilities.

a The SAARC Development Fund (SDF) is an umbrella financial mechanism established in 2010 by the SAARC to fund the organisation's projects and programmes with an aim to promote economic growth, welfare, and the development of all SAARC member-states.

b South Asian University (SAU) is an international university established by all the member-states of the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). It is located in Delhi, India.

But SAARC is an important organisation for India. It is the only multilateral grouping where India is the dominant player. It is also the sole multilateral instrument through which India can exert soft power over the whole of South Asia to blunt China's expansionism in the region. SAU is the best example of India using SAARC to exert its soft power. Over the last decade, hundreds of South Asian students from countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan have studied at SAU. These students, after returning to their home countries, can become brand ambassadors for India, positively influencing diplomatic relations over the long run. Consequently, it is in India's interest to strengthen SAARC by exploring options to deal with the Taliban threat to the organisation. The Taliban leadership comprises individuals designated as international terrorists. The Taliban represents everything that goes against the foundational values reflected in the SAARC Charter such as promoting peace, stability, and progress in the South Asian region.² In this regard, an important option that can be considered is to suspend Afghanistan from SAARC.

International Law on Suspending/Expelling Countries from International Bodies

Since SAARC is an international organisation (IO), one will have to look at the international law on the question of suspending or expelling Afghanistan. First and foremost, one must look at the founding documents of the IO to find if it provides for the expulsion or suspension of a member country. On this issue, one can broadly divide the IOs into two categories. First, those IOs that explicitly provide for the expulsion or suspension of a member country. For instance, Article 6 of the UN Charter allows the UN General Assembly to expel a country on the recommendation of the UN Security Council if the country has persistently violated the principles reflected in the UN Charter.³ Likewise, Article 5 of the UN Charter allows for the suspension of a country from UN membership.⁴ Article XXVI (2) of the Articles of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also envisages the suspension and expulsion of a member country if it fails to meet its obligations under the IMF Articles. In the IMF terminology, this is called 'compulsory withdrawal'.⁵

Second, are those IOs that do not contain any provision on expulsion or suspension of their member countries. SAARC falls in this category. Some international lawyers like Nagendra Singh were of the view that if the constituent instrument that created the IO is silent on the issue of expulsion or suspension, then there is no inherent right in the organisation to expel or suspend a member state.⁶ On the other hand, the view that has evolved over the years is that even if the constituent instrument is silent on the issue of suspension or expulsion, IOs have an implied power to suspend or expel countries. The doctrine of implied powers of IOs was laid down by the International Court of Justice in the *Reparation for Injuries* case.⁷ The court held that “under international law, the organisation must be deemed to have those powers which, though not expressly provided in the Charter, are conferred upon it by necessary implication as being essential to the performance of its duties”.⁸

Indeed, there are examples of IOs suspending member countries despite an explicit textual provision providing for expulsion. The Organisation of American States—an IO established in 1948 to bolster solidarity and cooperation among the countries in the Americas—suspended Cuba

after the Cuban Revolution in 1958.⁹ Likewise, in 2010, the African Union suspended Niger due to a military coup.¹⁰

International lawyers who have studied the practice of IOs on this issue argue that there are three situations when a case can be made for expelling or suspending a country from the IO.¹¹ First, if the regime in a country changes from democratic to anti-democratic; for instance, the African Union suspended Mali a few months ago and Niger in 2010 after a deadly coup.^{12,13} Second, if there are human rights violations; for instance, the Commonwealth of Nations suspended Fiji in 2009 for human rights violations such as restrictions on free speech, assembly, and arbitrary arrests.¹⁴ Third, if the country commits an act of armed aggression.

Arguably, suspending or expelling a country from an IO might lead to a lack of control of the IO over the country, which in turn will make it difficult for the IO to put pressure on the recalcitrant country to mend its ways. However, if a country continuously undermines the objectives of the IO, then suspension followed by expulsion might be a healthier option for the IO.¹⁵

What India Should Do

In the case of the Taliban, the first two conditions are met. The Taliban regime is undemocratic and has scant respect for human rights. Afghanistan under the Taliban poses a fundamental threat to the foundational values and principles of SAARC. Also, the SAARC as an IO has the implied power to suspend or expel member countries. Although the expulsion or suspension from the IO is the measure of last resort, India should consider starting the process of making a well-substantiated case for Afghanistan's suspension from SAARC. An obstacle that India will encounter here is that as per Article X (1) of the SAARC Charter, all decisions have to be taken on the "basis of unanimity".¹⁶ Given Pakistan's proximity to the Taliban regime, it would surely veto any such proposal. Nonetheless, presenting a case against Afghanistan at the SAARC forum will put pressure on the Taliban regime to have an

inclusive government, one of India's demands, and respect basic human rights. Since the Taliban regime is craving recognition internationally, and would not like to lose membership of a body like SAARC, the threat of suspension could act as a pressure point, helping India to pursue its national interests in the region. This will also infuse life in the moribund SAARC as an important platform to discuss the dangers posed by the Taliban regime to South Asia.

“India must strongly consider starting the process of making a well-substantiated case for Afghanistan's suspension from SAARC.”

The Neighbourhood's Apprehensions

Decoding Small South Asian States' 'Wait and Watch' Policy Towards Taliban

Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy

Inclusive government', 'goodwill of people', 'humanitarian access and assistance', 'people-oriented future', and 'development' were a few of the themes stressed on by the leaders of Nepal, Maldives, and Bangladesh about Afghanistan during the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021.^{1,2,3} Interestingly, none of these speeches explicated their governments' stance on Afghanistan's new Taliban government. It appears that the small South Asian states are emulating the 'wait and watch' approach of the major world powers towards the Taliban.

For instance, despite the Bangladesh government's talk of providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan,⁴ its foreign minister stressed that it was too early to comment on the Taliban's recognition and the country would only

decide based on how the situation develops.⁵ It was also made clear that Bangladesh was monitoring the situation carefully and would only work with the new government if it is democratic and supported by the people.⁶

The Sri Lankan government also expressed concerns over the Afghan situation as it could transform that country into a safe haven for extremists and worsen the migration and drug trafficking crises throughout the region.⁷ However, it expressed hope that the Taliban would abide by its amnesties and promises of not harming any foreigners, and would safeguard and uphold human and women rights.⁸

Likewise, Nepal urged for lasting peace in Afghanistan, with officials saying the country would maintain a ‘neutral position’ for now and make decisions based on the global response to the evolving situation.⁹

Bhutan has also spoken of a ‘neutral policy’ and an unwillingness to interfere in the internal politics of other countries, although this is not through an official statement.¹⁰

The Maldives, on the other hand, is yet to issue an open statement (as of 1 November 2021), with officials saying the government has not made any decision on the Taliban.¹¹

Broadly, these small South Asian states have embraced a “wait and watch” policy on the Taliban. This stance can be explained with three calculations: internal security, domestic politics, and external factors.

Internal Security

The fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban has renewed South Asian countries’ anxieties on terrorism and internal unrest. The Taliban’s close relations with several terror outfits and its incapability to govern the whole of Afghanistan will provide a safe haven for the terror groups, and contribute to radicalisation, terrorist training and funding, and illicit weapon and drug exports. This inevitably acts against the national interests and integrity of the smaller South Asian nations.

Bangladesh has seen its citizens fighting and training alongside the Mujahidin, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda, with many returning home to train and radicalise the Bangladeshi youth and Rohingya refugees. This led to the emergence of terrorist organisations such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh.¹² With most of their activities currently restricted, there is a potential for these groups to re-emerge and re-energise in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. Indeed, several Bangladeshis have already reportedly commenced travelling to Afghanistan to support the terrorist organisations.¹³

A similar set of challenges confront Sri Lanka. During the Taliban’s previous rule over Afghanistan, a deep network of illicit drugs, finance, and weapons trade was created among several South Asian terrorist and separatist organisations, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the impacts of which were seen even after the Taliban’s defeat in 2001.¹⁴ The re-emergence of a Taliban with more advanced weapons and supply of drugs—especially at a time when Sri Lanka is seeing an increase in Islamic terror, Sinhala-Muslim differences, and speculations of revived Tamil separatism—has triggered huge anxieties for Sri Lanka.^{15,16}

The Maldives has the highest per capita foreign terrorist fighters to have fought alongside al-Qaida, ISIS, and other terrorist organisations, and they will now find Afghanistan a hotspot to revive their activities.¹⁷ This, accompanied by an increase in homegrown terrorist attacks, will pose severe security challenges for the Maldivian state.

Domestic Politics

For Bangladesh, which has been long divided in terms of secular and Islamic nationalism, its current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has begun accommodating Islamist demands and pressures to balance her secular and Islamic vote base.¹⁸ This has become more crucial as Hasina's hardline approach against the Islamists and extremist ecosystems have created a perception of her being 'anti-Islam'.¹⁹ Thus, it is highly unlikely that Hasina's government will embrace a policy against the Taliban and sections of Bangladeshi sympathisers unless they pose a real threat to the state's security.

Similarly, for most of Sri Lanka, the scars from the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues remain.²⁰ In this context, the Taliban is unlikely to be seen as anything more than a terrorist organisation. This places the Rajapaksas and their party in a difficult position as their vote base primarily comprises hardline Buddhists bent on building a Sinhala majoritarian state. Indeed,

it was the hope that the Rajapaksas could safeguard the Sinhala Buddhists from extremist attacks and ideology that led to their victory in the first place.²¹ Any move that might recognise the Taliban for now would thus exacerbate the governments' costs over benefits,'.

On the other hand, the gradual entrenchment and acceptance of Sunni Salafi Islam within the Maldives and the intertwining of religion with the national identity have posed a new challenge for the government.²² In this context, the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party, which has been perceived as 'anti-Islam' for its criticism of hardline Islam, is seeing a gradual transformation. The government is seeking support from the conservative and religious opposition parties, having realised their emerging prominence. The disposal of the proposed hate crimes bill is a case in point.²³ Thus, the Maldives is in no hurry to accept or reject the new Sunni rulers in Afghanistan.

External Factors

A primary factor is India's recognition of and interaction with the Taliban. Although India's neighbours have shown some sensitivity to New Delhi's terrorism concerns, this will intensify in the future with China's debt-trapping and India's leading role in regional connectivity.

Hence, the small states will want to pursue a policy that does not trigger security concerns or have spillover effects for India. This is especially true for Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, which share open or porous borders with India. In the past, such differences have strained ties with India—for instance, India’s relations with Nepal suffered after the Kandahar hijack, and ties with Bhutan and Bangladesh deteriorated as they failed to restrict cross-border terror attacks against India.^{24,25,26}

Secondly, in recent years, China has made inroads in South Asia as an alternative trade and development partner to India. Thus, China’s recognition of the Taliban or the extension of its investments and Belt Road Initiative to Afghanistan will make it an easy point of attraction for landlocked states such as Nepal, which have been trying to discover new markets and reduce their dependence on India.²⁷ Further, a close relationship between China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, will influence the South Asian states’ Taliban policy through certain incentives from China and Pakistan and pressures from India. Hence, the small states will be keen to make their decision based on this evolving regional structure.

Finally, given their revived significance in the US under the broader Indo-Pacific construct, the smaller South Asian countries will use Washington to balance New Delhi and Beijing.²⁸ This bargaining leverage will only increase if China manages to bring the Taliban under their sphere of influence. To sustain their bargaining and balancing leverage, the small states will consider the US’s stance on the Taliban to shape their policies.

Thus, as the great game in Afghanistan continues to unfold the small South Asian states are trying to neutralise their apprehensions and security concerns through a ‘wait and watch’ policy towards the Taliban.

“The small South Asian states have embraced a ‘wait and watch’ policy on the Taliban due to three key reasons—internal security, domestic politics, and external factors.”

Understanding Bangladesh's Ties with Afghanistan Amid Taliban's Return

Nahian Reza Sabriet

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 engenders several concerns regarding the foreign policy choices of all South Asian countries down the road. Bangladesh has thus far not made any concrete decision on the recognition of the Taliban government, preferring to follow a “wait and watch” policy.¹ A look back at Bangladesh’s diplomatic ties shows that it has always maintained a policy of non-interference regarding the internal affairs of other states. Bangladesh’s foreign minister also stated that it is highly unlikely that Afghanistan’s political scenario will affect Dhaka in any considerable manner.² Nevertheless, the two countries remained linked to each other through bilateral relations and as members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and several intersecting affairs may come to the fore.

New Geopolitical Reality

From Bangladesh’s perspective, three areas are pertinent—regional stability, security, and connectivity. The concerns over regional security denote purely geopolitical issues, such as the involvement of regional and extra-regional powers vis-à-vis the newfound power vacuum in Afghan territory. Pakistan, China, and Russia’s positions on the recognition of the Taliban regime are very crucial here. The installation of Taliban diplomats at the Afghan embassy in Islamabad, China’s US\$31 million emergency aid, and Pakistan’s interest in expanding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan indicate informal acceptance or a neutral attitude towards the new regime.^{3,4} Russia also held “Afghan Talks” with Taliban representatives despite the group being on the list of “terror organisations” since 2003 and such contacts being “punishable” under Moscow’s national law.⁵

Additionally, both China and Russia have also abstained from voting on the United Nations Security Council resolution on 31 August 2021 that aimed to prevent Afghan territory from being used to “threaten any country or shelter terrorists” and demanded that “the Taliban adhere to the commitments made by it regarding the safe and orderly departure from the country of Afghans and all foreign nationals”.^{6,7} All three countries have shown their willingness to provide aid to Afghanistan in the Moscow talks.⁸ China has also resumed its trade link with Afghanistan, importing 45 tons of pine nuts from that country on 31 October 2021.⁹ The link was disrupted in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict between Afghan forces and the Taliban.¹⁰

China’s inroads into South Asia through ventures like the Belt and Road Initiative must also be taken into consideration. Beijing’s recent moves have led to suspicion over its geopolitical and strategic ambitions regarding Afghanistan and beyond. Moreover, China has reportedly asked the international community to engage with the new Afghan government and actively guide it.¹¹ To some extent, the geopolitical confrontation between China and the US is a factor here. Some US analysts are already expecting a strong Chinese presence in the internal politics of Afghanistan while referring to how US intelligence was outplayed by those of China, Russia, or Iran.¹²

It is impossible to predict the future, but given that Afghanistan is placed at the crossroads of several big-league nations and is located near West Asia, turbulence there can jeopardise the stability of South Asia. This can eventually impede the security of Bangladesh as well. Indeed, these are not concerns exclusive to Bangladesh alone, and they require cautious observations.

Re-emergence of Extremism

For Bangladesh, another crucial security concern is violent extremism and the resurgence of homegrown radical Islamist groups. Leveraging digital tools and social media, radical groups in Bangladesh are misrepresenting or misinterpreting the various facets of the Taliban’s return. Facebook and Twitter have already seen numerous posts and comments sympathising with the Taliban and, more importantly, terming the group’s return as the “victory of Islam .”¹³ At least two radicalised individuals have tried to reach Afghanistan from Bangladesh via India to “offer their services” to the Taliban government.¹⁴ It is also crucial to remember that it was those returning from Afghanistan after the Soviet-Afghan war who founded Bangladesh’s first Islamist militant organisation, the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh, in the early 1990s.¹⁵

Other international faith-based violent extremist organisations like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) have already penetrated into the Afghan territory; the ISKP has claimed the August Kabul airport attack, and suicide bombings in Kunduz and Kandahar.^{16,17,18} ISIS-inspired groups like the new faction of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) also exist, and followers of these groups have been claiming a presence for a long time. For instance, the 2016 attack at the Holey Artisan restaurant in Gulshan, Dhaka, was carried out by young militants from the neo-JMB group inspired by the ISIS ideologies.¹⁹ Additionally, the US drone strike on a suspected suicide bomber at Kabul airport on 29 August has also revamped radical voices in different parts of South Asia, highlighting anti-West or anti-American connotations.²⁰

At the non-governmental level, several Bangladesh nationals had been involved in Afghanistan's past state-building and development projects, primarily as employees of BRAC, a leading Bangladeshi NGO. The two countries had been cooperating in the education sector to boost Afghanistan's social development. Bangladesh also hosts several Afghan students. Education is a key area to further bilateral ties. For Bangladesh, cooperating via the education sector and empowering the Afghan community through a people-centric channel can deliver prudent outcomes.

Other Concerns

Another critical area of concern is the refugee influx resulting from the political shift in Kabul. Bangladesh has already rejected a US request to host several thousand refugees from Afghanistan, since it is already struggling with as many as 1.1 million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar.^{21,22} The international community has not been able to provide any cogent solution to this problem, nor has the repatriation process been accelerated. Although Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, the government opened borders to Rohingya refugees solely on humanitarian grounds. Taking a new faction of refugees, even for a shorter time, would exacerbate a precarious situation. Furthermore, there is an underlying crisis brewing—the Afghan situation will also shift the focus of the global refugee regime from the Rohingya issue. On the other hand, analysts have noted that the influx of Afghan refugees in countries like the United Arab Emirates may jeopardise Bangladesh's export of labourers.²³ This brings in a socio-economic dimension to the Afghanistan situation for Bangladesh, which must also be taken into account.

The final issue of concern is regional connectedness. Despite being a member of SAARC, the presence of Afghanistan in the forum has not been widely pronounced. SAARC members will now have to sit with Taliban representatives at the same table to discuss the exigent regional agenda. In relation to recognising the Taliban regime, Bangladesh is looking to the decisions of the neighbouring states.²⁴ Nevertheless, SAARC can be a good platform to beckon primary contacts amid geopolitical changes.²⁵ As far as the issue of terrorism is concerned, SAARC provides a good option to utilise its 1987 Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and the 2004 protocol to initiate a conversation.²⁶ While some may argue that the SAARC instruments are not sufficient to aim for a properly holistic approach, especially after the SAARC foreign ministers' meeting was called off due to a "lack of concurrence" on Afghan representation, the forum can serve as a ground for engagement and deliberation among the South Asian countries, including Afghanistan.²⁷

Conclusion

The future of relations between Bangladesh and Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban's return is contingent on how the new regime formulates its foreign policy preferences and how the neighbouring countries respond to the new rhetoric, narratives, and policies. Certainly, this is not going to propel any overt shift in Bangladesh's policy preferences. However, the concerns related to regional stability, security, and connectivity manifest some indirect implications for Dhaka. The future of the relations can be observed and analysed by focusing the lens on these key areas and the opportunities or challenges they present.

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Nepal Faces Multipronged Challenge Amid Taliban's Return in Afghanistan

Sohini Nayak

The world watched keenly yet indolently as the Taliban seized complete power in Afghanistan in August 2021.¹ What followed was a surge of distraught civilians and international citizens frantic to escape Afghanistan, with numerous flights evacuating people to all parts of the world, including Nepal. As the situation in Afghanistan worsened, Nepal's home minister Bal Krishna Khand ordered the immediate repatriation of Nepalese nationals in that country,² convening an inter-ministerial meeting to chalk out a plan of action.³ As of October 2021, around 940 Nepalese citizens have been evacuated from Kabul.⁴ At the same time, the details of Nepalese who may still be in Afghanistan is unknown.

Nepalese in Afghanistan

About 1,500 to 2,000 Nepalese working in Afghanistan's formal sector of Afghanistan were thought to not make it out of Kabul by the end of August.⁵ Most of these people worked in the consular services of foreign countries like Canada, Germany, Japan, the UK and the US, with many even deployed as security personnel in the diplomatic enclaves.⁶ Additionally, several Nepalese were known to be working as US and British defence contractors at the Bagram Air Base in Kandahar. Some others were thought to be working in Kabul for Turkish sub-contractors or American multinational companies like Fluor Corporation.⁷ At the same time, an estimated 14,000 Nepalese, mainly labourers, did not have any official documentation, complicating their attempts to leave Afghanistan.⁸

In 2020, over 1,073 Nepalese nationals obtained labour permits to work in Afghanistan,⁹ and over 8,000 Nepalese migrants moved to that country over the past seven years in search of a livelihood.¹⁰ Nevertheless, most of those who travelled to Afghanistan from Nepal did so illegally and there was no systematic and substantial direct diplomatic channel between the two countries. Although Nepal's Department of Foreign Employment had indicated the difficulties in moving to Afghanistan for work due to the security situation,¹¹ numerous agents were involved in deploying these workers on behalf of the companies by issuing letters with the designation, seal, and location of the company. For the most part, this process was unofficial.¹²

The search for a livelihood complicated the situation to the extent that it was tough to avoid such opportunities for many, even as Nepal sought to move up the ladder to become a lower-middle income country.¹³ Nepal is heavily dependent on remittances from its citizens in foreign countries, which comprises a substantial portion of the national GDP.¹⁴ According to the International Labour Organisation, Nepalese migrant labourers contribute to the development of Nepal as well as the host country.¹⁵

Even so, Nepalese workers in Afghanistan remained vulnerable to the tense security situation. For instance, in 2016, 12 Nepalese security contractors were killed in a suicide bomb attack in Kabul.¹⁶ This incident has scarred the Nepalese, and the government has been reluctant to issue work permits to Afghanistan since then. This is also a factor for the high number of illegal Nepalese workers in Afghanistan.

The Way Ahead

The Sher Bahadur Deuba government in Nepal has been criticised for its handling of the evacuation of its citizens from Afghanistan. Domestic political strife is rampant, complicating government attempts to address the situation. This forced Nepal to seek assistance from the international community to repatriate its workers in Afghanistan, by writing to the United Nations and sending several diplomatic missions to countries like the US.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the assistance it received was insufficient to evacuate all its citizens, but this must take into consideration the tense on-ground situation at the time (scores of foreigners and Afghans sought to leave the country, straining the rescue and evacuation efforts of the countries that could manage to do so). The absence of an 'emergency response team' in Nepal coupled with a lack of political will further worsened the scenario.¹⁸

What Nepal needed—and must continue to consider—is having a liaison with India such that New Delhi can assist Kathmandu in evacuating its citizens. This is one way for the two countries to thaw the recent cold ties emanating from the political map row and border issues.¹⁹ Furthermore, the US’s departure from Afghanistan will certainly have a big impact on Nepal, which is heavily dependent on remittances. India can help ease this stress as it is a more geographically feasible country for Nepalese workers.²⁰

Nepal must also remain cautious of the far-reaching security impacts from the Taliban’s return. The landlocked nation has been often depicted as a hospitable zone for Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence, which in turn has a good relationship with the Taliban, but could conduct espionage and terror activities in India and beyond.²¹ In the absence of a counterinsurgency structure and with no working strategy on terrorism, Nepal could be at risk of becoming a launchpad for terror-related activities.²² This allows Nepal and India to work together to strengthen regional security. How far Nepal can manage the crisis stemming from the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan will be a test for the Deuba government.

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Central Asia's Afghan Challenge

Saaransh Mishra

The swift takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban has raised several concerns for regional countries, including the Central Asian republics (CARs). These mainly include the potential spill-over of extremism, increased drugs trafficking, and the in-flow of refugees, which the CARs will struggle to tackle given their weak public health, security and social safety systems.¹

Interestingly, over the years, the CARs appeared to have been preparing for the Taliban's return in Afghanistan by bolstering ties with the group and enhancing domestic security.² Nevertheless, the rapidity of the Taliban's return to power caught all countries, including the CARs, by surprise.³ Now, while Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan have shown some willingness to engage with the Taliban, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan had opposed the group unless it forms an inclusive and representative government.⁴ Tajikistan's position has remained unchanged, but the Taliban's Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, met with Alimkhan Esengildiev, the Kazakh Ambassador to Afghanistan, to discuss trade relations between

the two countries.^{5,6} However, any official recognition of the Taliban by the CARs will depend on the group's demeanour and ability to deliver on its promises, such as forming an inclusive government, ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for terrorists, and guaranteeing human rights for women and minorities.

However, even as the region continues to be wary of the volatile situation in Afghanistan, it is ideal for the CARs to engage with the Taliban to secure their interests. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan border Afghanistan, and this is the primary cause of Central Asia's vulnerability.⁷ Even before the Taliban's complete takeover of the country, a United Nations Security Council report had warned of a "fragile" security situation in Afghanistan due to the expanding presence of al-Qaeda and ISIS.⁸ This situation has also been heightened by the numerous ISKP-claimed suicide bombings across the country.

The new Taliban rule may drive a rise in jihadist ideology-inspired movements in Central Asia, much like it did in the 1990s when the Afghan Mujahedeen's propaganda led to the emergence of fundamentalist groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Islamic Movement of Tajikistan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.⁹ Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are already battling extremist groups like the Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham and Hizb ut-Tahrir, and any spill-over of extremism from Afghanistan will only exacerbate the tense regional situation. Reports also suggested that former ISIS fighters from Central Asia have returned to their home countries following the group's loss of territories in West Asia, causing supplementary distress in the region.¹⁰ The CARs bordering Afghanistan have already made several arrests in their territories for allegedly being involved with extremist organisations.¹¹

Tajikistan also urged the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)—a Russian-led military alliance of which it is a member and that also includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic—to work together to combat the potential security challenges from the Afghan situation.¹² Although Russia has vowed to protect its Central Asian allies and the CSTO also conducted large-scale military exercises in the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan in early September, the organisation has never actually engaged in a combat operation.¹³ So far, the CSTO has only focused on containing Afghan-related threats, such as transnational terrorism and narcotics trafficking, while leaving

it upon the western countries to resolve these issues.¹⁴ It remains to be seen how effective the CSTO will be in maintaining security in the region.

Drug production and trafficking remains another major threat that the CARs will need to tackle. Of the three CARs that border Afghanistan, a vast majority of narcotics pass through Tajikistan en route to China, Russia, and Europe. Drug trafficking is estimated to constitute 30 per cent of Tajikistan's GDP; if the Taliban honours its promise to stop the production of drugs in Afghanistan, it will have a major impact on the Tajik economy.^{15,16} However, given Afghanistan's dire economic situation, the Taliban's need for funds to run the country, and the group's known reliance on drugs as a source of revenue, the prospects of this are highly unlikely.

The CARs will also likely bear the brunt of the humanitarian crisis stemming from the Taliban's return, given their geographical proximity to Afghanistan. Factors like the grim rights situation for women and minorities, a weakened economy, and high poverty and unemployment levels will likely trigger discontent among the Afghan population and could prompt them to leave the country, leading to a mass exodus of refugees into Central Asia.

Border guards have already cited issues like COVID-19, security concerns, and improper entry documents to refuse entry to or deport most Afghan nationals who have tried to flee the country.¹⁷ Turkmenistan has staunchly rejected refugees from Afghanistan, including ethnic Turkmen. Uzbekistan has denied entry to Afghan refugees too, but hundreds of Afghan soldiers crossed into the country in August, some of whom were sent back following negotiations with the Taliban.¹⁸ While Tajikistan had taken in about 1,000 refugees (as of early July 2021) and the government had announced initially that it would be willing to accept 100,000 Afghan migrants, it has maintained a silence on the issue since then.¹⁹ The Kyrgyz Republic announced that it would issue 500 visas to Afghan students, but it has refrained from revealing any plans to accept Afghan refugees. And Kazakhstan has made clear that it will only assist UN employees in leaving Afghanistan upon request.²⁰

Russia and China have major stakes in a stable Central Asia. Both countries will be vulnerable to the spill-over of radicalism and terrorism and drug trafficking via Central Asia. China will be especially wary of the situation in Afghanistan or Central Asia triggering extremism in the Uyghur-dominated Xinjiang province. China is Central Asia's most important trading partner, with bilateral trade amounting to roughly US\$100 billion, whereas Russia has traditionally considered Central Asia as its sphere of influence and has economic, security and military stakes in the region.^{21,22} The strategic importance of the CARs to these two major powers will likely bring them into focus during discussions on Afghanistan at multilateral forums as seen in the Moscow Format Talks held on 20th October.²³

While it is tough to predict the exact scale of the threats and challenges the CARs will face from a volatile Afghanistan, what is certain is that Central Asia is in for some tough times.

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Iran in a Post-US Afghanistan

Kriti M. Shah

The fall of Kabul and the rise of the Taliban has forced regional countries to rethink or revisit their foreign policies towards Afghanistan. While many countries have a choice in whether to engage with the group or not, bordering states like Iran have few options. Whatever outreach Tehran may have indulged in the past, it is now forced to contend with the fact the Sunni-militant group is in power right next door, which does it no favours.

Iran's interests and objectives in Afghanistan have largely aligned with those of the US. The past few years, however, have seen a drastic change in the way Tehran views Kabul due to its tumultuous relationship with Washington. Historically, Tehran and the Taliban have been enemies. The Shia state has vehemently opposed the Sunni militant group, provided support to anti-Taliban groups in the 1990s, nearly went to war with them in 1998, and supported the US invasion of Afghanistan

to overthrow the Taliban government in 2001. However, as relations with the US deteriorated and the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear agreement and imposed fresh sanctions on Iran, Tehran's view of the Taliban changed. It began using the militant group as a means to gain leverage against the US, whose forces were battling the group in their backyard—and failing. By providing support to certain Taliban factions in western Afghanistan, calling for a withdrawal of US forces, and even hosting senior members of the Taliban for talks, it was fair to assume that while Tehran did not necessarily want to see the Taliban restoring their military hegemony over Afghanistan, they were an important political tool that Iran hoped to leverage to serve its diplomatic interests.

At present, the primary concern for Iran and other regional nations remains the worsening humanitarian crisis and the lack of an inclusive government in Afghanistan, both of which dominated the agenda at the regional meet hosted by Tehran on 27 October 2021.¹ With banks running out of money, severe food shortages and approaching winter, millions remain at risk. Iran is also concerned about the possibility of greater civil unrest, which could force more civilians to flee and seek refuge at the borders. Over two million Afghan refugees live in Iran currently, and while some believe that Iran should be accepting more immigrants to help the country's demographic crisis, the new government will not want to face the perils of an overburdened border.^{2,3} The trafficking of drugs, from the heroin-rich Afghan south to markets in Europe via Iran, has always been a concern for the Iranian regime. The new government will be working to ensure that the 900-km border between the two countries remains closely monitored and protected in the event of the Taliban gaining control over the south and looking for larger markets for their opium.

Iran also remains anxious about the plight of the minority Shia population in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's return to power, there have been attacks on Shia mosques in Kandahar and Kunduz, leaving at least 150 people dead.⁴ While the Islamic State has claimed responsibility and warned Shia Muslims that they will be targeted, Iran will be looking to the Taliban, a Sunni group that has also attacked

Shias in the past, for assurances of a crackdown on the Islamic State and no sectarian violence in the country. Should such violence increase, or should the Taliban fail to adequately protect Afghanistan's Shia population, Ebrahim Raisi, who is expected to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader, will be forced to adopt a tougher stance against the Taliban, projecting Iran as a "protector" of the Shia community in the face of the Taliban's blunt Sunni militarism.

Iran's relationship with Afghanistan is at a crucial juncture vis-à-vis their economic ties. Iran is eager to revive its dismal economy amidst crippling international sanctions, and it needs Afghanistan's exports and expand trade ties. It is important that Iran maintains cordial ties with the Taliban so that it can continue shipping oil and gas to Kabul and receiving the much-needed hard currency. Iran will, however, face the struggle of protecting its trade and investment interests in Afghanistan, given that other regional states such as Pakistan, Qatar and Turkey are now offering to help the Taliban win greater influence.⁵ Iran's other interest, including the Khaf-Heart railway project, launched in December 2020, is an example of its growing interest in establishing stronger trade ties with its neighbour.⁶ The US\$75-million, 140-km project is expected to boost Iran-Afghan trade and help increase passenger movement between the two countries.

It can also aid Tehran's ambitions of becoming a transportation hub for the region, providing access to the Persian Gulf for landlocked nations such as Afghanistan. The fate of the project now rests in the Taliban's hands.

Iran had hoped that its outreach to the Taliban, including aid to the insurgency, would have earned it some influence with the power holders in Kabul. However, Taliban commanders close to Iran have been given low-grade ministerial offices, dashing these hopes. There is also no evidence that the Taliban is ready to sever ties with jihadists hostile to Iran and the wider Shia community.⁷

Unlike Russia or China, which are frequently accused of rushing to fill the "diplomatic vacuum" left by the US, Iran's role in post-US Afghanistan will remain the most critical in terms of influencing India's engagement. Tehran remains anxious about how the Taliban takeover of Kabul will affect its

interests in the country—a fear that New Delhi can relate to. Therefore, while India will continue, regardless of the outcome, to provide support to democratic forces in the Afghan government, it will look to Iran for assistance in making inroads into the country.

Iran's interests in Afghanistan will now need recalibration. It is important for Tehran to balance its future economic prospects with diplomatic pragmatism and ensure that its neighbour can protect its political, economic and religious interests. The Ebrahim Raisi government will have to balance political conservatism with Washington and the desire to free the country from the shackles of international sanctions. At the same time, Afghanistan will force Iran to adopt a more liberal, open-minded approach against the Sunni militant group, while making sure that the Taliban is able to defend and protect Shia Muslims in that country. This will be a challenge both for the Taliban and for Tehran.

“Whatever outreach Iran may have indulged in previously, it must now contend with the fact that the Taliban, a Sunni-militant group, is in power right next door.”

Proxies, Terror, and a Non-Picturesque Neighbour

The ISKP is Nothing but an Exaggerated Threat

Sushant Sareen

After the horrific suicide bombing at the Kabul airport in August 2021, the international spotlight and scrutiny shifted from the Taliban and its close ally al-Qaeda to the shadowy terror group Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).^{1,2} Suddenly, the real problem in Afghanistan was not the capture of that country by the Taliban, but the presence of the ISKP. The Taliban and Pakistan are being presented as the good guys who everyone should help and fund to fight against the ISKP, which is the real threat to global security.³ With US President Joe Biden calling the ISKP “an arch-enemy of the Taliban,” it seems like a slam dunk for the new narrative that is being manufactured of ‘good Taliban’ vs ‘bad ISKP’.⁴ The US military seems to have developed so much faith, trust, and confidence in the Taliban that they even share extremely sensitive information with them. There is now talk of intelligence sharing with the Taliban to target ISKP.⁵

Even as the ISKP is being built up as some kind of ISIS on steroids to justify possible cooperation, coordination and even collaboration with the Taliban regime, no one is asking some simple questions: just how dangerous is the ISKP really? Does it have a global or even regional footprint outside the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) region or is it a local terror group with a very tenuous international affiliation? Is it only using the label of an international terror brand to build its profile? What are its strength and capabilities to carry out big terror attacks outside of AfPak region and destabilise other countries? The data just does not bear out the hype surrounding ISKP. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, in the first ten months of 2021, only eight major terror attacks have been claimed by the ISKP.⁶ The bombing of a girls school in Kabul in May was never claimed by ISKP, which normally is quick to claim even those attacks it has not carried out.⁷ Last year, the ISKP carried out only seven major terror attacks, most of them against soft targets.

From 2018 (when the ISKP carried out over 130 attacks) to 2021 (when in the first ten months it has carried out just eight attacks, or nine if the girls' school attack is added to the list), it is clear that the ISKP's operations have been seriously disrupted and its strength seriously degraded. According to a UN Security Council (UNSC) report, the ISKP "remains diminished from its zenith, following successive military setbacks that began in Jowzjan in summer 2018".⁸ Over the last couple of years, the ISKP has been systematically targeted by not just its 'sworn enemies' (Taliban) but also the erstwhile Afghan government and the Americans.⁹ In many instances, there has been tacit cooperation between these three parties to target the ISKP.¹⁰

The UN report puts the strength of ISKP fighters between 1500-2200 but adds that the group has been "forced to decentralize and consists primarily of cells and small groups across the country, acting autonomously while sharing the same ideology".¹¹ Even so, the report assesses the group to be "active and dangerous," more so as it could become a magnet for disgruntled Taliban and other jihadists. But to extrapolate from here and project the ISKP as a global or even regional threat that requires all major powers to work together and support the Taliban regime with money and weapons to counter the group is clearly an exaggeration of its potential.

This is not to deny that the ISKP can launch some high-profile and high-casualty attacks, as indeed it has done since the Kabul Airport bombing—two Shia mosques, one in Kunduz and another in Kandahar, have been targeted by suicide bombers; a funeral

congregation in Kabul has been targeted; there have been multiple attacks on Taliban patrols in Kabul and Eastern Afghanistan; and clashes and firefights between Taliban and ISKP fighters have also been reported. There are likely to be more such incidents in the future. It is also possible that the ISKP might capture a few districts or even a couple of provinces in parts of Afghanistan. But beyond that, its ability and capacity to transform into another ISIS-like entity that can capture large swathes of territory in different countries and wreak havoc on the region and beyond is highly suspect. There could be some spill-over of the ISKP into Afghanistan's neighbours, but nothing on the scale that would make it a serious threat to regional stability. The biggest threat that the ISKP poses is to the Taliban. But nothing the ISKP does in Afghanistan, including targeting minorities and women, is something that the Taliban have not done previously.

Until now, the ISKP's only real 'achievement' is that it has accorded a degree of international respectability and acceptability to the Taliban.¹² If this was the real purpose behind the rise of the ISKP, it has been achieved. The purported threat that the group poses has opened the doors for the Taliban to engage with countries like Russia, China and Iran, and Central Asian and Western states.¹³ Dealing with the Taliban, who were international pariahs not so long back, is now being justified in the name of crushing the ISKP.

That the Taliban, given its deep association with a melange of regional and global jihadist groups, is a far more internationalist terror group than the ISKP, which is predominantly manned by disgruntled Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, is conveniently glossed over.

The linkages between the ISKP and other terror groups (including those with which it is daggers drawn), as also with the putative mother organisation of many of these groups—Pakistan’s premier intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—is not really a secret. With decades of experience behind it, the ISI has mastered the art of manipulating and managing the contradictions and conflicts between different terror organisations and using them for advancing the security and foreign policy agendas of the Pakistani state. Pitting one group against the other, using one group as a foil for the other, raising the profile of one group to increase leverage with another group, making rivals come together for a specific purpose and then forcing them to go their separate ways, is something that the ISI has used to great effect in its ‘war through terror’ strategy. Even the whole Taliban-vs-ISKP narrative originated in Pakistan.

A basic mistake that is often made while analysing terror groups in the AfPak region is to look at them in terms of binaries. For example, it is often implicitly assumed that the Haqqani Network, which is seen as a “veritable arm of ISI,” will be an enemy of ISI’s enemy Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan

(TTP); or, since Pakistan is the main backer of the Afghan Taliban, it will not have any truck with the Taliban’s challenger, the ISKP.¹⁴ But the Haqqani Network is not just an integral part of the Taliban, it also has extremely close links with the TTP, al-Qaeda and the ISKP. It is known to have acted as a go-between and peacemaker between these groups, and between the ISI and these groups. Often enough avowedly sworn enemies cooperate and collaborate on some things and viciously gun for each other on other issues. There have been instances where the Taliban and the ISKP have carried out joint operations; and then there have been any number of instances when they have brutally targeted each other.^{15,16}

Right from the time when some top TTP commanders broke away from Mullah Fazlullah and swore fealty to ISIS’s Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014, doubts have been expressed as to who and what was behind the split.¹⁷ Ostensibly, the split was the result of differences between prominent commanders and Fazlullah who had succeeded Hakimullah Mehsud. With Fazlullah remaining loyal to Mullah Omar (who was dead by then, only no one knew it), the breakaway faction found the ISIS as a convenient banner to work under.¹⁸ But there is also speculation that the Zarb-e-Azb military operation that had started in June 2014 against the TTP in North Waziristan played a major part in the split. In other words, the split was engineered to break the strength of the TTP and push the war that had entered Pakistan back into Afghanistan.

According to Abdul Rahim Muslimdost, one of the earlier leaders of the ISKP, the organisation had been “infiltrated by elements of Pakistan’s intelligence agency, in order to push what was left of the militancy in Pakistan across the border”.¹⁹

Whatever the murky reality of what exactly happened back then, subsequent reports revealed deep suspicions about ISKP links with ISI, not directly but through the instrumentality of its ‘veritable arm,’ the Haqqani Network. Amrullah Saleh, the *de jure* caretaker president of Afghanistan, has for long been accusing the ISKP of being an ISI proxy. In an interview some years ago, he disclosed that arrested ISKP terrorists had admitted to having received funding and training from Pakistan. He also revealed that communication intercepts had pointed to ISKP cadres being in constant contact with people in Pakistan.²⁰ In his book on the ISKP, Antonio Giustozzi has written that in 2017 Pakistani terrorist Aslam Farooqi was made leader of the ISKP as part of a deal with the ISI. The deal was that in exchange for the appointment of a leader linked to the ISI and cessation of attacks against Pakistan government targets, the ISKP would be given access to safe havens inside Pakistan. Lobbying for the deal was done by the Haqqani Network. But Farooqi’s appointment split the ISKP.²¹ A 2020 report revealed that at the behest of the ISI, the Haqqani Network was trying to take control of the ISKP, but this was being resisted by some factions that had emerged after the split.²²

Despite the Haqqani Network being one of the most lethal components of the Taliban movement, it maintained a close link with the ISKP. Many of the attacks claimed by the ISKP in Kabul were a joint venture with the Haqqanis, which facilitated them and perhaps even executed them. According to a UNSC report in 2020, the ISKP “lacked the capability to launch complex attacks in Kabul on its own while taking responsibility for operations that had, in all likelihood, been carried out by the Haqqani Network”.²³ The Afghan intelligence had busted a major cell of the Haqqanis and the ISKP in Kabul in May 2020 after the attack on the Sikh gurdwara.²⁴ Joint attacks such as these, in which different groups—even rivals—collaborate, is not out of the ordinary. In Pakistan too, there have been occasions when two or more terrorist groups have claimed responsibility for the same attack because all these groups have participated in the attack and were entitled to take ownership.

It is also not uncommon for one group to carry out an attack but for another to take responsibility, something that has been seen in Jammu and Kashmir in the past when an attack that had the clear fingerprints of Pakistani terrorist groups like Lashar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammad were claimed by an ‘indigenous’ terrorist group like Hizbul Mujahideen.

The same template has been followed in Afghanistan as well, as is clear from the latest UNSC report that says: “certain attacks can be denied by the Taliban and claimed by ISIL-K, with it being unclear whether these attacks were purely orchestrated by the Haqqani Network, or were joint ventures making use of ISIL-K operatives”.²⁵

While the ISKP is now the new ogre in town, and the Taliban crimes are being whitewashed—the US State Department spokesman has gone to the extent of declaring that the Taliban and Haqqani Network are separate entities—an effort is underway to get a tighter grip on the ISKP.²⁶ Although many of the arrested ISKP cadres have escaped after the jails were thrown open by the Taliban, reports indicate they are trying to enlist the ISKP fighters in the Taliban ranks.²⁷ But this follows the culling of some top ISKP leaders, including the former ‘governor’ of Khorasan wilayat, Abu Umar Khorasani. The fighters are, however, being offered a chance to save themselves if they join the Taliban. Otherwise, they will be hunted down.

Going forward, instead of making yet another Faustian bargain with the Taliban and plying them with money, resources and legitimacy in the hope that they will fight the ISKP, the US and its allies need to think this through. It might be a better idea to let the Taliban stew in its own juice, and taste some of its own medicine. No one should forget the thousands that the Taliban killed through precisely the same tactics that the ISKP uses. There is nothing really redeeming about the Taliban and nothing that really distinguishes it from the ISKP. Therefore, if the ISKP finds space after the US withdrawal, and revives, then so be it. Let the Taliban tackle them with their own devices and resources. This will keep them busy and tied down fighting and killing each other and not spread their poisonous wares elsewhere. In any case, now that the US has walked out, why not let the supporters of the Taliban—Pakistan, Russia, China and even Iran—handle this problem and suffer the consequences of their own making.

“The Taliban may be trying to appear as new and improved, but one should not forget the thousands it killed through precisely the same tactics that the ISKP uses. There is nothing really redeeming about the Taliban and nothing that distinguishes it from the ISKP.”

A Resurgent Taliban and its Implications for Kashmir

Ayjaz Wani

The dramatic siege of war-torn Afghanistan by a resurgent and emboldened Taliban ahead of the US's complete withdrawal in August 2021 has increased regional worries about radicalisation, political Islam, and terrorism. The regional powers—including China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and India, and even the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation—have failed to tame the rampaging Taliban without a coherent strategy.

The turn of events in Afghanistan has triggered fresh apprehensions among Indian policymakers and security experts for: (A) pan-Islamist groups gaining ground support in Kashmir, though the Taliban maintains its stand that Jammu and Kashmir is a “bilateral and internal issue”.^{1,2} (B) Pakistan, struggling to clear itself from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list, will try to use the situation to spread terror in Jammu and Kashmir to avoid international scrutiny.

Foreign Militants in Kashmir After 1989

After the withdrawal of Soviet combat forces from Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan manoeuvred the battle-hardened militants to the Kashmir Valley to create a new theatre of conflict and terrorism. The prevalent political environment in the Valley and the anger among the people after the rigging of the 1987 legislative assembly elections provided an ideal ground for Pakistan to exploit the situation. Pakistan manipulated the disgruntled Kashmiri youth, favouring armed insurgency to sponsor a “proxy war” against India through an open Line of Control (LoC) with the overt or covert involvement of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and other international Islamic organisations. Having repeatedly failed to settle scores with India militarily, Pakistan camouflaged its tactics as a ‘fight for Islam’.

It organised a wobbly amorphous crusade into a coherent and organised movement to challenge the Indian state in Kashmir. This is particularly poignant for Pakistan after it was humiliated in the Bangladesh war in 1971, and the regional balance of power swung decisively in India's favour.

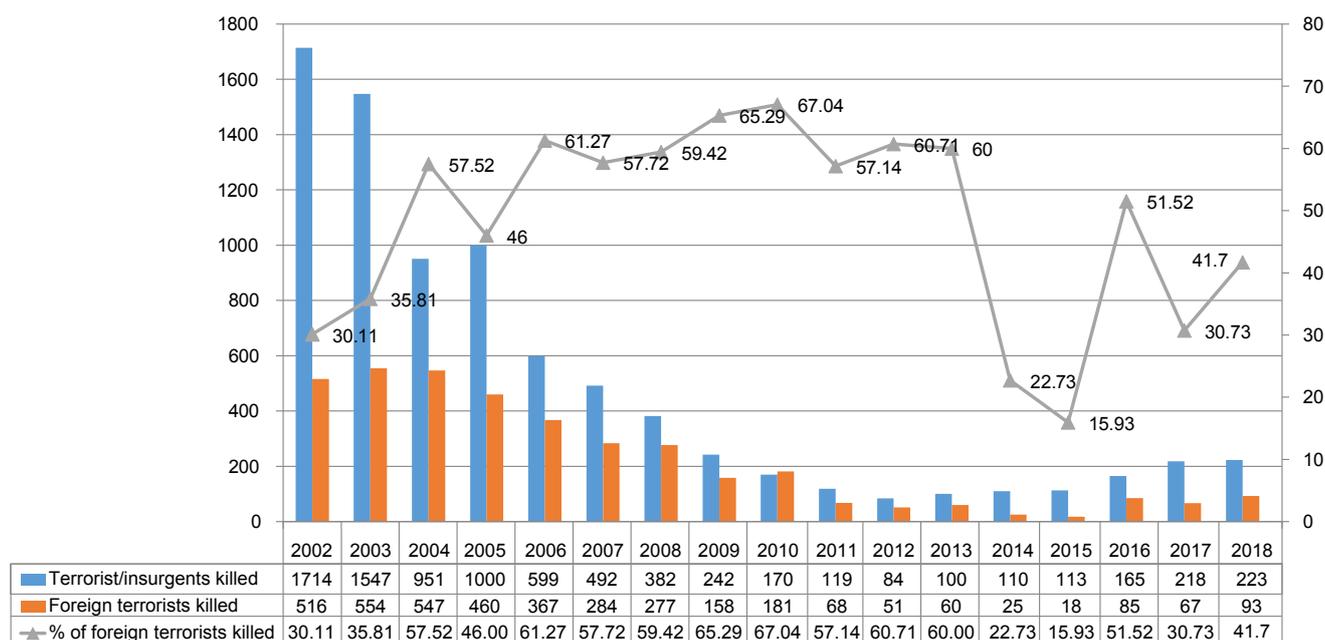
The ensuing insurgency led to political assassinations and paralysed the government machinery, forcing India to send armed forces to control the situation. It took some time for the security agencies to control the situation, given the presence of many foreign and Kashmiri militants trained in terror camps across the border. According to reports, in August 1993, 400 Afghan insurgents—primarily members of the *Hezb-e-Islami* party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—were present in Kashmir.³ Between 1989 and 2000, 55,538 incidents of violence were recorded in Jammu and Kashmir and of the 15,937 militants killed, more than 3,000 were from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Around 40,000 firearms, 150,000 explosive devices, and over six million rounds of assorted ammunition were seized during the same period in different counterinsurgency operations.⁴

It took several years for the security agencies to bring a semblance of peace in the Kashmir Valley. The simultaneous increase in surveillance along the LoC led to a decrease in cross-border terrorism. The improving situation allowed the agencies to reduce the number of check posts and military bunkers that had come to dot every nook and cranny of the Valley over the past several years. The elections in September 1996 restored

the democratic government.⁵ Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who remained in power till 2004, reached out to Kashmiris with his philosophy of '*insaaniyat ke daayre mein*' (in the ambit of humanity). Vajpayee took essential steps to de-escalate the "conflict in Kashmir" through his humanistic approach. He struck a chord with the people of Kashmir, and his strategy worked as a crucial confidence-building measure. He forced the then Chief Minister Mufti Syed to disband the Special Operations' Groups that had acquired a notorious reputation within Kashmiri society.⁶ Many Kashmiris realised that they were merely used by Pakistan for its selfish goals and to seek revenge for the Bangladesh debacle.

Stunned at the palpable mood in the Valley, Pakistan increased the infiltration of terrorists from across the border. Islamabad-based radical terror organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) used the tactics of *fidayeen* attacks to keep Pakistan's ill-conceived designs intact and keep Kashmir simmering. Between mid-1999 and the end of 2002, Kashmir witnessed 55 *fidayeen* attacks, executed mainly by Pakistani insurgents. With an increasing number of local youth being weaned away from militancy, the year-wise causality of Pakistani or foreign militants rose exponentially after 2002 (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:
Foreign Terrorists Killed in Kashmir (2002-2018)**



Source: Data compiled by author from different sources

Return of Taliban and Kashmir

As in 1989, Islamabad will try to use the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan to send insurgents to Kashmir. According to reports, thousands of Pakistani terrorists from LeT, JeM and other terror outfits groups are currently fighting alongside the Taliban.⁷ They will be ready and willing to infiltrate into the Kashmir Valley. However, the Kashmir of

today is not what it was in 1989. Over the years, the internal security grid has been beefed up, surveillance along the LoC has vastly improved with drones and night-vision cameras, and the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A in 2019 has put the newly-carved union territory under the direct control of the central government.

Additionally, Pakistan has been shamed internationally as the FATF greylisting since June 2018 has exposed its covert support to international terrorism.⁸ Already facing the heat for its actions, Pakistan will find it difficult to replicate its devious tactics to unleash fresh discord in the Valley.

Heightened security along the LoC has led to a noticeable reduction in the presence of foreign terrorists in the Valley. For example, in 2019, 130 infiltrations were recorded across the LoC, while only 30 managed to infiltrate into the Kashmir Valley from January to October 2020.⁹ The effective shutting down of the LoC route for infiltrations has driven Pakistan's military establishment and the ISI to desperate means, including narcoterrorism via the Wagah border and the use of drones to drop weapons along the Indian side of the LoC. In June 2020, the Border Security Force shot down a Pakistani drone in the Kathua district of the Jammu region near the international border. The drone carried four batteries, two global positioning systems, seven Chinese grenades, and a sophisticated US-made M4 semi-automatic carbine.¹⁰

Another change between 1989 and now is the increasing fatigue felt by people living endlessly under the shadow of the gun. While the sense of perceived victimhood and peer pressure that emanates from the emotional pull to act in the face

of injustice and humiliation continues to fester anti-India sentiments, monotony from violence is reflected in the reducing number of stone-pelting incidents, calls for strike and protests at encounter sites. According to official data, Kashmir witnessed only 255 stone-pelting incidents in 2020 compared to 1,999 in 2019, 1,458 in 2018, and 1,412 in 2017.^{11,12}

However, even as India seems to have adequately upgraded its tactical preparedness to thwart Pakistan's external attempts, the real worry lies internally within Kashmir. Set to establish an Islamic government in Afghanistan interwoven with a tribal culture and to renew its idea of establishing the caliphate from Afghanistan to the European border, the rejuvenated Taliban can reignite violent sentiments in a section of the Kashmiri youth with deviant behaviour. The unending conflict over Kashmir has created political and social ruptures in the Kashmiri society, sounding the death knell for the Valley's traditional social orders and social control systems. Even if Pakistan achieves a degree of success in its evil designs, the deviant youth are capable of silencing the more significant sections of society within Kashmir, which still believes in Kashmiriyat, the unique syncretic, devotional and philosophical 'Kashmiri' way of life.

Pakistan can exploit these sentiments and the prevalent fear and suspicion of identity and culture after the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A to “implement” radicalisation in the Kashmir Valley from across the border through the Taliban. It will also use the widespread dissatisfaction and anger against India and the simmering sense of perceived victimhood within the Valley to incite further anger and violence. Such a scenario can blunt New Delhi’s integrational approach. Therefore, New Delhi must see the happenings

in Afghanistan as an opportunity to kickstart sincere and result-oriented interlocution with the people of the Valley. It must provide clean and fair administration and ensure the safety of the Kashmiri identity and culture. The absence of such positive political outreach will facilitate Pakistan, which is keen to abuse the turn of events in Afghanistan to its benefit.

“As it did in 1989, Islamabad will try to use the revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan to send insurgents to Kashmir. But the Kashmir of today is not what it was in 1989.”

Twenty Years Since 9/11: Transnational Jihadist Threat Remains Constant

Kabir Taneja

This year marks 20 years since the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington D.C. that changed global geopolitics. The terror strikes against the US marked the beginning of a new era, led by a political ideation now known as the ‘war against terror,’ which saw the largest mobilisation of Western military strength since the Second World War as military campaigns were launched in Afghanistan and Iraq, followed by covert wars against terror groups across the world.

Over these 20 years, the removal of Islamist terror group al-Qaeda, the mastermind of 9/11, was seen as the one-stop solution to ‘win’ the US-led war against terrorism. Much of this thinking concluded in 2011, after a 11-year long search, when the US found and neutralised al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad, the heart of Pakistan’s military establishment.¹

However, terrorism, especially transnational terrorism, has only grown over this period and become more accessible, as witnessed by the rise and (debatable) fall of the so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or *Daesh* in Arabic) in Iraq and Syria over the past few years. From the perspective of the ‘war on terror’ narrative, nothing has been more damning than the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan, 20 years after the US military campaign dislodged them and returned the group to the caves of Tora Bora and back to the construct of an insurgency.

The timeline is dizzying to grasp. In September 1996, the Taliban had taken over Afghanistan and installed its Islamic emirate. In September 2001, the 9/11 attacks took place, leading to a US invasion, and in September 2021, the Taliban walked back into Kabul, seized power, reinstalled its emirate and was being seen by the US as a possible partner to counter future terrorism threats emitting from the country.

Much of the Taliban's new leadership has been sanctioned by the United Nations or the US in one form or another—four people in the group's new caretaker cabinet have served time in Guantanamo Bay, which is almost now being used as a badge of honour by the Taliban; and collectively, the cabinet members have US\$20-million worth of bounties on them declared by the US.² This timeline of the Afghan war, as absurd as it looks and sounds, is expected to have significant consequences regionally, with its immediate effects felt in South Asia and eventually across the globe. US Senator Lindsay Graham recently assessed that the Washington would have to go back into Afghanistan, considering the botched way the superpower withdrew from the conflict zone.³

The global jihadist terror threat's sustainability despite decades of counterterror measures, ranging from overt to covert, truly plays out the cliché that ideologies cannot be beaten only using guns and bombs, but guns and bombs can be used to embolden radical ideologies even further. However, as the world moves forward into a more precarious stage of counterterrorism once again, a significant level of reflection on the past is needed to course correct the very ideation of the 'war on terror,' which was led by a knee-jerk reaction in the aftermath of 9/11 rather than having an expansive blueprint on what needed to be achieved. While

this did indeed diminish groups like the al-Qaeda up to a point, it also enabled other state actors like Pakistan, which uses Islamist ideologies as a state tool in theatres such as Afghanistan in return for access, help, monetary benefit, and other deliverables instead of dismantling terror infrastructure within its territories. Of course, for Islamabad, the ultimate endgame is to keep India's influence out of Kabul.

The future of the now fast-evolving and developing Islamist terrorism threat can be investigated from three fronts: strategic, tactical, and political.

Strategic

The very strategy of counterterrorism, led by an idea of interventionism, needs a rework. States that have been on the receiving end of such thinking from Western powers—Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and others—are today home to not just one, but many extremist and terror movements. However, a trail of failed states created by counterterror thinking and actions over the past two-to-three decades pose a larger challenge than solving previous ones. Capitals across the world have, most importantly, moved away from seeing counterterrorism as a homogenous or global action, which was the case in the ensuing months after 9/11. Great powers' games eventually took precedence.

The extremism translated by the West in Libya, via erstwhile leader Muammar Gaddafi's regime, was seen as an opportunity by Russia and Turkey a few years later. The “negotiated” US exit from Afghanistan, a country now flushed with Western arms and ammunition in the hands of the Taliban, which in turn will eventually trickle down to the likes of al-Qaeda, Islamic State Khorasan Province and others, is to remain a significant challenge in the years to come. Strategic flaws, such as the invasion of Iraq, led by American political whataboutery and intelligence failures that only exasperated the war on terror, should be inculcated as never-to-be-repeated mistakes. These flaws have undermined the counterterrorism narratives more than the likes of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and others. From the outset, counterterror goals need to be institutionally untangled from nation-building, and the onus for the same should be applied on host states, instead of using these countries to play double roles (or more in some cases).

Tactical

The US-led war on terror went much beyond just the Afghanistan and Iraq theatres, following the expansion—and not the expected contraction—of the threats. Techniques such as drone strikes, leadership decapitation, the overwhelming use of military power (such as the Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb, or MOAB) has shown to be effective but in a limited capacity, with arguably more severe long-term ideological fallouts compared to short-term tactical gains. The Afghan war showcased the

severe ills of ‘outsourcing’ important sections of wars to private-sector contractors and accountants.⁴ The expedited US withdrawal led by President Joe Biden's myopic vision resulted in the decapitation of institutions such as the Afghan Air Force, a critical component of fighting against the Taliban. The outcome of a conflict is dependent on how clear the aims are. Broad aims, or no aims—as many accounts have highlighted was the case in Afghanistan—particularly after 2011, has led to a cyclical conflict that eventually fell victim to the Taliban “having the watches,” while Western forces were bound by increasing shortage of time.⁵

Political

The Arab Spring was a watershed moment in more than one sense. While it emboldened voices for democracy in the Middle East, it also pushed extremist ideologies in the region and beyond to double down. This popular revolution, which started in Tunisia and then spread across the region, toppling many authoritarian regimes, also made Islamist ideologies work to strengthen their own movements, seeing the ‘threat’ of democracy as another Western intervention to regroup around. And up to a certain extent, this was done successfully. The very concept of external kinetic ‘political management’ of states should be replaced with outright diplomatic methodologies, even if they take longer than disrupting a situation using military means.

And military and tactical options should be largely moved to the covert theatres. Counterterrorism's overwhelming use of traditional military strength as a solution has showcased its severe limitations, most visible in Afghanistan and the fact that the US had to ultimately sign an exit deal with the Taliban so that the latter would let the US exit peacefully.

The threat of transnational terrorism will only see an uptick in the years to come. Africa is already being highlighted as the next big geography to fall under the influence of Islamist extremism while the Middle East and South Asia are expected to witness resurgent Islamist movements.⁶ The so-called Islamic State made more of an impact on both terror and counterterrorism thinking in the mere five years of its prime, which included setting up a caliphate at a point geographically as large as the UK, than the likes of al-Qaeda, which has existed for over three decades. In return, the counter-

terror narrative in the US moved from 'war on terror' to the condition of 'forever wars,' the latter leading to domestic political compulsions of winding down post-9/11 counter-terror policies with their successes and failures up for equal debate.

The Taliban victory in Afghanistan has the potential of becoming the biggest ideological war-cry for Islamist terror organisations in the times to come.⁷ And with the increase in the line-up of fractured, failed, and frail states left behind by Islamist insurgencies, the threat in the next decade has only increased instead of decreasing. 

“From the perspective of the ‘war on terror’ narrative, nothing has been more damning than the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan.”

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About the Authors

Manoj Joshi is a Distinguished Fellow at ORF.

Rahul Kamath is a Research Intern at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

Nivedita Kapoor is a Post-doctoral Fellow at Higher School of Economics (HSE), Moscow.

Saaransh Mishra is a Research Assistant at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

Sohini Nayak is a Junior Fellow at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

Harsh V Pant is Director of Studies and Head of ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

Prabhash Ranjan is a Professor and Vice-dean of Jindal Global Law School, O P Jindal Global University.

Nahian Reza Sabriet is a Research Officer at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), Dhaka.

Sushant Sareen is a Senior Fellow at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

Kriti M Shah is an Associate Fellow at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy is a Research Assistant at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

Kabir Taneja is a fellow at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

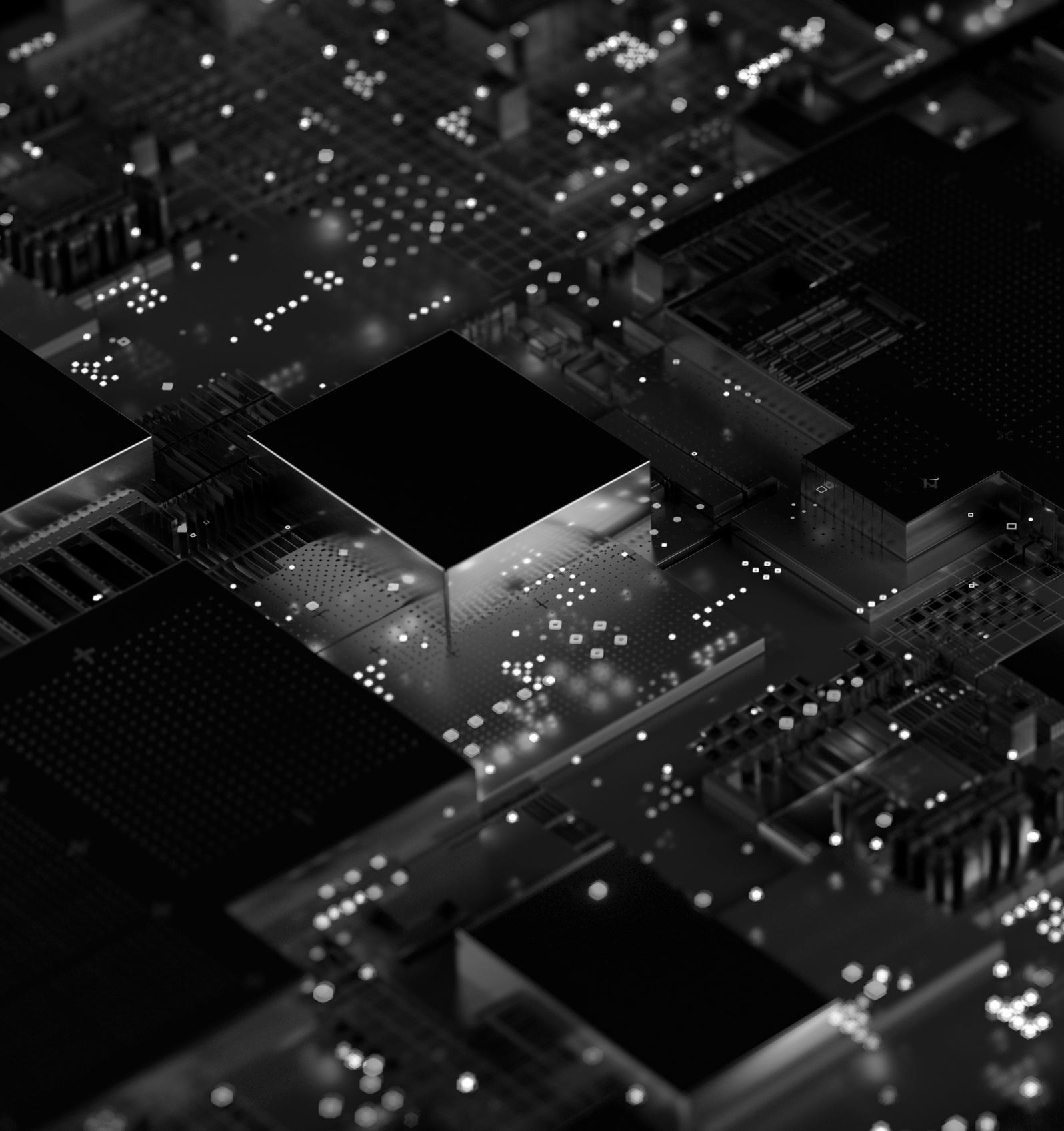
Aarshi Tirkey is an Associate Fellow at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

Ayyaz Wani is a Fellow at ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

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**20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org**