

REGIONAL RECONCILIATION WITH THE TALIBAN IS CONTINGENT ON PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE

Vaishali Basu Sharma*

Abstract: *The Taliban has endured repeated cycles of conflict. But it never foresaw the mounting challenge to its authority from the ISKP, which has stepped up attacks on minorities and pro-Taliban entities. In a stunning role reversal, the Taliban government in Afghanistan today finds itself at the receiving end of terror attacks. While the main concern for Afghanistan's immediate neighbors remains the destabilization by the export of militant groups from Afghan soil, each has its own set of reasons for continuing to engage with the Taliban.*

The reality that in Afghanistan there is no alternative to the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has sunk in, and is reflected in the pragmatic approach to engage with the Taliban. But further engagement with the Taliban mainly hinges upon its ability to contain the ISK and prevent extremist groups from operating in Afghanistan. And only the Taliban's willingness to make concessions will set the conditions for Afghanistan's stability.

Keywords: *Taliban, ISKP, United Nations, North Waziristan, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, The East Turkistan Islamic Movement*

The Taliban's resumption of power in August 2021, has since been sketched as a 'historic inevitability,' even so by recently deceased former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Despite successive interventions and through the repeated cycles of conflict since the 1970s, the Taliban has endured. But while the Taliban has returned to the helm in Kabul, with several figures present during its 1990s-era rule, the context has changed, and within Afghanistan, they are no longer seen as bringing order to a conflict-torn nation. Facing international sanctions, an asset freeze, and without access to nearly 75 % of its budget which came from foreign donors, the Taliban is faced with challenges of governing. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has estimated that as much as 97% of Afghanistan's population could sink below the international poverty line by mid-2022. Amidst such low levels of income, the dynamics of consolidation are aggravated by the violence perpetuated by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province

* The author Vaishali Basu Sharma is an analyst of strategic and economic affairs. She has worked as a consultant with the National Security Council Secretariat for nearly a decade. She is currently associated with the Policy Perspectives Foundation, New Delhi. This article is published in A JOURNAL OF ASTHA BHARATI NEW DELHI, Volume-23 No. 3-4 (January-June, 2022) with permission of the Author and publisher.

(ISKP), a regional affiliate of IS that operates in Afghanistan and opposes the Taliban's rule.

August the month which marked the Taliban's year in power was smirched by a series of horrific bombings that have killed more than 250 ordinary Afghans in recent weeks, the highest monthly number of civilian casualties over the last year. The Taliban never foresaw the mounting challenge to its authority from the IS-K, which has stepped up attacks on minorities and pro-Taliban entities.

In a stunning role reversal, the Taliban government in Afghanistan today finds itself at the receiving end of terror attacks. In a statement after deadly attacks on a Shia Mosque, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid conveyed via Twitter that, "the government "strongly condemns this cowardly act," adding that the attack was the work of "the enemies of Islam" and Afghanistan. The ISKP attacks undermine the Taliban's authority and ability to provide the security expected of a governing force. The United Nations recently reported that the Afghan branch of Islamic State (IS) is one of "the most vigorous and best established" of its regional networks and has urged the Taliban to take "concrete steps" to prevent terrorism and provide additional support to vulnerable communities.

Ordinary Afghans deem the Taliban responsible for the ambient chaos and volatility. In order to consolidate power, the group has to transform itself into a centralized government, prioritizing cohesion over any other political objective. As the Taliban braces against the realities of governing the faltering Afghan state, it appears to have tempered itself to accommodate certain international actors and display that the country is open for investments. Without diplomatic support, internationally isolated with limited economic resources, the Taliban is reaching out to countries in the region. And almost all nations in the region have indicated a willingness to engage with the Taliban government, albeit if it is able to control the violence and restrain the ISKP.

Pakistan's Security Abates as the TTP Regroups along the Border:

Afghanistan shares the longest border with Pakistan. And along the South-Eastern portion of this notoriously porous border lies Pakistan's North Waziristan, a tribal district and home to the Pakistani Taliban, also known as the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Its operations in Afghanistan's eastern provinces of

Paktika, Paktia, and Nangarhar, closer to the Pakistan border continue unabated and the Taliban has not heeded Islamabad's requests to limit the TTP activities, even demanding a crackdown. TTP leader Noor Wali Mehsud has called for an independent state comprising Pakistan's tribal areas. Evidence recently surfaced of the group publicly raising funds inside mosques during the Friday prayers in Jalalabad city and districts in Nangarhar province, indicating the possibility of its breaking the ceasefire with the Pak government. Islamabad, which has extensive relations with the Afghan Taliban leadership, providing its funds, training, arms and ammunition, and on several occasions directly providing combat support has been left nonplussed at the group's rebuff to Pakistan's requests for a crackdown on the TTP activities. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan endorsed the takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban saying the insurgent group has "broken the chains of slavery". Instead, the Taliban asked Pakistan to address the TTP's so-called "grievances." Pakistan carried out airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan. This attack was most likely conducted under Chinese pressure, as the TTP has also been attacking China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) infrastructure and Chinese nationals working in Pakistan. While failing to extirpate any senior TTP leadership, the airstrikes under strikes actually killed dozens of innocent Afghans including children, which has led to anti-Pakistan sentiments. Taliban-appointed Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqoob, son of the Taliban founder, Mullah Mohammad Omar, warned Pakistan in late April, that the airstrikes "are not acceptable," "the only reason we have tolerated this attack is because of our national interest, but it is possible we will not be so tolerant in the future." It is unlikely that the strong support that the TTP's enjoys in Afghanistan will change anytime soon, because ideologically and in terms of the sheer strength of nearly 10,000 TTP fighters in Afghanistan, the Taliban has the ideal 'ace up its sleeve' in its dealing with Pakistan. And more practically, in the face of a persistent ISKP threat, the Taliban is not in a position to fulfill any Pakistani demands to rein in the TTP at present. This initial jubilation in Pakistan, at the success of the Taliban further turned to disappointment as the group has also rejected the validity of the Durand line as the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US exit, far from suppressing Pashtun nationalism, has reinforced the Taliban's nationalist posture both on border issues and on Pashtun solidarity.

Despite the deteriorating security relations, Shahbaz Sharif's government has allowed the trade of all products to Kabul in the rupee via land routes. Exports

to Afghanistan saw a deeper drop since the Taliban took control of Kabul in August 2021 and have picked up since the change in trade regime from dollar to Pakistani rupee, on land routes owing to the non-availability of tradable currency through banking channels. Pak-Afghan trade from the Torkham crossing had doubled in the past few months. Almost 250-300 trucks or containers carrying soapstone and coal reached Pakistan daily via the Torkham border. The Taliban government has collected at least USD 33.80 million in customs revenue on more than 16 billion Afghanis' worth of coal exports in the last six months. Pakistan is keen to facilitate the normalization of trade and security, as this will ensure not only trade with Afghanistan but exports of rice, medicines, sports gear and equipment, and leather products to the Central Asian States via Torkham under the International Trade Route Agreement.

China Tries to Lure with Promises of Investment:

Regular reports emerge of Taliban fighters destroying border pillars in the Wakhan corridor, more as a show of strength and nationalism to Pakistan than China. The Taliban has shrewdly manipulated China's concerns over Uighur separatists to take forward negotiations on economic and developmental support. The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) seeks to liberate Xinjiang Province and the Uyghur people from Chinese government control and impose an Islamic ideology. Not overly concerned about infiltration from the border, has maintained a friendly relationship and is inclined to deal with the Taliban on its own rather than rely on Islamabad. Unofficially, China has been "speaking with the Taliban for many years." In July, a month before Kabul officially fell, Taliban leadership welcomed the prospects of Chinese aid and reconstruction: "China is a friendly country, and we welcome it for reconstruction and developing Afghanistan... If [the Chinese] have investments, of course, we will ensure their safety." Speculation on Chinese investments mounted when several Chinese companies reportedly conducted on-site inspections of potential lithium projects in Afghanistan in November 2021. Apparently, the Taliban were keen that China restart the Mes-e Aynak mine in Logar Province, one of the largest copper reserves in Afghanistan and in the world. But 14 years after two Chinese state-owned companies, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) and the Jiangxi Copper Company Limited were awarded the rights to the Aynak mines,

extraction is yet to begin. While the Taliban have been keen to re-engage this project, for China the main concern has been security. The same was the case with China National Petroleum Corp. which was interested in revamping the Amu Darya oil and gas project development. For China, security in the Central Asian region where it has extensive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) related investments is a primary concern. A geo-political understanding with the Taliban with promises of investments is the shrewdest route to ensuring that. China has asked other countries to cooperate with the caretaker government of Afghanistan and says the administration under the "Taliban" is getting stronger, but challenges remain." But despite Beijing's overt conviviality with the Taliban, China is wary of the group's promises to crack down on the Uyghur separatists under the banner of the ETIM. It was reported that after the country's takeover ETIM fighters were provided safe passage out of Afghanistan and relocated to Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, instead of handing them over to China. For China, any further engagement will hinge on whether the Taliban will honor their commitments, seize ties with ETIM, and take effective measures to resolutely crack down on these terrorist organizations within its territory.

India & the Path of Humanitarian Assistance:

In a clear signal to Islamabad, that it is not a mere proxy of Pakistan, the Taliban have been making an effort to outreach India. After the Taliban's return to power, India not only sent 36000 MT of wheat to Afghanistan through Pakistan but also dispatched medicines and COVID-19 vaccines to the country. The Taliban has indicated eagerness that India to revive its development projects in Afghanistan. In a pragmatic move, India sent a technical team in June, a tentative move towards reopening its embassy in Kabul. Ideas on reopening a section of the embassy in Kabul were doing the rounds while a regional summit on Afghanistan organized by Delhi was held in November 2021. Indicating progressive improvement of ties, on August 15, as India celebrated its 75th Independence Day and the Taliban completed the first year of its rule, Delhi upgraded the head of its "technical mission" to the level of a mid-ranking diplomat. Taliban's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Abdul Qahar Balkhi stated on Twitter that, "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan welcomes India's step to upgrade its diplomatic representation in Kabul. Besides ensuring security, we will pay close attention to the immunity of diplomats and cooperate well in (its)

endeavors." While it is certain that India will continue its humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people even under Taliban governance, further cooperation in terms of Indian investment, will depend largely upon the physical security of the Indian community there. A deadly attack by the ISKP on June 18 targeting the small Afghan Sikh community at Kart-e-Parwan gurdwara in Kabul was in many ways a warning to India by the extremists. Whether the Taliban can guarantee the security of minorities like the Sikh, Hazara, Tajik, Shia, and others from the ISKP remains the key question.

Tajik Extremists Complicate Scenario:

With Tajikistan, the Taliban's relations are quite complex. Tajiks have traditionally constituted the core of the Northern Alliance, and even today the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan is led by the son of Ahmad Masood, son of the Lion of Panjshir and his namesake has taken refuge in Dushanbe. The persecution of Tajiks in the name of quelling the military resistance in the north is an ever-present concern for Tajikistan. For Tajik President Emomali Rahmon the main concern remains primarily the destabilization of Central Asia by the export of militant groups from Afghan soil and strife by the influx of Afghan refugees. There is an indication of clear cooperation between the Taliban and the Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) an al Qaeda- linked terrorist organization that emerged in Tajikistan in 2006 as a Tajik-focused offshoot of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). It appears that the Taliban placed five districts in the northern province of Badakhshan under the control of Mahdi Arsalon, a Tajik national and commander of JA.

Tajik authorities say Arsalon and more than 200 Tajik citizens are in the ranks of the Taliban, forming a group known as the "Tajik Taliban." In a provocative move, a watchtower was built on the Afghan- Tajik border, directly across the river from Tajikistan's Darvaz district, with the inscription "M. Arsalon," written in graffiti and manned by members of the "Tajik Taliban" has become a matter of concern Tajik officials.

The Taliban has tried to reassure Tajikistan, the Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said, "We will not allow Afghanistan to [be used by groups to] threaten neighboring countries,"... "If the Tajik side has any issues or concerns, if they talk to us officially, God willing, they will be satisfied, and

we will remove the threats." But undercutting the Taliban's assurances, the ISKP has been launching rocket attacks from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, jeopardizing security along the border areas. To further complicate the security situation, indications are that numerous Tajik separatists are aligned with the ISKP. Capitalizing on the June 18 suicide bombing at Kabul's Sikh temple, ISKP recruiters have claimed that the attack was carried out by a Tajikistan national known as Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki. And that al-Tajiki trained the Afghan suicide bomber who killed more than 50 people at a Shiite Mosque in Peshawar on March 4. A report published by the United Nations Security Council warned that ISKP "has increased its presence in northern and eastern Afghanistan. It also includes fighters from Central Asia, who have increased activities in the north." It is indeed a complex situation where Dushanbe wants the security and integration of ethnic Tajiks, Afghanistan's second-largest ethnic group, and also wants the Taliban to clamp down on the ISKP, whose ranks many Tajik nationals have joined.

Uzbekistan Campaigns for Cooperation with Taliban:

Unlike Tajikistan, Tashkent has been better disposed toward the Taliban regime. In a recent message, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev urged the Taliban, "to demonstrate firm will and take decisive measures to prevent and counteract terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and to break off ties with all international terrorist organizations." Lately, Uzbekistan hosted an International Conference on Afghanistan that was widely attended. It has been campaigning the international community to unfreeze the assets of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Tashkent has focused on what Mirziyoyev has called the "Project of the Century" a Trans-Afghan railway line that would connect Central Asia to the Pakistani ports on the Arabian Sea. For now, Uzbekistan is all set to begin work on the construction of a power line that would allow Uzbekistan to up its electricity exports to Afghanistan

Iran Quietly Works its way with the Taliban:

In changing geopolitics realities over the years, the sectarian hatred between Iran and the Taliban has been evaporating, paving the way for a stable long-term alignment glued by and centered on political Islam. So, the return of

the Taliban to power last year was not a completely unfavorable situation. In fact, Iran and Taliban ministers have settled issues related to water and energy cooperation. Unlike the previous US-backed administration under which water from the Helmand River was regularly diverted to Godzareh, Iran has now reached an agreement with the Taliban dispensation and will henceforth receive its share of 820 million cubic meters per year. In June the Taliban signed a deal with an Iranian firm to purchase 350,000 tons of oil. It appears that Tehran and Kabul have agreed to facilitate trade and transit of petroleum products, establish a gas pipeline for energy imports and build refineries in Afghanistan

As the Taliban offense mounted in 2021, thousands of former Afghan commandos fled to Iran. But for lack of information from either Afghanistan or Iran on these soldiers, the concern springs largely from the Americans. Despite sporadic border clashes often breaking out between the Taliban and Iranian guards, Iran's interior minister recently ruled out the possibility of blocking the border stressing the need for peaceful negotiations.

From Neutral to Supportive - Turkmenistan:

During the Taliban regime in the 1990s, Turkmenistan was conferred a UN-recognized status as a neutral state. This time, however, Ashgabat has been vocal in support of Afghanistan to become part of the global economy. Turkmenistan's deputy foreign minister recently argued that reintegrating Afghanistan into the global economy "will have an impact on ensuring the security and stability of both the country itself and the region as a whole." positive

If ever realized, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline holds the possibility of supplying 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of Turkmen gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. While TAPI remains an unlikely proposition, for now, the Taliban government has reached a deal with Turkmenistan to import 1,000 tons of liquefied petroleum gas.

The Way forward for the Taliban is Security and Concession:

Almost all nations in the region appear to favor engagement with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan over isolation but have stopped short of recognizing a regime that is an international pariah. On the other hand, Ashgabat, Beijing, Islamabad, and Moscow have even formally accredited Taliban-appointed diplomats.

In fact, Turkmenistan was the first nation in Central Asia, since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, to receive a Taliban-appointed Afghanistan ambassador. Interestingly at the Afghanistan conference in July when Uzbek President Mirziyoyev concluded that, "common priority should be the restoration of the economy of Afghanistan, which is an important condition for achieving durable peace in this long-suffering country," all countries including the US were in agreement. Afghanistan's interim foreign minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, defended the Taliban's governance record stating that the group had managed to assure security inside Afghanistan, reduce corruption "practically to zero" and "for the first time in the history of Afghanistan" proclaim a "policy of tolerance." He said that the Taliban's ambitions extend to their former antagonists, and urged the West, especially Washington, to establish direct ties.

According to Central Asian research groups, there are at least 20 militant groups that still have roots or bases in Afghanistan, an accusation the Taliban vehemently deny. China has promised the Taliban regime economic and development support in for restraining any Uyghur militant groups in Afghanistan. The kind of financial support that the Taliban urgently needs, will only begin to come if the group can display sincere intentions to control these extremists operating from Afghan soil. Unlike post 9/11, this time there will be no international coalition to counter the Taliban regime. The reality that in Afghanistan there is no alternative to the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has sunk in and is reflected in the pragmatic approach to engage with the Taliban. Nevertheless, in order to be able to forge legitimate connections with international actors and secure a steady stream of legal income, the Taliban will have to become the net security provider in Afghanistan. A major departure from its earlier insurgent role is a disruptor of peace. Unless it is able to suppress the ISKP which has been claiming a drumbeat of violence, the fledgling Taliban government in Kabul has no prospect of gaining international legitimacy or investment.

References:

1. Vaishali Basu Sharma, 'For Afghanistan's Immediate Neighbours, Cautious Engagement With the Taliban' Aug 20, 2022 | The Wire, Available at: <https://m.thewire.in/article/south-asia/afghanistan-neighbours-cautious-engagement-with-taliban>
2. Omer Farooq Khan, 'Imran Khan endorses takeover of Afghanistan' Aug 17, 2021 | TNN Available at: Imran Khan endorses takeover of Afghanistan- Times of India (indiatimes.com)
3. Kathy Gannon, 'Pakistan's Relations With Taliban Regime Worsen' May 19, 2022 | The Diplomat, Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/pakistans-relations-with-taliban-regime-worsen/>

4. Ibrahim Shinwari, 'Trade with Afghanistan via Torkham doubles in recent months' April 23, 2022 | Dawn, Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1686277/trade-with-afghanistan-via-torkham-doubles-in-recent-months>
5. Abigail Ng, 'Hedging their bets': Political experts weigh in on China's growing relations with the Taliban' August 23, 2022 | CNBC, Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/23/china-and-taliban-relations-with-afghanistan-are-tricky-analysts-say.html>
- Taliban Says It Sees China As A "Friend" Of Afghanistan: Report' July 10, 2021 | NDTV, Available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/taliban-says-it-sees-china-as-a-friend-of-afghanistan-report-24837831>
6. Mumin Ahmadi, Sirojiddin Tolibov, Nigori Fazliddin 'Tajikistan Concerned By Provocative Taliban Watchtower On Border' July 12, 2022 | RFERL Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-border-afghanistan-taliban/31939669.html>
7. Kashif Hussain, 'Why the Taliban Won't Cut Ties with Iran' February 15, 2020 | The Diplomat Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/why-the-taliban-wont-cut-ties-with-iran/>
8. Joanna Lillis 'Afghanistan in hock to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for electricity' May 19, 2022' Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/afghanistan-in-hock-to-uzbekistan-and-tajikistan-for-electricity>
9. Navbahor Imamova 'Nearly 30 Nations Engage With Taliban at Tashkent Conference' July 27, 2022 | VOA Available at [Nearly 30 Nations Engage With Taliban at Tashkent Conference \(voanews.com\)](https://www.voanews.com)