

Article

Dealing with the New Taliban Regime in Afghanistan

J. Jeganaathan

Abstract

The absence of a democratically elected government, the poor state of law and order and the many restrictions and violations of basic rights, especially those of women, under Taliban rule in Afghanistan are developments of deep concern. Moreover, the increasing tension along the Durand line with Pakistan, and the challenge posed by the Islamic State-Khorasan to the Taliban have made the security situation precarious. This paper examines the emerging strategic and security trends in Afghanistan in the post-Taliban takeover period. Should India engage with the Taliban regime so that it can influence its decisions, provide aid to its needy, and limit the security impact for the region, especially on Jammu and Kashmir? What would be the fallout if the Taliban regime is recognised and its relationship with the international community is formalised?

It is over a year now since the Taliban returned to power by capturing Kabul in August 2021 after two decades of fighting with the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Though the new Taliban Regime has consolidated its authority in the various provinces, its economy is in a shambles and depends on external aid or funds. The Taliban regime, under the leadership of Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, is struggling to run the country and to provide basic amenities to the citizens. As the international community watches the evolving situation and policies of the regime, the Taliban is bringing back strict Sharia practices, which alienates women from the

Dr. J. Jeganaathan is a Senior Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of National Security Studies, School of National Security Studies at the Central University of Jammu in Jammu & Kashmir.

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workforce while educational institutions are either closed or regulated for them. The US withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan last year has had a cascading effect on both Afghanistan and the regional security environment. New Delhi appears serious about charting a new Afghan strategy that would secure its vital national security interests without jeopardising the regional geopolitical environment that has emerged in the post-pandemic, post-American era. New Delhi has earned much goodwill among the Afghan people through its micro-level development-oriented engagement without interfering in internal security and political affairs. Though the Taliban has taken full control of the government, it is yet to be recognised by the international community, including the regional powers. There is no doubt that Afghanistan continues to remain a complex strategic and security issue for the region and the world. As a leading power in the region, India's role in shaping regional security architecture is inevitable. India has been engaging with the so-called 'Good' Taliban much before they came to power in 2021. Indian officials and interlocutors had a series of meetings with Taliban leadership in Qatar and expressed India's stand and concerns. In the past year, India has not stopped any humanitarian aid, and has sent wheat and other items through Pakistan by road. Even the Taliban leadership has been grateful for India's efforts to help the people of Afghanistan despite there being no formal consular or diplomatic interactions.

India expects the Taliban regime to ensure that the country will not be a haven for any terrorist organisation.

Nevertheless, the present scenario in Afghanistan poses serious challenges to India's national security and regional strategy to sustain and safeguard stability, its assets and developmental activities. The return of the Taliban in 2021 without major bloodshed, the collapse of the Afghan security institutions, and the surrender of Afghan security forces to the Taliban have dealt a blow to India's interest in Afghanistan. Moreover, the Taliban's regime has not yet been recognised by the international community, including its neighbours – India, China, Iran, Pakistan and the Central Asian states.

What does the return of Taliban 2.0 mean for India's security? India is principally concerned about the revival of Afghanistan as an Islamic epicenter for terrorism and expects the Taliban regime to ensure that the country will not be a haven for any terrorist organisation. India is also concerned about the rise of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS). Following the

abrogation of Art 370, which provided special status to Jammu and Kashmir, India is focusing on strengthening its territorial integrity and does not want any of the extremist and terrorist groups with external support from Pakistan and Afghanistan to subvert peace and stability. To achieve these objectives, India needs to engage with the Taliban government, and it is doing so informally since it has not recognised the present regime.

In this context, it is pertinent to understand how the Taliban is engaging with the United States, Pakistan and other countries. The active engagement of China in Afghanistan is also a cause for concern given its deep involvement with Pakistan, its indifference to terrorism aimed at others and its hostile policies towards India. The Modi government has to recalibrate its Afghan policy and strategy with a sense of pragmatism, factoring in the regional geopolitical dynamics and the nature of the Taliban regime.

Rising Pakistan-Taliban Tensions

The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been historically complicated, and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan has only increased tensions and conflicts between the two countries. The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 instead of being an asset to Islamabad, as the military-political establishment expected, has created a sense of insecurity in Pakistan. The Taliban and Pakistan have historically had a close relationship, but Pakistan is now increasingly concerned about Taliban's independent thinking, its growing opposition to Pakistan's policies towards Afghanistan and its ability to provide a haven to militants who could launch attacks on Pakistan.

One of the factors that have led to the increasing tensions between Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and Pakistan is their shared border. The Durand Line (Figure-1), which separates Afghanistan and Pakistan, has long been a point of contention between the two countries. Afghanistan has never recognised the Durand Line as an official border, insisting that it was imposed by British colonialists and that it separates ethnic Pashtuns who live on both sides. This has led to several border disputes between the two countries over the years, and the rise of the Taliban has only made matters worse. Pakistan is becoming one of the biggest losers of Taliban rule in Afghanistan.¹ The statements from the Taliban Commanders have been acerbic towards the Durand Line. Mawllawi Sanaullah Sangin, a top military commander of the Taliban, categorically said that "We

will not allow the fencing anytime, in any form. Whatever they did before, they did, but we will not allow it anymore. There will be no fencing anymore.”² Moreover, border dispute over the Durand Line, which separates Pakistan and Afghanistan, is a longstanding issue between the two countries. Afghanistan has never recognised the Durand Line as an international border, and there have been disputes over the exact location of the border. This has led to tension and occasional clashes between the two sides. Besides the border row, issues such as cross-border terrorism and the presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan have also acerbated the relationship between the new Taliban regime and Pakistan.

Afghanistan has never recognised the Durand Line as an international border.

Figure 1 Durand Line



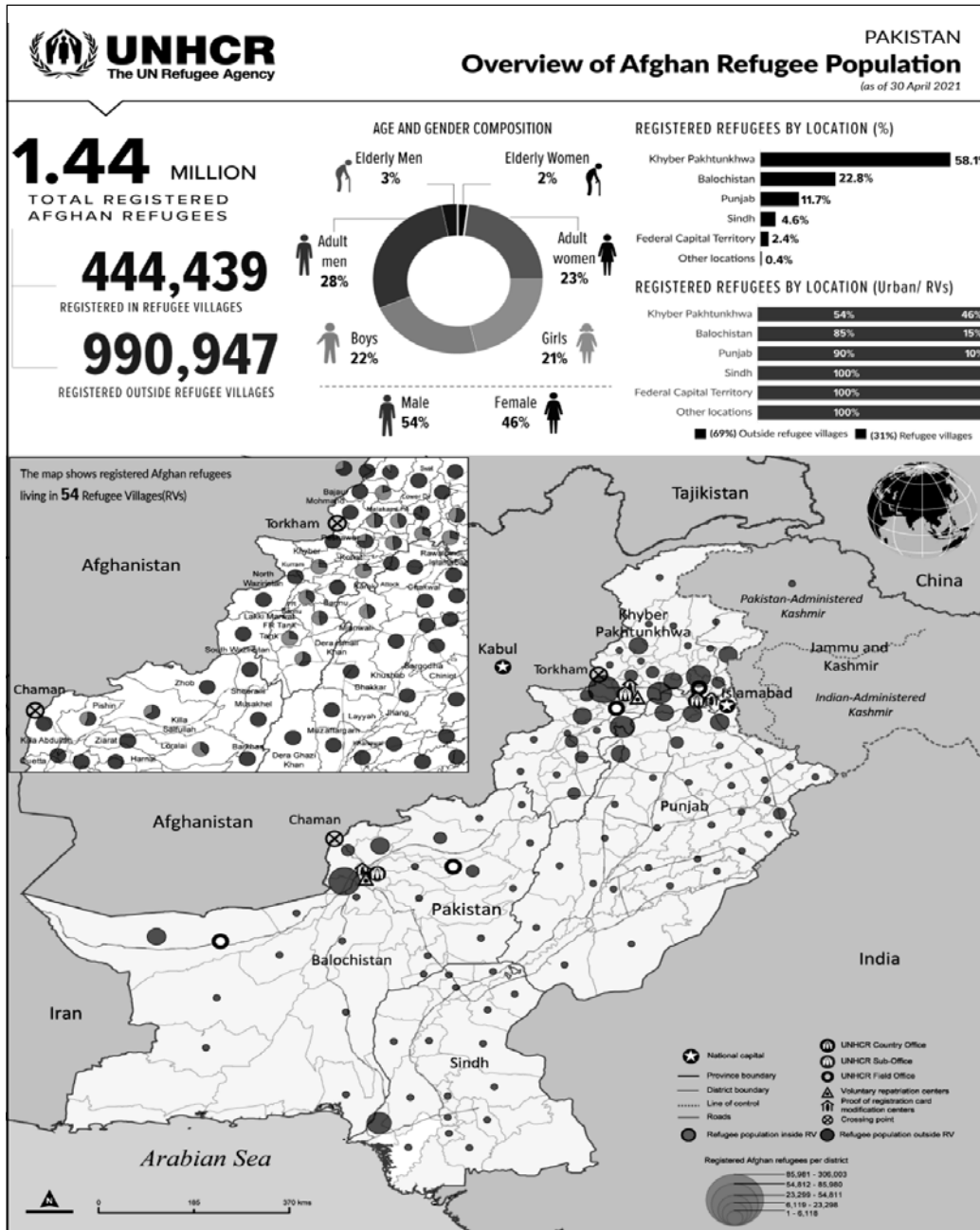
Source: National Geographic³

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is a militant group formed in 2007 as an umbrella organisation for various militant groups operating in Pakistan's tribal areas. The group's primary goal is to overthrow the Pakistani government and establish an Islamic state in Pakistan. The TTP has been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks in Pakistan, targeting both civilians and the security forces. After the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan claims that the TTP could use Afghanistan as a haven to launch attacks on Pakistan. Pakistan claims that the TTP has safe havens in Afghanistan. The Taliban has released hundreds of TTP operatives from jail, including the group's deputy leader, Maulvi Faqir Mohammad. Mohammad has since vowed to impose Sharia in Pakistan.⁴

Pakistan's political leadership has sharpened its criticism of the new Taliban regime at international forums. In late September 2022, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, speaking at the United Nations General Assembly, urged the international community to remain engaged with the Afghan Taliban due to the presence of banned terrorist groups such as ISIL-K, TTP, East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Al-Qaeda on Afghan soil.⁵ In response to Pakistan's allegation, a Taliban leader charged that Islamabad was "receiving millions of dollars" from Washington to allow American drones to conduct flights over Afghanistan. "How long can we tolerate this?" he asked a gathering in Kabul. "If we rise against this, no one will be able to stop us," he added.⁶ The relationship between Pakistan and the new Taliban regime has not only soured but is on the verge of collapse. Given the internal political turmoil in Pakistan and the economic crisis, the Taliban regime may attempt to settle the border dispute based on Pashtun ethnicity by tacitly supporting the TTP to wage an insurgency with the Pakistan Army.

The refugee crisis is also a major issue between Pakistan and the Taliban. After the Taliban takeover, a large number of Afghan refugees fled to neighbouring countries, including Pakistan. Pakistan hosts more than 1.4 million registered Afghans who have fled their homes⁷, which has put a strain on its resources and created tensions between the two countries. The Afghan government has accused Pakistan of not doing enough to support the refugees and failing to provide adequate assistance. According to the latest United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report, between January 2021 and February 2022, there were 117,547 new arrivals from Afghanistan in Pakistan, with a peak of 35,289 persons in August 2021.⁸ Pakistan has also changed its policy

Figure 2



Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)¹³

towards Afghan refugees. It has fenced almost 90 percent of its border with Afghanistan, covering almost 2,611 kms along the Durand Line since 2017.⁹ The remaining 10 percent at the key Torkham border crossing will be completed soon. Though the Pakistan army claims that the intention is to prevent cross-border militant attacks,¹⁰ the Taliban sees fencing as a permanent structure to divide the Pashtun community. In December 2021, the Taliban forces destroyed the barbed wire on the Durand line in the Gushta district in the eastern province of Nangarhar.¹¹ Furthermore, the newly appointed Taliban General Directorate of Intelligence of Nangarhar province, Bashir, warned the Pakistani forces by saying that “next time if you look at Afghanistan, I will come and make this area ... my frontline to wage war with you. I swear by Allah that waging war with you makes me happier than waging war with Jews.”¹² This reflects the Taliban’s aggressive posture on the border issue with Pakistan and relations are likely to remain a major military flashpoint.

Of the 1.44 million registered Afghan refugees, 54 percent were male and 46 percent female. They are sheltered in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region and in the Balochistan province (Figure 2). It is interesting to note that in these two provinces the TTP is quite strong and active, and the refugees would become major political fodder for TTP cadres.

Water has been another point of tension between the two countries, with Pakistan accusing Afghanistan of building dams on the Kabul River that could reduce the flow of water into Pakistan. This has led to concerns in Pakistan about the impact on its agriculture and the availability of water for drinking and irrigation. The water dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the Kabul River has been simmering and could have widespread ramifications as no water agreement exists between upper riparian Afghanistan and lower riparian Pakistan, despite the two countries sharing nine big and small rivers.¹⁴ Pakistan fears that an adverse relationship with Afghanistan may give an option to the new Taliban regime to use water as a weapon to leverage the outcome.

Islamic State–Khorasan Province and Taliban Armed Tussle

The rise of ISKP as a challenger to the Taliban is a new threat that has emerged in the region. ISKP is an offshoot of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that is active in the so-called Khorasan region, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of

Central Asia. ISKP has been active in Afghanistan since 2015, and it has been involved in several high-profile attacks, including a suicide bombing at a wedding in Kabul in 2019 that killed more than 60 people. The group has been able to attract disaffected Taliban members and other militants who are unhappy with the Taliban's control of Afghanistan. The Taliban has been engaged in an armed struggle with ISKP, and has been conducting operations against the group to suppress its activities. The emergence of ISKP poses a threat to regional security as well, as the group has demonstrated the ability to carry out attacks beyond Afghanistan. The group has been involved in attacks in Afghanistan, and has been linked to terrorist plots in other countries, including the United States. In response to the threat posed by ISKP, the international community has been working with the Afghan government and the Taliban to address the issue. The US has a security interest in preventing ISKP from turning Afghanistan into a hub for international terrorism, and it might be forced to support the Taliban to prevent this¹⁵, and the Taliban has also been engaged in efforts to suppress the group's activities.

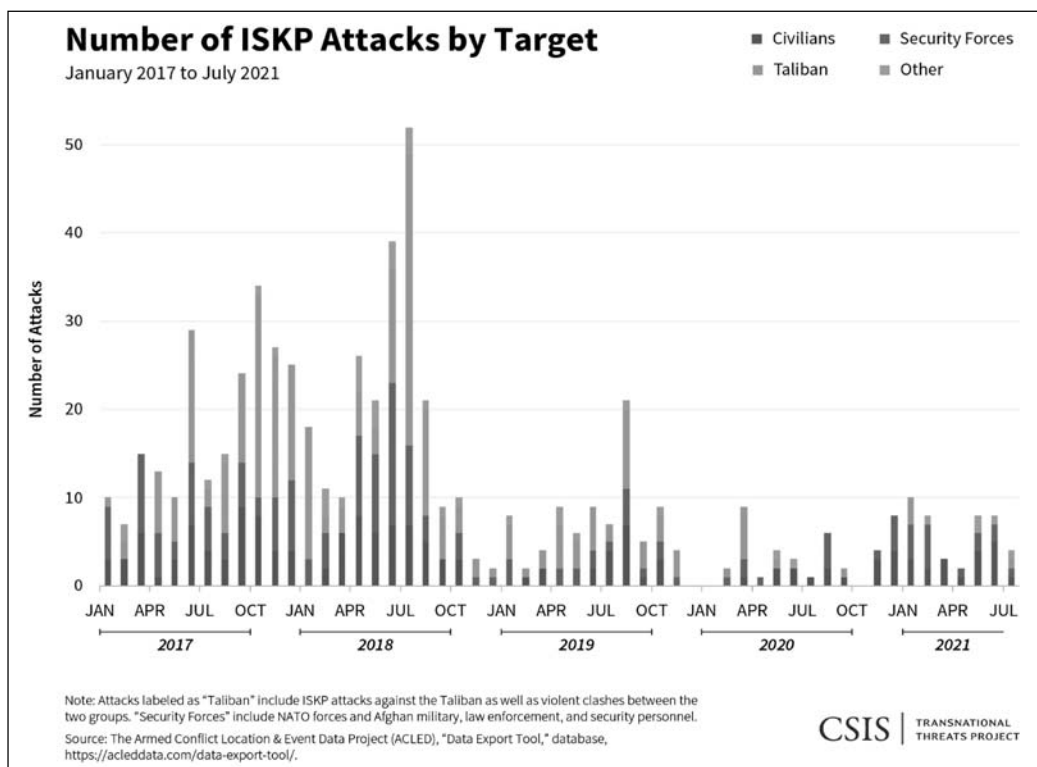
The rise of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) as a challenger to the Taliban is a new threat that has emerged in the region.

Why is the ISKP engaged in an armed power struggle with the Taliban in Afghanistan? The ISKP is a regional offshoot of the global terror outfit ISIS¹⁶ whose aim is to establish Islamic Caliphate in the 'Khorasan' province. They have ideological differences with the Taliban. ISKP subscribes to Salafist Jihadist ideology to bring together the Islamic countries in Central and South Asia whereas Taliban ideology is rooted in the Deobandi sect of Islam that follows Imam Abu Hanifa for jurisprudence. Most of the cadres of ISKP were drawn from TTP, Al Qaeda and other local militant groups. ISKP does not believe in nationalism or modern nation states, which the new Taliban regime has embraced to rule Afghanistan. There are two primary reasons why ISKP is waging war against the new Taliban regime. First, they do not recognise the Taliban's regime that seeks recognition from the western powers. Second, ISKP does not want to have an Islamic Emirate within the Caliphate. Though the scale of the ISKP challenge to the Taliban is nowhere near the challenge that the Taliban posed to the earlier Kabul government, the threat remains substantial and weakens the Taliban's control over the national territory.¹⁷

The ISKP's threat to regional security remains unchanged due to its presence in the virtual world of the darknet and social media. A United Nations Security Council

(UNSC) report released in June assesses that the ISKP has a core group of approximately 1,500 to 2,200 fighters in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces but has been forced to decentralise. Currently, the group primarily operates through cells and small units across the country, active autonomously.¹⁸ Most of the fighters are not trained adequately but are capable of executing high-impact IED blasts on key targets. With the reduction in international counterterrorism pressure, ISKP’s recruitment pipeline could prove sufficient to inject a much-needed fighter pool into ISKP’s ranks, cement the group’s durability, and increase violence levels.¹⁹ But, the Taliban’s growing military presence and heightened vigil on terrorist outfits like ISKP operating from Afghan soil would deter the ISKP from growing exponentially. The Taliban has to honour its commitment to the international community to not allow its territory to be used by any terrorist organisation. The ISKP, however, has been involved in targeting foreigners, including attacks on Chinese, Indians, Central Asians and Pakistanis in the past.

Figure 3



Source: CSIS Report²⁰

The figure-3 shows that the number of attacks by the ISKP in the pre-Taliban 2.0 era was largely against the Taliban, despite the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) counter-terrorism grid. However, the attacks gradually receded from 2020 to 2021 during the pandemic period, when Taliban forces gained the upper hand against the security forces. In the post-Taliban takeover, ISKP appeared to have lost its organisational capacity and resources to carry out its attacks in and around Afghanistan. The number of ISKP militants in Afghanistan is estimated at around 4,000, which is relatively small but a growing number of former members of Afghanistan's intelligence service and elite military units have reportedly joined ISKP to resist the Taliban.²¹ ISKP has the potential to increase violence and instability in Afghanistan and pose a threat to regional security. All stakeholders in the region need to work together to address the issue and prevent the group from gaining a foothold in the country.

Since the Taliban took over, the ISKP has repeatedly attacked Hazaras, Shias, Sikhs and other religious minorities at their mosques, schools, and workplaces.²² The international community is very much concerned about the ISKP attacks against religious minorities and blames the Taliban authority for not doing enough to end it. Since 2021, there have been more than 200 deadly attacks against Hazaras and other minorities leaving more than 1,000 dead and injured. Under pressure from the international community, the Taliban's Ministry of Interior stated that: "As a responsible system, we have the responsibility to protect the lives of all Afghan citizens, especially the religious minorities of the country, and to take their security seriously."²³

ISKP's increased activities explicitly undermine the Taliban's commitment to the international community that Afghanistan will not harbour any terrorist groups capable of launching attacks against any country.²⁴ Does the ISKP pose a threat to India's National Security? The answer is yes. ISKP has been active through social media to recruit their cadres from India. ISKP has been making attempts to recruit Indians for the past few years and the outfit comprises mainly former cadres of the Pakistan-based banned outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).²⁵ In July 2022, India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) busted ISKP modules and conducted searches in six States (provinces), including at Batkal in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Bihar, and Maharashtra, and found incriminating evidence.²⁶

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According to Indian intelligence agencies, contrary to the common perception that the ISKP is an extended arm of the Islamic State, it has also become a front of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and is under the complete control of the ISI.²⁷ It has a strong presence on social media and continues to attract youths from Kashmir and Southern states, especially from Kerala and Northern Karnataka. Though there have been no major attacks perpetrated in India so far, it has attracted former Indian Mujahedeen cadres and well-educated Indian Muslim youth to join the global jihad to establish the Caliphate.²⁸ According to the Islamic State-Khorasan Province's mouthpiece *Voice of Khurasan*, an Indian-origin member of ISKP died fighting in Afghanistan. It shared his identity by his adopted name, Najeeb Al Hindi, and described him as a 23-year-old "engineering (M.Tech) student from Kerala."²⁹ As far as Jammu and Kashmir is concerned, there have been incidents of youths displaying the ISIS flag in the past but it does not have a strong presence or attraction for the youth of Kashmir. However, it continues to engage in online propaganda to radicalise the Kashmiri youth. For India, ISKP is quite active in the social media for radicalising Indian Muslim youths and recruit them to fight on foreign soil. But, the fact that ISKP is controlled by Pakistan's ISI is alarming as ISKP cadres, possibly from Kerala, recruited through social media platforms can be sent to Kashmir and other States to fight along with LeT and other terrorist groups.

Domestic Issues and Concerns of the New Taliban Regime

The economic situation in Afghanistan has been severely impacted since the Taliban took control in 2021. It has also led to a significant reduction in foreign aid and investment, which has harmed infrastructure development in the country. The lack of investment in critical areas such as transportation, energy, and communication infrastructure has further worsened the economic situation in the country.

The country's already fragile economy has been further weakened by the ongoing conflict and instability. Unemployment and poverty levels have soared, with many businesses and industries disrupted or shut down due to the internal conflict and the Taliban's takeover. The Afghan currency has also depreciated rapidly, causing further hardship for ordinary citizens. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, "around 700,000 jobs have vanished since past year threatening a population reeling from impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict, drought, and war in Ukraine."³⁰ The Taliban administration has been running the economy without strong

financial assets since the Biden administration seized \$7 billion of Afghanistan's central bank reserves two years ago.³¹ However, nearly half of the funds were set aside for 9/11 victims and today only \$3.5 billion remains frozen in the Swiss account. Taliban has been accusing the US of not releasing the funds to the people of Afghanistan to meet their basic needs. Taliban is also adding woes to its contracting economy by banning girls from attending schools and colleges. Critical infrastructure, such as the health sector in Afghanistan has been severely impacted, with the ongoing conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating an already strained healthcare system. The Taliban's takeover has led to a disruption in healthcare services, with many hospitals and clinics closed or facing severe shortages of medicines and supplies.

The situation in Afghanistan is dire, with millions of people facing extreme poverty, unemployment, and limited access to healthcare and other essential services.

The situation in Afghanistan is dire, with millions of people facing extreme poverty, unemployment, and limited access to healthcare and other essential services. The international community has called on the Taliban to take urgent steps to address the humanitarian crisis and ensure the basic needs of the Afghan people are met. However, the Taliban's actions so far suggest that it may be difficult to achieve significant improvements in the country's economic and social conditions.

Afghanistan is facing a very difficult economic situation. The external funding support has been almost nil, which has forced the Taliban regime to shift to a survival mode by depending on the agricultural sector. Most of the people who were employed in service and allied sectors in the urban areas working for western countries and international agencies have become unemployed. According to a Gallup survey, 92 percent think it's a bad time to find a job and 86 percent have even found it difficult to afford food.³² Afghan people's perceptions of their local economy show (as in Figure 4) that 90 percent believe that their economy is getting worse under Taliban's rule. One of the reasons for this widespread disenchantment with the Taliban's governance model is that many have lost employment opportunities directly or indirectly from the international agencies and western forces stationed there for two decades.

With rising unemployment and inflation, the Taliban government is desperately looking for international funds to flow in to revive the economy. The Russia-Ukraine

war shifted the western powers' focus towards Europe and the Taliban regime is looking towards regional players such as India to invest in the private sector and urban infrastructure projects to generate more jobs.³³ Besides India, China, Japan and Korea were also invited by the Taliban to invest in its mineral resources. However, the impact of their investments on the Afghan economy is likely to be felt in the longer run. India has been sending food, medicine and other essential items as part of its humanitarian efforts to save Afghan life without expecting any quid pro quo from the Taliban regime. India is seen as the benign neighbour of Afghanistan by the new Taliban regime.

Figure 4



India and the New Taliban Regime

India's Afghan policy has been consistent since the War on Terror campaign that ousted the Taliban from power in 2002. India's policy was aimed at helping the Afghan people with basic amenities such as health, education and food. India did not interfere in the domestic politics of Afghanistan, but often reiterated that it does not want Afghanistan to become a haven for terrorist organisations inimical to India's national security. As a result, India enjoys 'goodwill' among the people of Afghanistan and even the erstwhile Taliban commanders have appreciated India's humanitarian efforts and support over the past twenty years. This has irked Pakistan, especially the ISI, which continues to seek strategic depth in Afghanistan.

Two incidents shaped India's Afghan policy in the post-Osama bin-Laden death phase. First, the US decision to withdraw its forces, including NATO-led forces by 2014. President Obama announced the withdrawal plan in 2011 after concluding "Operation Enduring Freedom." India reacted in a subtle way that the US withdrawal may lead to a security crisis in Afghanistan. But, since the nature of the scope of US withdrawal was not clear, regional powers, including India, adopted the policy of wait and watch. India felt that the presence of Western forces in Afghanistan provided a sort of security cover or guarantee under which India was able to execute many developmental projects including the construction of the Parliament building for the people of Afghanistan. It was also the time that Indian policymakers began to think about charting a new Afghan policy that would secure India's bare minimum security interests of having a 'favourable government' in place in Kabul.

Second, following the controversial 2014 elections, Ashraf Ghani was declared the winner, though Abdullah Abdullah appeared to be an equal contender in terms of votes. International analysts concurred that the election results were manipulated against the spirit of electoral democracy. Abdullah Abdullah was seen as a close friend of India. This reduced India's role in establishing a democratically elected popular government that would ensure the stability and security of the country in the future. Again, India's Afghan policy, especially its role in supporting or backing the government, also witnessed a change towards a people-centric approach. The new government in New Delhi in 2014 led by Prime Minister Modi and his new team saw Afghanistan policy as an extension of its new Pakistan policy, i.e., zero tolerance for terrorism and extremism with impact on India.

After 2014, India's role in Afghanistan became cautious. At the same time, New Delhi started weighing all options to engage with any type of new government in Afghanistan that had international support and patronage. When Trump announced the negotiations and talks with the so-called new Taliban in their office in Qatar, New Delhi was also preparing to engage with the new Taliban leaders using its old contacts and back-channel diplomacy. However, there were no formal official interactions or dialogue. The Taliban was also very sensitive to India's concerns and interests and New Delhi was seen as a regional stabilizer rather than a potential disrupter of peace and stability. Even during COVID-19, India continued its humanitarian support to the people of Afghanistan.

According to an official statement of the Ministry of External Affairs after a Joint Secretary visit to Kabul in June 2022, "India has sent humanitarian assistance consisting of 20,000 million tons of wheat, 13 tons of medicines, 500,000 doses of COVID Vaccine and winter clothing besides gifting one million doses of India-made COVAXIN to Iran to administer to Afghan refugees in Iran. India also assisted UNICEF by supplying almost 60 million doses of polio vaccine and two tons of essential medicines. The Secretary also met the senior members of the Taliban and held discussions on India's humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan."³⁴ However, the first-ever meeting with the Taliban leadership took place in August 2021 when the Indian Ambassador to Qatar held talks with the Taliban leader Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the head of the Taliban's political office, in Doha immediately after the Taliban took over Kabul.³⁵ It is to be mentioned that Stanikzai had attended military training in an Indian military academy way back in 1989 and he expressed the Taliban's new regime's desire to continue the political and economic relationship with New Delhi, which had by then invested almost \$3bn in various projects in Afghanistan. It appears that the Taliban and New Delhi have taken a pragmatic approach to reset their relationship.

What does India expect from the New Taliban regime? India also trained Afghan military personnel. They have been sent back to Kabul after an agreement with the new regime that ensures they would be accommodated in the Taliban's new military.³⁶ Furthermore, the acting Defence Minister Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob has also "expressed his intent to send army personnel to get training in India."³⁷ All these developments are happening despite India has not yet officially recognised the Taliban. Taliban wants to develop a special relationship with India by de-coupling Pakistan. India's Afghan policy

2.0 is significantly driven by geopolitical factors such as rising Chinese influence in the region under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the deepening China-Pakistan geostrategic nexus. Moreover, Afghanistan could be a gateway to Central Asia for India to access energy resources and enhance trade through the Chabahar port in Iran. India will avoid any passage through Pakistan when it comes to strategic energy routes, due to security reasons. Interestingly, India has so far not shown any inclination to support or back a New Northern Alliance that would militarily challenge the Taliban. Amb. G. Parthasarathy, former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, cautioned that “New Delhi should move ahead cautiously till it receives categorical and verifiable assurances that Afghan soil and weapons the Taliban have captured will not be used to promote terrorism in India.”³⁸ Since there is no clarity on how the western countries are planning to engage with the Taliban’s new regime even after a year, India should continue its engagement with the Taliban leaders and other stakeholders without bandwagoning with the West, including the US. It should factor the regional dynamics into its new Afghan policy that would assert India’s humanitarian and strategic goals in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan’s efforts to undermine India’s relationship with the new Taliban need to be addressed promptly and effectively to avoid any backlash as it happened in the past.

India’s Afghan policy 2.0 is significantly driven by geopolitical factors such as rising Chinese influence in the region and the deepening China-Pakistan geostrategic nexus.

India has taken the regional leadership role to bring stability and security to Afghanistan. Within months after the Taliban takeover, India’s National Security Advisor (NSA) hosted a “Delhi Regional Dialogue on Afghanistan” in November 2021 in New Delhi. This dialogue focused on the concerns of regional players such as India, Russia, Iran and the Central Asian countries over the humanitarian crisis, the fragile economic conditions and dismal security situations in Afghanistan. The dialogue reiterated their commitments to support “an inclusive government; a zero-tolerance stance about Afghan territory being used by terrorist groups; a strategy to counter trafficking of drugs and arms from Afghanistan; and addressing the increasingly critical humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.”³⁹ The deputy spokesman of the Taliban’s Foreign Ministry, Inamullah Samangani welcomed the Delhi Regional Dialogue and appreciated India’s efforts to bring the regional players together to help foster a better future for Afghanistan. He assured that “we are trying to take solid steps in governance, and countries should not

be worried about Afghanistan soil being used against anyone.”⁴⁰ Interestingly, China and Pakistan refused to attend the meeting. Taliban was not invited to the dialogue since they were not recognised by the international community as yet. But China has communicated that it will be unable to attend the conclave because of scheduling issues.⁴¹ Nevertheless, India under the strategic vision of Prime Minister Modi and the NSA Advisor Ajit Doval is relentlessly pursuing a regional strategy for peace and security in Afghanistan. In a recent visit to Moscow for a one-to-one meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, amidst the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, Doval pledged that India would “never abandon the Afghan people in their time of need.”⁴²

The Taliban has learned to live with the evolving global political reality of power politics. Unlike in the past, the Taliban’s desperate effort to seek international recognition for formal interaction with the international community could fructify sooner than later. The Ukraine crisis has brought the superpower rivalry to the centre stage of world politics. Though there is no immediate prospect of the global order descending into a bipolar sort of Cold War, there seem to be some signs that indicate that the present order is fragile and conflict between states may erupt anytime from anywhere. The post-Ukraine crisis has triggered a global power realignment that has a cascading effect on regional geopolitical realignments.

The international focus is currently on Ukraine, Eastern Europe and Russia, and the Indo-Pacific, especially around the Taiwan Strait. It is a blessing in disguise for the new Taliban regime, which has been consistently the target of western media focus. The recent killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of Al Qaeda Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) has exposed the Taliban’s double standard in bluffing the international community about its assurances that it would not provide any space for a terrorist organisation in Afghanistan. The incident is a setback for the Taliban’s effort to get international recognition. At the same time, there are possibilities that the US may re-allot its strategic resources to focus on Afghanistan so that it will not fall in the Russia-China axis. The Taliban has spent considerable amounts of their resources in consolidating the territory and extending their writ to every part of the country. But they are running out of resources to run the country and provide the basic amenities to the citizens. The US has frozen Afghanistan’s assets and is unwilling to release those funds to be accessed by the present regime. The US has linked the release of those assets and its support for international financial assistance and investments to the adherence of human rights

and women's rights by the Taliban. The US is closely monitoring the Taliban leadership for its commitment to the peace deal and not allowing any international terrorist organisation or group to operate in Afghanistan against Western interests.

Conclusion

The one year of Taliban rule has brought huge troubles to the Afghan people in terms of economic collapse and suppression of women's rights. The international community, currently preoccupied with the nature and course of the Russia-Ukraine war, is very critical of the Taliban's policy towards women, especially denying their universal right to education and employment. Given this context, four possible scenarios are emerging at the regional level. First, the deepening China-Pakistan strategic nexus under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) rubric; Second, the revival of the US-Russia classic security competition at the systemic level; Third, reforms in political Islam in the Arabian Peninsula; Last, the rise of India as a global economic powerhouse. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan without any contingency plan to oversee and manage the Taliban takeover has exposed the West's political insipidity and has helped China to reassert its 'rising China, declining US narrative'. China seeks to play a significant role in Afghanistan post-US withdrawal and is willing to support the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) with financial and economic support by extending the CPEC projects to Afghanistan. The goal is to transform CPEC into China's Af-Pak Economic Corridor (CAPEC). Given the Chinese companies' track record of shady negotiations and deals that have resulted in steep debts for small states in the region, India may gain greater significance as a regional player. For the Taliban, this would be a better option to escape from the clutches of the big powers for financial aid and support. China also wants the Taliban's support to control the Uyghur Muslim population in Xinjiang province under its *Hanisation* process.

The Ukraine conflict has revived the classic US-Russia Cold War type of crisis. It is to be mentioned that Afghanistan, especially the Taliban, played a crucial role in the defeat of the USSR during the Cold War. The US military strategist may rethink the relevance of the Taliban in Afghanistan as a force multiplier against a resurgent Russia. This will intensify the geopolitical competition to establish supremacy over Afghanistan. Interestingly, China, seen as part of Russia's influence, is also in the fray for making deep inroads into Central Asia and Afghanistan. China can be a more effective player as

compared to the US or Russia because of its strong nexus with the Pakistan army and the deep state. Plus, China has the necessary capital to invest in Afghanistan which would lure the financially troubled Afghan administration to strengthen its strategic partnership with China. This would be a major setback for the US as well as the Western powers. Taliban leadership is most likely to be part of the China-Pakistan-Russia axis if the US and Western powers delay recognising the IEA. India has already opened its embassy in Kabul with limited staff but it's a positive beginning.

Political Islam is undergoing rapid reform and transformation after Saudi Arabia introduced more liberal policies such as women being given greater rights. Women are up in arms against the religious clergy's restrictions even in Iran, which is facing a wave of protests against the stringent policies issued by the clergy. Protests have also become common in Afghanistan where hundreds and thousands of women have come out to the streets to fight against the Taliban's dictum and social prohibition. The wider changes taking place in the Islamic states may put the Taliban on a path to relax their strict and conservative norms and rules regarding the basic rights of women. In the coming years, the protests for women's rights are likely to grow if the Taliban does not accommodate their rights into their policies.

Finally, the rise of India in the coming decade and as an economic and global manufacturing hub would pose a strong counter to the China-Pakistan axis. Most businessmen in Afghanistan are likely to trust Indian goods rather than the Chinese, given the negative image China has established in the Pakistan market. India's investments are widely welcomed by the locals in Afghanistan since it's more transparent and accommodative as compared to China's. If India scales up its investments in the critical sectors of energy and transport to get access to Central Asia through Iran and Afghanistan, it may be a game changer for India as well as the IEA. New Delhi needs to create a consortium of Indian industries or corporations who could be potential investors in Afghanistan minerals, pipelines and road and rail connectivity once diplomatic recognition takes place and there is greater stability in the country.

As of now the future looks bleak for the Taliban. The Ukraine crisis has not yet settled down and the US is distracted by its rising rivalries with Russia and China. The Taliban's relationship with the rest of the world is, however, quietly improving and most countries are not concerned about who rules Afghanistan as long as they do not export terrorism to the rest of the world. What remains to be seen is the impact of the

US-Russia rivalry, China's strategic role in the region and its loan driven projects in the poor and developing countries. The outcomes would make a difference in the Taliban's choice of friends, partners and foes. For India, a more stable and peaceful Afghanistan could serve as a land bridge through Iran to connect with Central Asia and beyond for trade and accessing energy resources. Given the worsening situation along the Af-Pak border and rising terrorism in Pakistan, the Taliban may see their prospects for development and international acceptability as most desirable in strengthening ties with India rather than the Western powers or China.

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