



Afghanistan, the Various Dimensions

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POLICY BRIEF

Afghanistan is a landlocked country bordered by Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to the North.¹ The country has mineral deposits worth US\$ 1 trillion.² Afghanistan also produces around 90 tonnes of heroin yearly.³ The drug is trafficked to Central Asia, Russia and other regions.⁴ With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the geopolitical developments at regional front offer a new trend of connectivity. Afghanistan is seen as a link between Central and South Asia.

Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan is a fait accompli phenomenon; it reflects the mindset of the country rooted in tribal culture, the essence of which lies in the 'Pashtun Wali Code of Conduct'. The code identifies revenge (Badal), honour (Ghairit) and hospitality (Melmasty) as the pillars of Afghan society.⁵ Internationally, Taliban's victory has led to a mixed reaction. Some look at it as an optimistic development and an end to occupation. While, there are others who see the evolving situation in Afghanistan as catastrophic challenge. The country's fragile economy, war-torn infrastructure and poor medical facilities portray a bleak picture.

Militarily strong politically vulnerable Taliban have a lot of catching up to do. At present they are struggling to overcome organizational differences in the formation of government.⁶ Governance appears to be a major challenge to Afghanistan's stability,

¹ "Central Asia and Afghanistan: A Tumultuous History," *Stratfor*, September 24, 2013, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/central-asia-and-afghanistan-tumultuous-history>.

² Dong Xing, "The Taliban is persuading China to invest in Afghanistan, but it is not an easy task," *ABC News*, August 29, 2021, accessed September 26, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-29/the-taliban-trying-to-persuade-china-to-invest-in-afghanistan/100408696>.

³ Nabila Jaffer, "The First Enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications," *Regional Studies* XXXIV, no. 2 (2016): 79.

⁴ Muhammad Ihsan Qasir and Sair ur Rehman, "Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity," *Journal of Political Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 117, accessed September 22, 2021, http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/pols/pdffiles/8%20-%20IHSAN%20-%20SAIF_v23_1_16.pdf.

⁵ Asif Durrani, "Role of Pashtunwali in Taliban's Return," *CGTN*, August 25, 2021, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-08-25/Role-of-Pashtunwali-in-Taliban-s-return-12Zq8vJXneE/index.html>.

⁶ Daud Khattak, "Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Europe's Role in Afghanistan," Panel Discussion, Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA), *Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI)*, September 16, 2021, Webinar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz8pEWg6REk>.

especially when the country faces internal fissures due to ethnic divide and external pressure because of Taliban's human rights record. On the security front, Taliban have given the assurance that the Afghan soil will not be used for any terrorist activity.⁷ This is a positive move for the region's peace.

The presence of IS-KP (Islamic State Khorasan Province) in Afghanistan is a threat to Afghanistan as well as the region. The terrorist outfit comprises breakaway factions from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), some affiliates of Afghan Taliban, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. To counter the IS-KP in its entirety, unity within the various Taliban factions is a must. There are around 600 Al-Qaeda operatives and around 2000 IS-KP militants in Afghanistan. The elephant in the room is around 7000 TTP militants. These militants in the past have been helping Afghan Taliban and hence expect the same from them. The Taliban group led by Abdul Ghani Baradar and his companions called as 'Doha group' has been opposed to terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. The second category of Taliban are called as 'Old Guard group'. The group is led by Hibatullah and Haqqanis. While, the third category of the Taliban comprise organized crime syndicates. The group finances the Afghan Taliban and is also involved in drug trafficking. The Fourth and last category of Taliban are foot soldiers. They are a new generation of insurgents who are unemployed and frustrated.⁸ The political outlook of various Taliban groups places them differently on terrorism map. This might prove to be a challenge to the Taliban government in encountering the IS-KP threat.

The Taliban by re-opening of schools and by allowing women to work, have presented themselves as a changed version to the global audience. To have a wider acceptability at national level, the Taliban will have to engage with all the Afghan factions, including ethnic and religious minorities of the country. In addition, the inclusion of opposition

⁷ Taliban have reassured won't allow TTP to use Afghan soil against Pakistan: Sheikh Rashid, *Dawn*, August 23, 2021, accessed September 25, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1642195>.

⁸ Dr. Hassan Abbas, "Gauging Terrorism Threats in Post-withdrawal Afghanistan & Implications for Pakistan: Future Scenarios," Lecture Series, *Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI)*, September 17, 2021, Webinar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tU9SWjYi-N4>.

members in the cabinet will reflect Taliban's mindset towards future political dispensation. In addition to above the women participation in politics would be essential to promote the image of Afghanistan as a moderate society. The newly announced cabinet lacks women representation⁹ though the Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has said that "women might be added later."¹⁰ The women journalists are sitting at home which is another concern that Taliban need to address.¹¹ The West's concerns over women rights and freedom of speech might lead to cuts in aid to Afghanistan¹² and in worst-case scenario the country might have to face diplomatic isolation. While at the domestic front, it might instigate a debate within the various Taliban groups, the challenge for the Taliban government would be to have a balanced foreign policy supported by all the Taliban groups at home. To mould the mentality of the field commanders would be a daunting task for the Taliban government. Besides, the government will also need to ensure that no Taliban joins the IS-KP ranks.¹³

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is being projected as a military win. The Taliban, no doubt, are a military force but their capture of Kabul is not an absolute military victory rather it had the political support of the locals. Seeing Taliban's takeover from an international perspective, the emirate model government in Afghanistan is in contrast to Western style democracy. Besides, Taliban's rule brings an end to 9/11 era. These connotations project Taliban negatively in Western circles which, in turn will make it more difficult to muster economic support from global partners. Another angle likely to weaken Afghanistan's case for financial assistance is the Taliban's past. According to Mr Graeme Smith, Former Consultant, Crisis Group Afghanistan, *"the Taliban who once blew the foreign buildings are now asking for funding from foreign donors. It puts the policy makers*

⁹ Amina Khan, "Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Europe's Role in Afghanistan," Panel Discussion, Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA), *Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI)*, September 16, 2021, Webinar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz8pEWg6REk>.

¹⁰ Taliban Expand Interim Cabinet, Double Down on All-Male Team," *Dawn*, September 21, 2021, accessed September 23, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1647593>.

¹¹ Khattak, "Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process."

¹² Graeme Smith, "Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Europe's Role in Afghanistan," Panel Discussion, Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA), *Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI)*, September 16, 2021, Webinar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz8pEWg6REk>.

¹³ Abbas, "Gauging Terrorism Threats in Post-withdrawal Afghanistan."

*in awkward position to fund the Taliban led offices.”*¹⁴ Thus, the Taliban control of Afghanistan will constrict the flow of aid.

The Taliban pledge to counter terrorism is a positive move that might promote their image internationally. However, the Taliban might not be accepted as part of an international ‘Counter Terrorism Framework’ on the plea that the Taliban had opposed the US / NATO coalition in Afghanistan.¹⁵

With the Taliban control of Afghanistan, the regional countries’ political orientation towards Kabul has changed. The Indian Embassy in Kabul and consulates in Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad and Mazar-i-Sharif have been closed.¹⁶ It signals that for the time being India will no longer have a free hand in Afghanistan. Former Afghan Prime Minister and Hizb-i-Islami Chief Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has aptly remarked that “India (should) not to fight Kashmir war from Afghan soil.”¹⁷

On China’s role in Afghanistan, Taliban have invited China for investment. The Taliban spokesperson Sohail Shaheen told China’s state-run national broadcaster CGTN that China could “play an important role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.”¹⁸ China has investments in Afghanistan in the mining, oil, and gas sectors (US\$ 3 billion in Aynak copper mine, Logar province in East, and US\$ 700 million oil and gas exploration in Sar-e-Pol and Faryab provinces in North).¹⁹ Between 2019 and 2020, Afghanistan’s exports to China stood at US\$ 55.3 million while the imports totaled US\$ 986.5 million.²⁰

¹⁴ Smith, “Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process.”

¹⁵ Khattak, “Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process.”

¹⁶ Afghanistan: Taliban searched closed Indian consulates in Kandahar, Herat, *Business Standard*, August 20, 2021, accessed September 26, 2021, http://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/afghanistan-taliban-searched-closed-indian-consulates-in-kandahar-herat-121082000508_1.html.

¹⁷ Hekmatyar asks India not to Meddle in Afghan Affairs, *Dawn*, August 23, 2021, accessed September 26, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1642085>.

¹⁸ Dong Xing, “The Taliban is persuading China to invest in Afghanistan, but it is not an easy task,” *ABC News*, August 29, 2021, accessed September 26, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-29/the-taliban-trying-to-persuade-china-to-invest-in-afghanistan/100408696>.

¹⁹ Salman Rafi Sheikh, “Afghan Peace Talks must be All Inclusive,” *Asia Times*, February 4, 2016, accessed September 20, 2021, <http://www.atimes.com/article/afghan-peace-talks-must-be-all-inclusive/>.

²⁰ Xing, “The Taliban is persuading China to invest in Afghanistan.”

Professor Gu Xuewu, Director, Center for Global Studies, University of Bonn, Germany says, “China regards the extension of CPEC Westward into Afghanistan as the best way to integrate the country into the grand picture of the BRI.”²¹ The Central Asian Republics (CARs) can be linked with CPEC through the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor.²² The inter-regional connectivity will open up prospects of energy cooperation. The electric power from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan can be exported to Kabul and Northwest of Pakistan.²³ However, to fully implement the economic vision of connectivity, security in Afghanistan is a prerequisite.

As regards, Russia’s role in Afghanistan, Taliban extended an invitation to Russia for the inauguration ceremony of new government in Kabul (Russia did not attend the ceremony).²⁴ Taliban are still a banned organization in Russia. However, Russia being a neighbour to Afghanistan cannot remain aloof to the evolving developments. Russia’s prime concerns continue to be terrorism, drug trafficking and refugees. Russia conducts joint military exercises with CARs (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) along the Afghan border.²⁵ With Taliban in power in Afghanistan, Russia will have to undertake certain foreign policy changes. This will be required to communicate with the new government and strengthen efforts against the transnational challenges.

²¹ Xing, “The Taliban is persuading China to invest in Afghanistan.”

²² Shafei Moiz Hali, Tan Shukui and Sumera Iqbal, “One Belt and One Road: Impact on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor,” *Strategic Studies* 34 and 35, no. 4 and 1 (Winter 2014 and Summer 2015): 155, accessed September 22, 2021, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Shafei_Moiz_and_Tan_and_Sumera_3435_SS_41_20142015.pdf.

²³ Vafu Niyatbekov Alibekovick, “Power Projects of the Republic of Tajikistan as a Factor of Development of SCO,” in *SCO’s Role in Regional Stability: Prospects of its Expansion*, ed. Mushir Anwar (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute: 2013): 185, accessed September 25, 2021, <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/srse.pdf>.

²⁴ Will not take part in Taliban govt Inauguration Ceremony,” *The News Magazine*, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2021/09/11/will-not-take-part-taliban-govt-inauguration-ceremony-russia.html>.

²⁵ Dr Nigel Gould Davies, “Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Russia’s Role in Afghanistan,” Panel Discussion, Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA), *Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI)*, September 7, 2021, Webinar, <https://issi.org.pk/panel-discussion-on-conversations-on-the-afghan-peace-process-russias-role-in-afghanistan/>.

Role of SCO and Afghan Peace:

Afghanistan holds significance in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'s security calculus. The 'SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group' has been in place in Beijing since November 2005.²⁶ The structure within the SCO framework dealing with terrorism is called the 'Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS)', based in Tashkent.²⁷ RATS anti-terror operations, have prevented 250 terrorist attacks in SCO member states.²⁸ The SCO member states also conduct anti-trafficking exercises.²⁹ In line with the SCO charter to counter terrorism³⁰ and with upcoming energy / economic corridors the organization can play an instrumental role at regional level to promote peace in Afghanistan. Under the SCO platform, the collective border security arrangements, surveillance checks and intelligence sharing could be undertaken to minimize drug trade.³¹

SCO and CPEC can complement each other. SCO having member states – Russia, China, CARs, Pakistan and India and with Turkey (as dialogue partner) and Iran, Afghanistan as observers' is a platform that can discuss regional security issues. Whilst, CPEC is a regional connectivity project, trade to and from CARs is going to adopt the shortest route via Gwadar. Afghanistan shares a 2640 kilometres long border with Pakistan. Besides, the Chaman and Torkham crossing points, numerous other crossing points like the Dorah Pass, the Nawa Pass, Ghulam Khan, Wana, Kamber Ali Karez, Noshki and many others along the West link the country to Pakistan.³² Afghanistan can be a major beneficiary of the CPEC. Under CPEC, the Peshawar-Kabul motorway will enhance Afghanistan access to Arabian Sea and open up prospects of economic activities. Afghanistan will also be

²⁶ Syed Farooq Hasnat and Zamurad Awan, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding: Its Economic, Political and Security Potential," *Perceptions* XXI, no. 1 (2016): 92, accessed September 24, 2021, http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/perceptions_Spring2016183-100.pdf.

²⁷ Hasnat and Awan, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding," 92.

²⁸ Ishtiaq Ahmad, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China, Russia, and Regionalism in Central Asia" (paper presented at Inter-Asian Connections Conference, Social Sciences Research Council, Dubai, February 21-23, 2008), 4, accessed September 26, 2021, http://ishtiaqahmad.com/downloads/SCO_Dubai_Feb_08.pdf.

²⁹ Ahmad, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization," 4.

³⁰ Shanghai Cooperation Organization Charter, China- Kazakhstan- Kyrgyzstan- Russia-Tajikistan- Uzbekistan, June 15, 2001, accessed September 26, 2021, <http://people.unica.it/annamariabaldussi/files/2015/04/SCO-Charter.pdf>.

³¹ Jaffer, "The First Enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications," 79.

³² Lieutenant General Naeem Lodhi and Brigadier Abdul-Rehman Bilal, "Maximizing the Regional Potential of CPEC." Chapter 11 in CPEC A Precursor to Regional Economic Growth and Stability," Editor Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema, *China Studies and Information Center, Strategic Vision Institute (SVI), Islamabad*, 2019, 233.

connected to CPEC via Chaman through an additional link of the Western alignment, which originates from Gwadar, passes through Khuzdar, Zhob, D.I. Khan and reaches Islamabad.³³

Policy Recommendations

- Afghanistan's weak institutional framework and fragile economy are ground realities. These ground realities, if not dealt timely and left unattended, might push the Afghan population towards another conflict. In the post-withdrawal phase, international and regional efforts are needed for Afghanistan's reconstruction. The regional countries, in particular Pakistan, China and Russia need to coordinate efforts towards an economically empowered Afghanistan.
- The recognition of Taliban regime is essential so as to continue with the Afghan peace. Besides, the economic engagement with the newly formed political government is a must so as to avert civil war in the country and to stop massive migration.
- On terrorism front, the regional countries and the West need to adopt a unanimous political approach. In this regard, the Taliban concern against the US of drone attacks and air space violation needs to be addressed.
- The US interlocutors' concern over IS-KP and Al-Qaeda remnants in Afghanistan alongwith deliberate ignorance about TTP having strength of 7000 is a discriminatory approach. The regional and global actors need to redefine their policy approaches and look at TTP, ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) and IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) with the same prism as of Al-Qaeda.
- The US policy towards Afghanistan needs to be reviewed. The US in past has invested in people and not in institutions that is why the "democratization of Afghanistan" has failed.³⁴ In the present scenario, the imposition of sanctions on Taliban will affect the

³³ Khalid Manzoor Butt and Anam Abid Butt, "Impact of CPEC on Regional and Extra-Regional Actors," *Journal of Political Science XXXIII* (2015): 33, accessed September 22, 2021, <http://ps.gcu.edu.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Butt-Butt.pdf>.

³⁴ Faiz Zaland, "Conversations on the Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: US Role in Afghanistan," Panel Discussion, Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA), *Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI)*, September 28, 2021, Webinar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yylaiAXHge0>.

Afghan women and children, which in essence will be a stark violation of humanity. Thus, the US policy towards Afghanistan should be to communicate with the Taliban and through technical, and financial assistance help the new government.

- With the Taliban government in power, India, for the time being, has been dislocated from Afghanistan. However, to stop India from nurturing outfits like TTP, Pakistan needs to step up counter terrorism cooperation with the Taliban government. In this context, Pakistan can enhance the capacity of the Taliban to tackle the menace.
- Pakistan needs to improve ties with Afghanistan. For that the anti-Pakistan and anti-Afghan narrative in government circles should be tackled. In private, Pakistan may broach the issue of anti-Pakistan activities of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs with Afghan government.
- On the economic side, technical support should be provided to the Afghanistan's Central Bank. The Government of Pakistan may suggest credit line of rupees equivalent to US\$ 2 billion to Afghanistan to help its importers with the Taliban officials.
- Pakistan needs to take up the issue of anti-Pakistan propaganda with the new Afghan government. This is a must to stop the negative projection on social media. Alternatively, Pakistan should also devise means to counter anti-Pakistan propaganda.
- A pool of experts well versed in Afghan history, sociology, politics and economy to be created to engage with the present Afghan government both to act as an engagement forum as well as an advisory body.
- Pakistan must ramp up its counter terrorism and counter violent extremism campaign with a renewed focus on implementation of National Action Plan. The civil administration, police and judicial structure should be established promptly in former tribal areas which have been merged with KPK.