



AFGHANISTAN AS SEEN FROM PAKISTAN-II

PIPS Paper Series

Situation Review 2

Oct-Dec, 2021



Papers

The peace nobody believed in

Marco Mezzera and Safdar Sial

Iran's Afghan policy after the U.S. withdrawal: Implications for Pakistan and the region

Asif Durrani

Afghanistan as Seen from Pakistan II

PIPS Paper Series

Oct-Dec, 2021

Situation Review 2

Copyright © PIPS 2021. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing from the publisher of this book.

All enquiries regarding reproduction should be sent to PIPS at its address given below.



P.O. Box 2110, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Tel: +92-51-8359475-6

Fax: +92-51-8359474

Email: pips@pakpips.com

Web: www.pakpips.com

The peace nobody believed in

Marco Mezzera & Safdar Sial

Marco Mezzera is a political analyst and mediation expert with a geographical focus on Asia. In his last position as Senior Adviser at NOREF Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution, he managed, among others, the “Philippines” and the “Military Dialogues” programs, and in-house Track II mediation efforts. Prior to joining NOREF, he worked as a research fellow with the Netherlands Institute of International Relations “Clingendael”, where he focused on the political economy of democratization and governance in post-conflict and fragile contexts. During that period, he focused predominantly on Pakistan’s various governance challenges. Previously, as a research associate, he spent five years in Southeast Asia working for a regional policy research and advocacy organization. He holds a MSc in Development Studies from Wageningen University, the Netherlands, and has co-authored four books and written several articles and policy reports.

Safdar Hussain, nom de plume Safdar Sial, is Joint Director at Pak Institute for Peace Studies and Associate Editor of "Conflict and Peace Studies" journal. He has also co-authored “Dynamics of Taliban Insurgency in FATA” and “Radicalization in Pakistan.”

Contents

The fundamentals of a peace process	5
Where it all started	6
On the various efforts to promote intra-Afghan talks	9
Pakistan's involvement in facilitating peace negotiations	11
Void negotiations	14
Current prospects	15
Opportunities for a political dialogue	17
References	19

The fundamentals of a peace process

At the onset of every peace process, the parties to a conflict must have addressed the fundamental question of which strategy they will ultimately prioritise in the pursuit of their goals. By agreeing to engage in negotiations, often after a protracted armed conflict and possibly following a stalemate, they appear to indicate that the quest for a political settlement through talks has become, at that particular juncture, their chosen strategy out of the conflict.

However, as many mediators and peace facilitators know, this is an assumption which unfortunately is often removed from the truth. Parties can have a misleading way to go about prioritising different strategies, depending on the direction of events, and they often have a tendency not to necessarily follow up on their declarations of intents. Every single move becomes part of a bigger game, at the end of which only victory over the other parties matters.

For those standing outside the inner circle of these parties, either as mediators or as engaged observers, the only option left is that of second-guessing the real intentions of those parties. Like in a strategy game, the parties' moves will adapt to the developments of the context in which they operate, such as for example specific military results on the ground or shifting international support networks and alliances. And their end-objectives will similarly follow and adapt to those contextual evolutions.

In such a bluffing environment, it is somehow logical to expect that none of the parties will ever reveal what their end goal, at any specific moment, may be. This realisation is important, because while on the surface they may profess the unshakable intention to stay on the course, as declared at the start of the negotiations, their positions and interests may get adjusted along the way, and with them also the ultimate goal justifying their engagement in the first place.

For a peace process to run its proper course it is essential that the parties' genuine commitment to a negotiated solution to the conflict becomes and remains their unequivocal strategic priority throughout the entire duration of the peace process. Strategic shifts, especially if not openly declared, will inevitably and irremediably damage the sustainability and credibility of the peace process.

The so-called Afghan peace process, which started with the appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation on September 21, 2018,¹ and terminated with the seemingly effortless conquest of Kabul by the Taliban on August 15, 2021, is unfortunately a striking example of the fragility (if not meaninglessness) of such peace processes, when the parties embrace them only halfheartedly or as a decoy.

Where it all started

The foundational weakness of the Afghan peace process that was launched under the Trump administration has its origin in the 2001 Bonn process. Due to the view in Washington that the Taliban was one and the same as the hated Al-Qaeda network and the military campaign that had targeted both in Afghanistan since the beginning of October 2001 had relegated the Taliban to the realm of political irrelevance, the talks that led to the Bonn Agreement of December 5, 2001, intentionally excluded the Taliban and their associates. This course of action was taken despite later evidence that the Taliban leadership had been in contact with Hamid Khan Karzai, who would become president three years later, to discuss possible arrangements for a peaceful political transition (Rubin, 2021; Doucet, 2021).

It is also important to note that one of the key international backers of the Taliban since their inception in 1994, Pakistan, had also been sidelined at the Bonn process. At that point, the U.S. was primarily interested in avenging the September 11 terrorist attacks, in preventing Afghanistan from becoming again a launching pad for such actions, and most likely also in signaling to allies and potential geopolitical rivals alike its intention to underpin with military power its growing ambitions towards an America-led unipolar world (Bello, 2021).

The Taliban, however, had not been annihilated. The U.S.-supported Northern Alliance had seemingly managed to take over two-thirds of the country by late November 2001, but the Taliban maintained a relevant, although not always visible, presence in the countryside. From there, they started biding their time and carefully reorganising their ranks. By 2004,

¹ See biography of Zalmay Khalilzad at the United States Department of State website: <<https://www.state.gov/biographies/zalmay-khalilzad>>

the Taliban mobilisation had already become evident. And this was all happening while the U.S. had decided to rely on an illegitimate government made of a hand-picked president and several former warlords that had been “appointed to many provincial and district governorships and to key positions in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National police (ANP)” (Vendrell, 2012).

In the years that followed, the U.S. remained trapped in this mindset that excluded a priori any possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. The U.S. was not prepared to consider talking with the Taliban, because they had first betrayed America by sheltering Osama bin Laden and subsequently had dared to withstand its military might by engaging in a consuming war of attrition. Or, as was put convincingly by Republican presidential front-runner Mitt Romney at the beginning of 2012, “the right course for America is not to negotiate with the Taliban while the Taliban are killing our soldiers... The right course is to recognise that they are the enemy of the United States” (Charles, 2012).

The Obama administration, however, after deciding in December 2009 for an unprecedented albeit inconclusive troop surge, and after having further escalated a relentless campaign of drone strikes (many of which were operated from a secret base in Pakistan’s Balochistan Balochistan), carefully started considering the possibility of ‘negotiations’ with the Taliban. The political willingness of even contemplating such an option was without doubt strongly linked to President Barack Obama’s announcement in May 2014 of a plan for a full withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2016 (Holland, 2014). Initial attempts to establish some lines of communication with the Taliban outside of Afghanistan had already started in 2010, when some senior Taliban leaders had been stationed in Doha, Qatar.

This new course of action by the Obama administration was already centered on the need to start planning for an ordered withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces and should not be considered as a genuine shift in strategic priorities. Peace, or rather an agreement that could lower the intensity of the fighting on the ground, was considered as a necessary condition for an honorable-looking disentanglement from Afghanistan.

These tepid efforts never led to anything substantial in terms of peace negotiations. The only concrete development in that direction was the

official opening by the Taliban of a political office in Doha in June 2013. However, the strong objections by the Afghan government to the Taliban presenting themselves as the legitimate representatives of a parallel Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's government in exile, forced the closure of the office just a month later. The way the U.S. handled this issue, triggering the adverse reaction of an allied government that was supposed to be part of any attempt at negotiations, revealed how the U.S. saw a resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan, including through political negotiations, as its exclusive prerogative. Apparently, it did not contemplate the need to involve national or regional stakeholders in any such attempt.

Qatar, Germany, and later Norway were the only countries that the U.S. trusted in facilitating this specific diplomatic track. These same countries would also play a key role in accompanying U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad in his peace efforts from 2018 onwards.

Once it became clear that the U.S. was acting in an exclusionary way in his quest for a political settlement of the Afghan conflict, a flurry of separate diplomatic initiatives appeared. Among them were also initiatives aiming at promoting an intra-Afghans dialogue. Key international players, with the U.S. at their forefront and the UN as a willing messenger, kept underscoring the importance of such an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned dialogue. The history of this conflict and its numerous botched attempts to initiate a political process reveal however how those same international actors, and primarily the U.S., never fully committed to it or believed in its importance to achieve a sustainable peace in Afghanistan. The focus of the U.S. and NATO intervention was initially counterterrorism, and later the desperate need to extricate themselves from a conflict that was slowly but inexorably swallowing them. Aware of this reality and of the fact that any attempt at intra-Afghan talks would be merely a sideshow as long as the U.S. would maintain its military presence in the country and its predominant role as funder and protector of the Afghan government, the Taliban never really bought into those offers and kept their focus steadily fixed on the U.S.

On the various efforts to promote intra-Afghan talks

Among the more recent and ephemeral attempts at national negotiations, it is worth remembering the Kabul Process, which was launched in 2017 by President Ashraf Ghani. The Process centered around the offer of a peace

deal to the Taliban in return for a cessation of the hostilities. The deal included an amnesty for Taliban fighters, the recognition of the Taliban as a political party, amendments to the constitution, and the lifting of sanctions against Taliban leaders (Arif, 2018). The Process soon collapsed, as the Taliban were not prepared to negotiate with a government that they considered as a puppet of the U.S. and with no credible independent military capacity. The Taliban considered the U.S. as their main enemy in the conflict. Any talks would need to be with the U.S. In addition, they knew that time was on their side, as the U.S. had made clear that it wanted to exit the conflict sooner than later.

Key international actors that did not want to leave the fate of Afghanistan solely in the hands of the U.S. and its allies, also became increasingly engaged in diplomatic efforts. China and Russia have certainly been the two regional powers that have tried the hardest to offer alternative negotiated ways out of the conflict.

China, for instance, already in 2015 “hosted secret talks between representatives of the Taliban and Afghan government in Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region”(Sun, 2021). This initial attempt was followed by regular contacts and meetings with representatives of the Taliban’s political office in Doha. Beijing conjured the last of these interactions in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the talks between the U.S. and the Taliban in September 2019. China’s proposal was to organise a two-day intra-Afghan conference in Beijing at the end of October (Al Jazeera, 2019). After two postponements, the event was eventually cancelled due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In what appeared as a revival of “great-power competition” on the Afghan chessboard, but probably also out of concerns for the way the U.S. was leading the negotiation efforts with the Taliban, in November 2018, barely one month after the official appointment of Ambassador Khalilzad as the new U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Russia organised consultations in Moscow to discuss a possible settlement of the Afghan conflict. This initiative was part of the so-called “Moscow Format”, which had originated in December 2016 as a platform for consultations between Russia, China, and Pakistan (Aliyev, 2020). Representatives of the Taliban and members of the Afghanistan's High Peace Council attended the November 2018 meeting. The initiative was significant because it represented an attempt to facilitate direct talks between the Taliban and

official delegates from Afghanistan. However, the Taliban, while agreeing to attend the event, made it very clear that the real negotiations had to take place with the U.S and not with the Afghan state. On its part, the U.S. accepted the invitation to attend, but only as an observer. The meeting was particularly significant because besides trying to offer a separate track for intra-Afghan talks, it also proposed a relevant international accompaniment. About a dozen countries attended it, and among them key regional players such as China, Pakistan, Iran, India and five Central Asian states, which had been left out of the U.S.-led process (BBC, 2018).

Russia maintained its active role in the Afghanistan peace process also after the U.S. and the Taliban eventually concluded their peace deal on February 29, 2020. On March 18, 2021 it convened a one-day conference in Moscow to try to blow new life into the process, in the face of worrying signals that the Taliban were waiting for the U.S. and NATO forces to depart, so that they could remove the Ghani government through a full-scale military offensive. By then, the U.S. had fully embraced Russia's role as an additional facilitator of intra-Afghan negotiations. Ambassador Khalilzad took part in the event together with representatives from China and Pakistan. In light of the fast approaching deadline for the withdrawal of its remaining 2,500 soldiers, agreed as part of the deal with the Taliban and set for May 1, 2021, it was clear that the U.S. was desperately looking for progress in the talks to justify its exit after twenty years of military intervention.

Pakistan's involvement in facilitating peace negotiations

Among the several peace initiatives that followed the opening of the Taliban's political office in Doha, those promoted by Pakistan deserve a special mention. Ever since the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001, Pakistan's role in the ensuing conflict has given rise to widespread speculation and allegations. Its history of close support to the Afghan mujahedeen in the 1980s, followed allegedly by a similarly intimate relation with the Taliban since their appearance in 1994, has severely undermined the international community's trust in Pakistan as a reliable partner in its efforts to stabilise Afghanistan. It obviously did not help to realise that the Taliban leadership, in retreat from the 2001 U.S. intervention, had established their *rahbari shura*, or leadership council, in

the city of Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan. During the following years many more instances emerged of Pakistan's suspiciously close relation with the Taliban, and especially with the Haqqani network. A defining moment in this respect was also the discovery in May 2011 that the most wanted terrorist in the world, Osama bin Laden, had been hiding for years in Abbottabad, in a compound situated scarcely a mile from the Pakistan Military Academy.

Regardless of whether all the accusations that Pakistan's military has been supporting the Taliban both logistically and materially are substantiated,² during the last two decades the country has undoubtedly found itself at the center of a complicated balancing act between the need for domestic stability, and the self-constructed necessity to influence strategic events in neighboring Afghanistan. While the latter need may have induced the military leadership in Pakistan to support the Afghan Taliban in their resurgence and eventual takeover of the country, at the same time the need for domestic stability must have encouraged Pakistan to look for a decisive conclusion of the conflict in Afghanistan that would also be as controlled as possible. Not only to avoid another huge inflow of refugees,³ but also to contain the potential spillover of ethno-religious violence into its Pashtun-dominated border areas with Afghanistan.

Therefore, while Pakistan has been allegedly arming and supporting the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, it has also tried to make use of its strategic proximity to the movement by exhorting it to engage in various peace initiatives. In July 2015, for instance, barely two months after the aforementioned Urumqi talks in China, which Pakistan had also helped facilitate, "Pakistan hosted the first direct formal contacts between the Taliban and Afghan government representatives, including the deputy foreign minister" (ICG, 2021). Held in the hill resort of Murree, just outside Pakistan's federal capital Islamabad, the meeting also saw the participation of Chinese and U.S. officials as observers. A follow-up to this round of talks was supposed to take place at the end of the month, but the revelation by the Afghan government of the death of Mullah Omar two years earlier, and the subsequent repositioning of the Taliban leadership,

² The last of these accusations was thrown on the occasion of the conquest by the Taliban of the last resistance pocket in the Panjshir Valley, at the beginning of September.

³ This danger has been partially taken care of by the construction of a fence along the 2640 km long border, which was due to be completed by the end of June 2021.

induced the latter to withdraw its participation. Other observers have imputed the collapse of that Pakistan-led process to divisions that emerged between the political office in Doha and the rest of the Taliban leadership, especially those based in Pakistan. The Taliban representatives in Doha allegedly resented Pakistan's forcing and manipulation of the situation and claimed their strategic independence in deciding when and how to engage in any peace talks with the Kabul government (Osman, 2015).

Despite all the controversies that they raised, the Murree talks signaled the first clear and direct intervention of Pakistan into the peace process. Its position as a key potential actor in facilitating the Taliban's engagement in such process was further strengthened about a year later, when Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada was elected as the new leader of the Taliban, following the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansour in a U.S. drone strike on May 21, 2016. In the Taliban leadership's restructuring that followed, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada appointed Sirajuddin Haqqani⁴ as one of his two deputies. That move formally endorsed the entrance of the Haqqani network, one of Pakistan's alleged main assets in Afghanistan, into the Taliban leadership, thereby making any attempt at a negotiated solution to the conflict inseparable from the Haqqanis' participation in it. Following the same move, Pakistan expected a decrease in international pressure to distance itself from the Haqqani network. At the same time, Islamabad anticipated an increase in its capacity to control political developments within the Taliban movement, especially concerning the latter's participation in peace negotiations.

Pakistan's efforts to play a facilitating role in a negotiated track may have also had the goal of encouraging the international acceptance of the Taliban as a legitimate political entity. Recent statements of Imran Khan and other key representatives of his government, inviting the international community to recognise and engage with the Taliban government in Kabul, appear to confirm such hypothesis (See for instance: Lalzoy, 2021; *Dawn*, 2021). By pursuing this approach, Pakistan hopes that it will have a government next door that listens to its indications, but that also enjoys a minimum degree of international tolerance, if not acceptance. In addition, with a religiously conservative government in power in Afghanistan,

⁴ Nominated Minister of Interior in the caretaker government that the Taliban announced on 7th September 2021.

Pakistan hopes that the space for India's hostile maneuvering will be strongly reduced.

Pakistan's putative interests in supporting a political settlement in Afghanistan are deeply problematic from a peacebuilding perspective. The imposition of third parties' agendas on conflict actors at the negotiating table risks deviating the focus of the talks towards less central issues for the peace process. The negotiating parties may end up discussing matters that are less fundamental to the sustainability of a peace agreement and to their own priorities. In such cases, war by proxies often becomes peace by proxies.

Void negotiations

In retrospect, it is now evident that all the peace initiatives listed above, and several more not mentioned in this paper, were just corollaries of the U.S.-Taliban negotiation. Ever since October 2001, and the resurgence of the Taliban just a few years later, it became clear that only these two actors could deliver an end of sorts to the conflict. For all the debates about the need for the peace process to be inclusive, Afghan-owned, and regionally endorsed, eventually neither the U.S. nor the Taliban would allow other players to determine its outcome. The stakes for the two parties had become increasingly high, as the years went by. To the point that their objectives had become proportionately simple: an 'honorable' exit from the conflict for the U.S., and the return to power in Afghanistan for the Taliban, whether or not through a political transition. All the other elements of the negotiations played a secondary role, either as smokescreens to conceal the real positions of the parties, or as classical bargaining chips.

The appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation needs to be placed in such a context. By then the U.S. had matured and internalised its decision to disentangle itself from Afghanistan and from its failed grand plan of nation-building, while the Taliban had fully embraced armed conflict as the only strategy to achieve its final objective. External events would occasionally determine sudden interruptions in the talks. For example, at the beginning of September 2019 President Trump decided to cancel peace talks with the Taliban, including a secret meeting with their "major leaders" in Camp David, after the insurgent group claimed responsibility for an attack in

Kabul that had killed an American soldier and 11 other people (Stewart, 2019). However, efforts to reestablish contacts would immediately follow such breakdowns in the talks, often through the facilitating services of other countries.

The agreement signed by the U.S. and the Taliban on February 29, 2020 needs also to be seen from this perspective. The U.S., with the obliging support of Qatar, Norway and Germany, continued arguing for the importance of an intra-Afghan peace process, which was meant to follow the negotiations that Washington was frantically trying to conclude with the Taliban. However, it is striking how the government of Kabul was never put in control over the conditions and modalities of such a national process. The U.S. was basically concocting a complex plan to bring peace back to Afghanistan without providing the sitting government with a proportionate decision-making power. For instance, the U.S.-Taliban agreement committed both parties to release respectively 5,000 and 1,000 prisoners by March 10, 2020. Already the day after the signing of the deal, President Ghani protested against this commitment, because “a prisoner release was not a promise the United States could make” (NPR, 2020). He said that any such decision should have been first negotiated between the U.S. and the Afghan government. In other words, Ghani claimed the sovereign right to decide when and on which conditions to release Taliban prisoners that were kept in Afghan jails. This element of the agreement would indeed remain a thorny issue in the months that followed.

The main reason that Washington adduced for this peculiar negotiating behavior was the Taliban’s declared insistence to separate a deal with the U.S. from one among Afghan parties. While the dilemma for Khalilzad and his entourage was evident, it was equally clear that a decision to prioritize their own process with the Taliban would imply a much weaker position for the Afghan government in any negotiation it may have with the Taliban. The Afghan state’s extreme level of dependency on the U.S., especially concerning matters of defense and public security, was very evident and was definitely not lost on the Taliban. They knew well that once they would obtain a commitment from the U.S. to withdraw its forces, it would only be a matter of time before they could run the Afghan government over and dictate their own terms to a new Afghanistan.

Current prospects

With the sham of the intra-Afghan talks now relegated to the realm of those things that could have happened, but that were actually never meant to happen, Afghanistan is left with a new, harsh reality, which in many of its citizens has recalled the ghosts of the previous Taliban government, between 1996 and 2001.

The Taliban, on their turn, despite a much better departure position than twenty-five years ago, as they now appear to control the entire territory of the country, seem to have realised that in order to guarantee some degree of durability to their regime, they cannot afford to function in complete isolation, both internationally and domestically. Their openness, during the last few years, to engage in a political process of negotiations, next to the more accustomed strategy of guerrilla warfare, has been a clear sign of their increased level of sophistication when dealing with the complex conflict situation in Afghanistan. Their negotiating strategy, skillfully alternating threats of reprisals with promises of concessions, has also revealed how familiar they, and especially their representatives in the political office in Doha, have become with the priorities and the narratives of the international community. In addition, their apparent ease in shifting from one potential key regional player to the other, allegedly in search of support for a political solution to the conflict, have also made evident their increased understanding of the new leverages offered to them by geopolitical competition.

This trend has set forth also in the aftermath of their takeover of the country. Their aspiration to obtain a certain degree of international recognition, sanctions relief and financial support, has transpired from their initial commitments to a process of state building that would be inclusive and respectful of women's rights (Nossiter, 2021). The Taliban have also revealed a remarkable aptitude to replicate the international community's language concerning governance matters. In his remarks on September 7, 2021, following the announcement of a caretaker government, the chief Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, declared: "This is an acting cabinet appointed to handle current affairs, and we are preparing the foundations of government and state-building... In the near future, the role of the people's participation and the shuras will be developed" (Aikins & Huylebroek, 2021). These promises have so far

proven to be empty. Even after a third round of government appointments, at the beginning of October 2021, no woman and only a handful of representatives of the country's ethnic minorities appeared in the total line-up (ABC News, 2021).

Such a deviation from the initial commitments has been ascribed, among others, to the predominance of hardliners among the Taliban. This could indeed provide part of the explanation. But the possibility of the Taliban engaging in a hard bargaining game should not be discarded. They seem to know all too well how high certain priorities are on the political agenda of key Western countries. And they also realise that these countries will keep pursuing these priorities especially in light of their debacle of August 15, 2021. The West desperately needs to be able to at least pretend that 20 years of military presence and state-building efforts in Afghanistan have not gone completely to waste. For the Taliban, however, it is also a matter of honour. Having emerged as the absolute winners of the conflict, it makes no sense for them to listen to the diktats of remote Western governments. Concessions would need to be negotiated among peers. At the same time, it is a crucial component of the Taliban's new "governance" game to show to the Afghan population that they are fully in control and determined to enforce their conservative view of society. The desperate financial situation in which Afghanistan currently finds itself, with predictions of up to 98% of the population facing universal poverty by the middle of 2022 (The Associated Press, 2021), may eventually persuade the Taliban leadership to engage in (cosmetic) corrections to their governance model. But during the initial phase of the transition, their attention will be focused on consolidating their power and maintaining the momentum that originated from their successful military campaign.

Opportunities for a political dialogue

Eventually, the Taliban know that they will need to transform themselves from a formidable guerrilla warfare machine into a functional governing entity. The necessary skills among them to carry out such a shift are probably not over-abundant. They will forcefully need to look somewhere else for help, and perhaps to ask for external support. Such a conjuncture could present the opportunity to try to convince the Taliban to open a dialogue channel with the international community about the need to find

a sustainable balance between their strict religious ideology and the fundamental rights of a population aspiring to a safe and dignified future.

Afghanistan is not the same country they 'left' in 2001. While at the beginning of their previous period in power they had been partly welcomed as the only (armed) actor capable of ending the cycle of brutal violence unleashed upon the country by competing warlords, today the country and its population have advanced. Especially in urban areas, Afghans have grown accustomed to basic liberties and rights that may not be easily compatible with the harsh enforcement of Sharia law.

But even if the Taliban may not have changed inherently from those that took over Kabul in 1996, they seem to have accepted a reality that is wider and more complex than the religious and patriarchal conservatism of the rural areas where most of them originate. They know they are in command and they will play with this factor to their advantage, but to date they have avoided shutting all the doors to the outside world.

The international donor community needs to use wisely the little space that they have left open. Patronising behavior will not work with the Taliban. Nor a blunt competition with other regional players less concerned about democratic values and human rights. A flexible and open-minded approach is needed, ready to play hardball when necessary, while being prepared to offer much needed help when the welfare of the Afghan population is at risk.

In such a politically sensitive environment, it would be probably wise to rely on supranational institutions like the UN. The Security Council should support to the best of its ability the recently renewed mandate⁵ of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and it should consider resolutions on conditions and modalities for sanctions relief. At the same time, UN assistance and shuttle diplomacy would work only if combined with complementing international, regional and national arrangements and guarantees. Finally, the international community should strive to find creative ways to support Afghan civil society and grass-roots initiatives, which can reach out to the population without necessarily having to pass through the corridors of power in Kabul.

⁵ The mandate was extended on 17 September 2021, by UN Security Council Resolution 2596 (2021).

References

- ABC News. 2021. "Taliban appointments add to all-male Afghan government team." October 4th.
<<https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/taliban-appointments-add-male-afghan-government-team-80400843>>
- Aikins, Matthieu and J. Huylebroek. 2021. "Taliban appoint stalwarts to top government posts." *The New York Times*, September 7th.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/07/world/asia/taliban-women-protest-kabul-afghanistan.html?utm_source=dailybrief&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=DailyBrief2021Sep8&utm_term=DailyNewsBrief>
- Al Jazeera. 2019. "China invites Taliban, Afghan officials for two-day talks." October 23rd. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/23/china-invites-taliban-afghan-officials-for-two-day-talks>>
- Aliyev, Nurlan. 2020. "How Russia views Afghanistan today". War on the Rocks, October 19th.
- Arif, Samim. 2018. "A way forward for Afghanistan after the 2nd Kabul process conference." *The Diplomat*, March 7th.
<<https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/a-way-forward-for-afghanistan-after-the-2nd-kabul-process-conference/>>
- BBC. 2018: "Afghanistan war: Taliban attend landmark peace talks in Russia." November 9th. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46155189>>
- Bello, Walden. 2021. "September 11 and the debacle of 'nation-building' in Iraq and Afghanistan." *Foreign Policy in Focus*, September 10th.
<<https://fpif.org/september-11-and-the-debacle-of-nation-building-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/?emci=2f21dd2f-5b16-ec11-981f-501ac57ba3ed&emdi=c4d4ff3b-dd16-ec11-981f-501ac57ba3ed&ceid=4046060>>
- Charles, Deborah. 2012. "Romney says U.S. should not negotiate with Taliban." Reuters, January 17th. <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-campaign-taliban-idUSTRE80G06P20120117>>
- Dawn*. 2021. "Qureshi again urges world to engage with 'new reality' in Afghanistan." September 28th.
<<https://www.dawn.com/news/1648964>>

- Doucet, Lyse. 2021. "A wish for Afghanistan – The envoy." BBC World Service. September 1st.
- Holland, Steve. 2014. "Obama plans to end U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan by 2016." Reuters, May 27th. <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-obama-idUSKBN0E71WQ20140527>>
- ICG (International Crisis Group). 2021. "Pakistan: Shoring up Afghanistan's peace process." Briefing 169 / Asia, June 30th. <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/b169-pakistan-shoring-afghanistans-peace-process>>
- Lalzoy, Najibullah. 2021. "Sooner or later, US will have to recognize Taliban: PM Khan." The Khaama Press News Agency, October 3rd.
- Nossiter, Adam, C. Gall and J. E. Barnes. 2021. "The Taliban's leaders: Worldly and 'inclusive' or ruthless ideologues?" *The New York Times*. August 17th. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/world/asia/taliban-leaders-afghanistan.html>>
- NPR. 2020. "Afghan president rejects timing of prisoner swap proposed in U.S.-Taliban peace deal." March 1st. <<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/01/810949474/afghan-president-rejects-timeline-for-prisoner-swap-proposed-in-us-taliban-peace?t=1635246687089>>
- Osman, Borhan. 2015. "The Murree process: Divisive peace talks further complicated by Mullah Omar's death." Afghanistan Analysts Network, August 5th. <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-murree-process-divisive-peace-talks-further-complicated-by-mullah-omars-death>>
- Rubin, Barnett R. 2021. "Leveraging the Taliban's quest for international recognition." United States Institute of Peace, March. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Afghanistan-Peace-Process_Talibans-Quest-for-International-Recognition.pdf>
- Stewart, Phil and J. Lange. 2019. "Trump says he cancelled peace talks with Taliban over attack." Reuters, September 7th. <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-mckenzie-idUSKCN1VS0MX>>
- Sun, Yun. 2021. "A reluctant embrace: China's new relationship with the Taliban." War on the Rocks, August 10th.

The Associated Press. 2021. "The latest: UN: Afghanistan on brink of "universal poverty"." September 10th. <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-pakistan-afghanistan-islamabad-qatar35bb246ad1db460b2a2e8d24c77f99d?utm_source=dailybrief&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=DailyBrief2021Sep10&utm_term=DailyNewsBrief>

Vendrell, Francesc. 2012. "What went wrong after Bonn." Middle East Institute, April 18th. <<https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-went-wrong-after-bonn>>

Iran's Afghan policy after the U.S. withdrawal: Implications for Pakistan and the region

Asif Durrani

Asif Durrani has been a career diplomat for 32 years, who served as Pakistan's ambassador to the UAE and Iran. In his early diplomatic career, he was posted to India, Afghanistan, UK, and Pakistan Mission to the United Nations in New York. Before joining the Foreign Service of Pakistan in 1986, Ambassador Durrani worked as a journalist focusing on Afghanistan and Iran. He is an alumnus of Balochistan University, Quetta, and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He regularly contributes to national and international media. Currently, he is serving as a Senior Research Fellow in Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI).

Contents

Abstract	25
1. Introduction	25
2. Background on Iran's recent approaches towards Afghanistan	27
2.1 Tehran's view of the U.S.-Taliban agreement	27
2.2 Iran's relations with the Taliban prior to 9/11	28
2.3 Iran-Afghanistan relations after the U.S. invasion	30
3. The U.S. & Saudi factors: Impact on Iran's Afghan policy challenges and responses	32
3.1 Iranian reaction to the Taliban's capture of Kabul	32
3.2 Iran-Taliban relations	33
3.3 Formidable challenges & threats for Iran	35
3.4 Iran's vulnerabilities in Afghanistan and Middle East	36
4. Iran's regional approach	38
4.1 Iran's securing its interests in a volatile region	38
4.2 Iran-Afghanistan irritants	40
5. Iran's outlook towards the Taliban regime	42
5.1 A pragmatic approach	42
5.2 Pakistan-Iran understanding on Afghanistan	43
6. Conclusion	44
References	46

Abstract

Iran shares a 938-kilometre border with Afghanistan. It was on the verge of war with the Taliban when they killed its eight diplomats and one journalist in Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998. However, the 9/11 tragedy was a turning point in the history of Afghanistan and the region. Much has happened and changed in the past two decades: the Americans parachuted Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani as symbols of democracy; the Taliban resurged after fierce resistance; and the Americans eventually agreed to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Finally, once discredited, the Taliban resurfaced on the scene as rulers of Afghanistan forcing President Ghani to flee the country in a huff. Tehran has travelled a long way from keeping an adversarial relationship to forging a partnership with the Taliban during the past two decades. Being a revolutionary dispensation, Iran has pursued a proactive policy towards its neighbours and the Middle Eastern region. However, Iran's immediate neighbours and major countries of the Middle East are wary of its expansionist policies. **On the other hand,** Iran is fearful of the American machinations of "regime change" and Israel's hobnobbing with the GCC countries to destabilise the clergy regime. The Taliban 2.0 is a challenge for all the neighbours of Afghanistan and beyond. Iran has adopted a pragmatic approach towards the Taliban, but may keep its options open as the situation in the war-ravaged country unfolds.

Key words: Iran, Taliban, Middle East, US troop withdrawal, GCC, peace, stability, humanitarian assistance

1. Introduction

Like any other power involved in Afghan affairs, the sudden fall of Kabul on August 15 and the ascension of the Taliban was surprising for Iran (Rasmussen, 2021). Iran considers Afghanistan as its backyard with which it has had historical ties; although bilateral relations between the two countries have not been free of irritants. At the outset, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 had come as a blessing in disguise for Iran. It had very tense relations with the Taliban regime, which had brutally murdered eight Iranian diplomats and one journalist in the Iranian Consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998. Iran was on the verge of declaring war against the Taliban regime but retracted at the last moment because of its tense

relations with Iraq and other states of the Persian Gulf region (Rasmussen, 2021). Iran avoided opening another front.

Iran has maintained a calculated stance on Afghanistan during the past two decades. However, it has gradually accepted the locus of the Taliban as a 'lesser evil compared with the Americans' who posed a threat to the clergy rule while physically present in Afghanistan. Initially, Iran was in a cooperative mould with the Americans. It had played an active role at the Bonn conference (Maloney, 2008). Hamid Karzai was nominated as President of the interim government in the country even though he received only three votes against 11 by Prof Sattar Sirat, a Zahir Shah loyalist. However, once President Bush declared Iran as an "axis of evil" in 2002, the latter had to revisit its Taliban policy.

Tehran's deep involvement in the Middle East developments compelled it to pay marginal attention to the Afghan issue. However, it secured its interests by maintaining balanced relationships with successive Afghan regimes (Karzai and Ashraf Ghani) and the Taliban (Abedin, 2019). There have been bilateral irritants on water sharing, Shia minority's issues, narcotics smuggling to Iran, and Afghan refugees, especially those working in Iran. However, on balance, Iran maintained a stable relationship with Afghanistan during the past two decades.

Now that the Taliban are in power, Iran may contemplate the emerging challenges and opportunities that the new situation in its volatile neighbourhood may develop. The foremost issue is the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and Afghan refugees' influx in neighbouring countries including Iran. Already there are reports of 300,000 Afghans taking shelter in Iran ever since the Taliban got control of Kabul (NRC, 2021). Almost 90 per cent of the Afghan population has plunged into poverty, of which 60 per cent may face starvation, including over a million children vulnerable to acute malnutrition.

With regard to recognition of the Taliban regime, Iran has opted for following the regional approach. During the SCO summit, heads of state and government agreed to recognise the Taliban regime collectively.

This paper focuses on the evolving approaches of Iran and Pakistan over the Afghan issue with a diachronic comparison of the past two decades. The two countries have realised that a stable Afghanistan in the neighbourhood is imperative for peace and stability in the region. Given

Iran's engagements in the Middle East and Pakistan's adversarial relations with India, both countries do not want a second front next door in the shape of chaotic Afghanistan. Pakistan has also realised that India took undue advantage of protracted instability in Afghanistan by propping up Pakistani dissidents through the use of Afghan soil. A cooperative environment in Afghanistan is discernible in the immediate neighbourhood of Afghanistan. However, the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the war-torn country remains a source of deep concern, especially for the immediate neighbours.

2. Background on Iran's recent approaches towards Afghanistan

2.1 TEHRAN'S VIEW OF THE U.S.-TALIBAN AGREEMENT

Initially, the Iranian reaction to the U.S. and the Taliban agreement at Doha on withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan displayed confusion. While dismissing the agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban as the American ploy to "legitimize its occupation of Afghanistan" (Reuters, 2020), the Iranian Foreign Ministry statement read in part: "The Islamic Republic of Iran believes lasting peace will be established in Afghanistan only through intra-Afghan talks attended by the country's political groups, including the Taliban, while taking into account the considerations of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries." Realizing the consequences of the American withdrawal, the Iranian commentators and officials started saying that the agreement could prove to be an added burden to Iran, which has serious concerns about the deal creating instability in neighbouring Afghanistan (Kermani, 2020).

During the past five years, it became evident that the Iranian government had accepted the legitimacy of the Taliban as a major stakeholder in the Afghan crisis. However, if Afghanistan plunges into chaos, Iran's political system will be saddled with another burden draining its political, diplomatic and economic resources, which are already scarce given its involvement in various regional crises (Kermani, 2020). For the time being, Iran's borders would be secure of the American pressure on its eastern and western fronts.

2.2 IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH THE TALIBAN PRIOR TO 9/11

Iran intended to establish its hegemony in Afghanistan after the fall of the Najibullah regime in April 1992. Iran's revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, opposed Soviet rule in Afghanistan and was a proponent of the spread of the Islamic Revolution under Velayat-e-faqih (rule by the Islamic jurisprudence) (Arabi, 2019). Afghanistan's Shia religious scholars at the time supported different views on the role of religion in government. Tehran provided substantial support to groups that followed the Khomeini line. Several Afghan Shia groups based in Iran owed allegiance to Imam Khomeini; the prominent Shia group was Hezb-e Wahdat (Sarabi, 2006).

However, in the initial days of the Iranian revolution, plagued by internal unrest and Saddam Hussein's attacks in 1980, the Iranian regime could not pay much attention or resources to its eastern neighbour. Afghan mujahedeen, dominated by Sunni groups, received additional support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, although Iran helped organise and direct Afghan Shia mujahedeen groups. Iran was not part of the talks held between Pakistan and the Afghan regime under the United Nations auspices. The former USSR and the U.S. oversaw the parleys known as Geneva Talks. These talks spanned over six years, culminating in an agreement called the Geneva Accords, under which the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Ironically, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan could not bring stability as the mujahideen groups fighting the Soviets started grabbing territories under their control to establish their fiefdoms.

Iran's involvement in Afghanistan increased after the Soviet departure and the fall of the Najibullah government in 1992. The war with Iraq ended in 1988, allowing Iran to spare resources to spread its influence in Afghanistan. From 1992 to 1996, Tehran backed several mujahedeen groups fighting for the control of Afghanistan, particularly Kabul. Iran not only supported the Burhanuddin Rabbani government in Kabul at the time but also assisted Hezb-e Wahdat, involved in the armed struggle with the Taliban government, thus demonstrating Iran's partisan approach towards Afghanistan.⁶

⁶ For details, visit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Alliance

Immediately after the Taliban conquest in 1996, Iran emerged as a major supporter of what came to be known as the Northern Alliance (or Northern Front), an Afghan opposition group made up of various ethnic groups—Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras—from northern and central Afghanistan (Taneja, 2021). This alliance was led by deposed ethnic Tajik President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. Other influential leaders included Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum and Tajik warlord Ismail Khan, Rabbani and Massoud's Jamiat-e Islami. Iran, along with Russia, provided arms and funding to the Northern Alliance throughout the civil war, while Pakistan and Saudi Arabia supported the Taliban.⁷

Since 1979, Iran's policy on Afghanistan evolved as the changes in Afghanistan's domestic politics took shape. Iran strived for a friendly government in Afghanistan to establish its influence in the politico-cultural arena in the country. Toward those and other goals, Iran had created "spheres of influence" inside Afghanistan. During the Soviet occupation (1979-88), Iran created an "ideological sphere of influence" by empowering the Shi'ites. Iran then created a "political sphere of influence" by unifying the Dari/Persian-speaking minorities, who ascended to power after the fall of the communist regime headed by Najibullah. However, unlike Pakistan, Iran never served as a base for the insurgency against Soviet occupiers or the Taliban. By not creating refugee camps, Iran better integrated those Afghans in exile into its society, although Pakistan provided the better educational opportunity and social acceptance (Milani, 2006). Iranian policies added fuel to the ferocious civil war in the 1990s. Iran considered the Taliban rule as a threat to its interests and helped create a "sphere of resistance" to counter the "Kabul-Islamabad-Riyadh" axis by supporting the Northern Alliance (Milani, 2006). After the fall of the Taliban, it succeeded in sustaining influence with the successive Afghan governments.

2.3 IRAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS AFTER THE U.S. INVASION

Iran certainly enjoyed a powerful influence in Afghanistan in the past century. Its cultural and religious ties with the Afghans provide a natural source of profit, in addition to foreign powers such as the United States,

⁷ For more details, visit: <<http://www.understandingwar.org/iran-and-afghanistan>>

Russia, and India (Weinbaum, 2006). Iran has been maintaining strong political ties to Afghanistan's central government, in addition to powerful soldiers and military chiefs in the Afghan armed forces; during the past one decade, the Iranian and Afghan economies became highly interconnected. Several other issues affecting Iranian-Afghan relations include disputes over water rights; drugs flowing from Afghanistan, with a large number of Afghan refugees in Iran, for the last time in recent years, a source of tensions between the two countries (Nader et al., 2014). Iran has been well aware that it may be an influential voice in Afghanistan, it may face significant challenges, even after the withdrawal of the American troops (Nader et al., 2014).

Tehran has always felt uneasy about the Afghan government's firm reliance on the United States but felt unable to do much about it. Iran's support for a stable Afghanistan and a politically secure Karzai and later Ghani led governments were expected to enable Afghanistan to lean less on the United States (Weinbaum, 2006). However, Iran was aware of its limitations due to the U.S.-led coalition's presence in Afghanistan. It also realised that the American presence next to its borders could prove detrimental to its security should Tehran raise more objections (Sadat & Hughes, 2010).

The most fundamental strategic error of the George W. Bush administration following September 11, 2001, was launching a "Global War on Terrorism" that failed to distinguish correctly between those responsible for the 9/11 attacks and other U.S. adversaries. This hubristic and grandiose agenda weakened U.S. focus, alienated allies, and deprived the United States of opportunities to lessen hostility with historic foes (Slavin, 2021). It put the United States on a path toward unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, culminating in humiliating withdrawals from both.

In the beginning, the Iranians showed sympathy to the United States after 9/11 holding candlelight vigils on the streets of Tehran. The Iranian government cooperated indirectly with the U.S. military to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and worked openly with the U.S. State Department to form a new government in Kabul (Fassihi, 2021). The 9/11 provided a rare opportunity to Iran and the U.S. to come closed and shun their differences. It was Javad Zarif, then deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs of Iran, who procured a commitment from that of the new Afghan government to hold democratic elections and combat

international terrorism (Slavin, 2021). U.S. officials have since acknowledged that Iranian pressure on the Northern Alliance had allowed Hamid Karzai to become the first post-Taliban President of Afghanistan.

At the same time, Iran and the United States held a series of backchannel talks in Geneva and Paris that dealt with Afghanistan and rolling up Al-Qaeda members fleeing into Iran from Afghanistan. However, the Bush administration showed no interest in building upon those talks to improve ties with Tehran, even ignoring Iranian warnings about the consequences of invading Iraq and subsequent overtures for broader dialogue after the 2003 U.S. invasion. Bush also proclaimed a "Freedom Agenda", seemingly threatening Iran with regime change following similar U.S.-engineered overthrows in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Bush administration reneged on a promise to turn over leaders of the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq. This militant Iranian opposition group harboured by Saddam was a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organisation in return for Al-Qaeda figures detained in Iran. In his State of the Union address in 2002, these talks were interrupted when Bush included Iran, along with North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, as part of an "axis of evil" (Slavin, 2021).

During the period of Taliban rule, Tehran was convinced that the militant movement was a creation of its enemies intended as a strategic distraction. Tehran is particularly on guard that Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism does not become ascendant. Iran considers itself a patron of its coreligionists in Afghanistan and takes seriously its advocacy of good treatment for Shia, mainly ethnic Hazaras. While Tehran's relationship with Afghan Shiite political parties and militias has not always been close, it has consistently favoured a multiethnic Afghan government. Iran also prefers a government in Kabul strong enough to act independently of Islamabad, Riyadh, and Washington (Slavin, 2021).

3. The U.S. & Saudi factors: Impact on Iran's Afghan policy challenges and responses

3.1 IRANIAN REACTION TO THE TALIBAN'S CAPTURE OF KABUL

American hostility towards Iran served as a lesson for the latter to revisit its policy towards the Taliban. The Iranian authorities have cautiously welcomed Afghanistan's new rulers, stressing that Tehran will base its policy on the Taliban's behaviour. During a speech on August 28, Supreme

Leader Ali Khamenei said: "We support the nation of Afghanistan. Governments come and go. What remains is the Afghan nation. The nature of our relations with governments depends on the nature of their relations with us."⁸ Iranian President Raisi also welcomed the U.S.'s departure from Afghanistan. He told the outgoing Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif that "The defeat of the United States in neighbouring Afghanistan should be transformed into an opportunity to 'revive life, security and lasting peace' in the country" (Motamedi, 2021).

Iranian officials see the U.S. withdrawal as a surrender to the Taliban, a relatively small, ideologically driven militia group, a victory that they feel vindicates their investment in the "Axis of Resistance" and its regional network of militia groups. It is likely to encourage Iran's "offensive realist" regional strategy; potentially exacerbating tensions because of the latter's zero-sum rationale once the eastern flank is secured after the withdrawal of the American troops (Fathollah-N & Azizi, 2021). Tehran has recently been publicly redefining its relations with the Taliban, an erstwhile archenemy. But after 9/11 and the Taliban insurgency against the NATO/U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, Iranian-Afghan tensions took a back seat, as the headache created by the Taliban for the U.S. and its coalition partners suited the Iranian interests.

However, only in 2015, relations between Tehran and the Taliban started to attract international attention. From that point on, Iran gradually made its contacts with the Taliban public, justifying it as an effort to reconcile rival interests in a neighbouring country (France 24, 2021). Another plausible explanation offered by the Iranian observers is that once the U.S. allowed the Taliban's office in Doha in 2013, it became clear to Iran that the U.S. was gearing for negotiations with the religious militia. Iran could not stay aloof to the unfolding developments next door.

Moreover, by mid-2015, when the nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), broke the ice between Iran and the U.S., it created space for a thaw in the Iran-US relations despite Saudi and Israeli reservations (Al-Jazeera, 2015). Therefore, it was prudent for Iran to look around its neighbourhood and order its priorities, including viz-a-viz Afghanistan, more specifically towards the Taliban. No one could object to

⁸ The tweet can be seen here: <https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1431554721844797442>

Iran's relations with the Taliban, including the Americans, as the latter was in dialogue with the religious militia.

3.2 IRAN-TALIBAN RELATIONS

Pre-9/11, Iran viewed Pakistan as a competitor in Afghanistan. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the subsequent tilt of the new Afghan setup towards the United States, Iran saw benefit in reestablishing contacts with the Taliban in early 2005. When the Taliban started their full-fledged operations against the U.S. and Afghan government positions, it suited Iran to watch the U.S. bleeding in Afghanistan. For Iran, the rag-tag militia, which it despised as "barbaric" turned out to be an asset to keep the Iranian borders safe. The newfound engagement between the Iranian officials and the Taliban was a "marriage of convenience" where the Taliban promised to maintain tranquillity along the Iran-Afghan border in return for financial and military assistance. Iran also facilitated the Taliban to use the Iranian territory for recuperation (Rubin, 2016).

Concurrently, Tehran backed Hamid Karzai's and Ashraf Ghani's administrations. Although Iran denies providing material support to the Taliban, it acknowledged maintaining "diplomatic ties" with the Taliban. On the parallel track, Iran and the U.S. had common interests in uniting against common enemies, i.e. the Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (Daesh) (Stone, 2020). When former Taliban leader Mullah Mansour was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan in 2016, he travelled from Iranian Balochistan to Pakistani Balochistan. His passport showed multiple Iranian stamps. The current emir, Haibatullah, also sought refuge in Iran in 2017 (Giustozzi, 2017).

The two decades of the American-led coalition's presence in Afghanistan may have temporarily relieved the war-ravaged country. Still, they could not address endemic political problems so deeply entrenched in a traditional orthodox society. The power play in the country had its roots in history, especially ever since the Soviets invaded the land. In terms of religiosity, both the Taliban and pro-American regimes were Islamic and conservative in their make-up. Iran's options were limited; it could, at best, maintain balance with the evolving Afghan political culture, which traditionally looked for outside support. Iran opted for maintaining a balance with the successive governments dependent on the U.S. largesse

and the Taliban, who were fiercely resisting the American occupation (Sarkar, 2020).

It is no more a secret that given Iran's troubled history with the Taliban and ideological differences, they entered into a relationship of convenience with the Taliban (Jehl, 1998). Beyond the main convergence of interests of U.S. forces' withdrawal from the region, Iran and the Taliban have also cooperated in fighting the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and thus denied it a foothold in western Afghanistan along the border with Iran.⁹ ISKP, a Sunni extremist terrorist group, is a logical enemy of Iran, a Shia Islamist power. ISKP also opposes the Taliban for ideological and political reasons.

Moreover, Iran has been watchful of pro-Saudi and pro-Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan as during the 1990s. Iran's concerns arise primarily from fears of Sunni hardliners in the Taliban regime gaining power who remained more aligned towards Saudi interests during the Taliban's first government. Iran is mindful that Saudi Arabia and UAE have been less forthcoming about the Taliban's capture of Kabul, primarily because they are watchful of the American mood and also that now Qatar has taken the lead in the Afghan affairs (*The Economist*, 2021).

In recent years, Saudi Arabia's harsh stance against Qatar, where the Taliban maintained their political office, and Qatar's improved relations with Tehran have helped Iran and the Taliban come closer. Qatar also watches the U.S. interest in Kabul and still maintains the Taliban's political office in Doha. Given these concerns, Iran would want to maintain good relations with the Taliban to keep peace along its borders (Alvi, 2021). This also explains Iran's ability and willingness to play different roles depending on the context and changing circumstances.

Iran has supported an "inclusive" government in the Taliban cabinet, favouring representation to Shias and ethnic minorities with whom it had maintained partnership during the Taliban's first government (1996-2001). While Iran did not directly criticise the Taliban for its interim cabinet, it expressed concern over its composition. Foreign Minister Hossein

⁹ Views were expressed in a roundtable discussion on Antonio Giustozzi's new book, "The Islamic State in Khorasan," held in August 2019. Transcript can be seen here: <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-a-look-into-the-islamic-state-khorasan>

Amirabollahian said in a statement that Iran was following up on the formation of "an inclusive government with the participation of all people" and hoped the Taliban would abide by its promises for such an administration (Motamedi, 2021a).

The day the Taliban captured Kabul, newly inaugurated Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi cheered the United States' "military defeat and withdrawal." But, according to western analysts, although Iran may be happy to have U.S. troops gone from its northeastern border, the reconstituted Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan poses another set of challenges Tehran's decision-makers have been reluctant to debate openly. As much as Iran has supported the Taliban in recent years, worrisome scenarios for Tehran include the Taliban turning against Iran or Afghanistan's Shiite minority as well as the spectre of Sunni jihadism metastasizing westward (Lim, 2021).

3.3 FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES & THREATS FOR IRAN

Iran may also be aware of the formidable threat the Taliban can pose to Iran if the latter plays a spoiler's role. Three possible scenarios may emerge that can dent the ongoing détente between Iran and Afghanistan's ruling clerics.

- First, if the relationship between the two deteriorates, the Taliban will have no qualms to play the role of Saudi proxy and create troubles in the Iranian Balochistan, a restive Sunni majority Baloch province with a history of unrest for decades (Takeyh, 2021).
- Second, the Taliban's repressive tactics against the minority Shia Hazaras may create bad blood with Tehran, forcing the latter to react against the Taliban government. Already Tehran-trained Fatemiyoun brigade Hazara youth have reportedly returned to Afghanistan and may put up resistance if the Shias are suppressed in the country, or the Taliban allow sanctuaries to the Baloch dissidents (Takeyh, 2021).
- Third, if the sectarian situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, Iran may revert to the pre-9/11 mould by reviving the Iran-India-Russia nexus and creating difficulties for the Taliban rule (Nader et al., 2014a).

However, for the time being, the above scenarios seem remote due to emerging consensus amongst the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan to cease and discourage proxies to disturb the security situation in the country further. Already the Taliban are grappling with the growing Daesh/ISIS attacks and the humanitarian crisis pushing the ordinary people to starvation.

3.4 IRAN'S VULNERABILITIES IN AFGHANISTAN AND MIDDLE EAST

Significantly, Iran sees the Afghan problem through the lens of the Middle Eastern conflict, where it apprehends that Saudi Arabia may use Afghan-based proxies against it. What worries Tehran most is that based on experience, Saudi involvement in Afghan affairs would shrink the space for Tehran, especially when the Taliban are in the driving seat. Additionally, Iranians have been sceptical of the American oft-repeated statements of "regime change". Iran believed that the U.S. could use Afghanistan as a springboard to foster cross-border terrorism to destabilise Iran (Lüders, 2019).

Tehran also feared that the U.S. objective in Afghanistan was to create a Syria-like situation in the region that would engulf Iran in violence and anarchy. However, the earlier assessments that Saudis, Emiratis and U.S. may destabilise Iran have proved wrong. After the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, Saudis and Emiratis are watching the unfolding events in the country from the margins. It is a "wait and see" game that the relevant stakeholders have played ever since the Taliban came to power. The withdrawal of the American troops has lessened Iran's worries of direct American involvement (Choksy et al., 2021).

After 9/11, Iran considered itself vulnerable due to the American presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. The U.S. invasion of Iraq proved to be a blessing in disguise for Iran as it helped Iran expand its influence amongst the Shi'ite population of Iraq. It also enabled Iran to create the "Shia crescent" traversing through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, which Israel considered an Israeli state's encirclement. Iran became more embroiled in the Middle East, but it secured its borders by maintaining good relations with the successive Afghan governments and the Taliban. This policy served Iran's interest best.

Iran is a formidable power in the Middle East, having exploited opportunities arising from the U.S. invasion of Iraq and wars in Syria and Yemen (Frum, 2019). To the U.S. and its allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – such an ambition constitutes an intolerable threat (ICG, 2018). After U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran may be feeling more secure. Still, given the ongoing uncertainties in Afghanistan under the Taliban, especially regarding the humanitarian crisis in the country, Iran's vulnerabilities remain intact. It may face a grave situation if Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis turns into a catastrophe and forces millions of Afghans to seek refuge in the neighbourhood, including Iran, already bearing the burden of three million refugees.

Iran's sense of insecurity is rooted in the tumultuous post-1979 era. It particularly faced strategic solitude during the traumatic eight-year war with Iraq. The West and almost all Arab states supported the Saddam Hussein regime to contain Iran's emerging revolutionary order, which seemed bent on exporting its revolution throughout the Muslim world (ICG, 2018). It applied the same yardstick on Afghanistan during and after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and continued to play proxy with its favourite Afghan Mujahideen groups. Concurrently, Iran forged a close bond with the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad and helped establish Hezbollah in Lebanon, a group it has supplied militarily via Syria ever since.

Since the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, Iran has followed a two-pronged policy in Afghanistan: first, preserve stability and support the Afghan central government, and second, oppose the presence of foreign forces in the country (Barzegar, 2014). However, because of tensions with the US, Iran pursued a third course which allowed it to mend fences with the Taliban since 2005. Moreover, Iran perceived the presence of U.S. forces as part of Washington's strategy to strengthen its strategic position in Central and South Asia and the Persian Gulf at the expense of Iran's national and security interests. Iran also believed that U.S. policies in Afghanistan would undermine Iran's legitimate demands, including reestablishing close political and economic ties between the Iranian and Afghan governments. Therefore, Iran criticized the 2012 U.S.–Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), which provided the framework for U.S.-Afghan relations after the 2016 drawdown, maintaining that such an agreement was against the traditional neutrality of Afghanistan in South

and Central Asia, consequently sowing distrust in regional states' relations (Aljazeera, 2012).

4. Iran's regional approach

4.1 IRAN'S SECURING ITS INTERESTS IN A VOLATILE REGION

Iran has been supportive of a regional approach to solving the Afghan crisis. Even while it had an adversarial relationship with the U.S. in the Middle East, including the murder of Al-Qods force commander Gen. Soleimani, Iran avoided any retaliatory attacks on the U.S. bases or interests in Afghanistan (Abedin, 2019). Iran's detractors maintain that its job was effectively done by the Taliban, which ultimately forced the Americans to leave Afghanistan. Similarly, at the regional level, Iran has cooperated with all efforts undertaken by Russia or Pakistan. On the strategic level, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has secured Iran's eastern borders from American retribution (Esfandiari, 2021). As regards its western border, the Iraqi parliament's decision to demand the exit of the U.S. troops has come as a great success for the Iranian diplomacy. With that, Iran may have effectively won the battle of influence in Iraq (Connable, 2020). Therefore, with the withdrawal of the American troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran's borders with the immediate neighbours have been secured.

While former President Trump tightened the noose around Iran by withdrawing from the nuclear deal (JCPOA) and enforcing strict sanctions against Iran, these sanctions have adversely affected Iran's economy. To counter the American punitive measures, Iran has warmed up its relations with China. China has agreed to invest \$400 billion in Iran for 25 years (Fassihi & Myers, 2021), mainly in the energy sector, which the U.S. has heavily sanctioned. While overcoming the natural barriers to expanding trade along the CPEC route remains a challenge, the evolving scenario could see Pakistan becoming a conduit for the Iranian oil and gas headed to China, presumably on a pipeline from Balochistan to Xinjiang (Safdar & Zabin, 2020). Indeed, a partnership between Pakistan, China and Iran would have tremendous advantages in the geo-economic realm.

From a broader perspective, Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, the Central Asian States and Turkey have all the trappings of emerging as a new block to countering security threats and engaging in the economic growth and

stability of the region. Afghanistan can serve as a bridge to such a block. India has been a reluctant partner in the SCO due to its alignment with the U.S. as a strategic partner in the QUAD and Indo-pacific alliance intended to counter China. However, the above countries can emerge as a powerful block even without India because of geographical contiguity and an emerging geostrategic environment.

Although India does not share borders with Afghanistan, it has been actively involved in Afghan politics and used Afghan soil against Pakistan. In a way, India opened a second front against Pakistan. To achieve its objectives, India has been striving to rope in Iran on issues that may be at variance with Iran, including Afghanistan. However, the Iranian perception changed after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, particularly President Bush's designation of Iran as an "axis of evil".

The two-way trade between India and Iran, which had exceeded \$17 billion in 2018-19, could reach \$30-35 billion by 2021 had the oil imports not been stopped by India. In May 2019, under the pressure of stringent economic sanctions from the Trump administration, New Delhi had brought oil imports from Tehran down to zero (Basu, 2021). Overall, it has been a frustrating experience for India as while India complied with the American sanctions against Iran and Indian firms have lessened their presence in the Iranian market, Chinese companies have moved in to replace them. Some analysts argue that India's decision to fund the Chabahar port expansion in Iran was driven by Pakistan's February 2013 decision to allow China to operate the Gwadar Port (Aneja, 2103).

Concurrently, India has been trying to reinvigorate the former nexus between India, Iran and Russia. A few weeks before the fall of Kabul, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar undertook visits to Tehran and Moscow to gauge the mood of his hosts (Gupta, 2021). However, the mood in the immediate neighbourhood of Afghanistan supports consensus on Afghanistan and discouraging attempts that may create frictions amongst the regional countries.

4.2 IRAN-AFGHANISTAN IRRITANTS

Iran harbours deep concerns about conditions in Afghanistan that have high economic and social costs for Iran (Alterman & Clarke, 2021). It houses millions of Afghan refugees from successive cycles of war and upheaval;

the transit of opium has created a tragic culture of addiction inside Iran and has had a corrupting effect on security forces responsible for monitoring cross-border trade; and sectarian and ethnic stresses in Afghanistan have their repercussions in Shia Iran and for Iranians serving in Afghanistan. Most importantly, Iran sees prospects for the return of the Taliban to power as destabilizing for the region, even while it hedges its bets and develops its ambiguous ties to the Taliban. The following issues may engage both the countries in the coming days and weeks:

Border issues – Iran has a 938-kilometre border with Afghanistan. It has worked with Afghan security forces to control border crossings where billions of dollars worth of illicit drugs and smuggled goods cross each year (Aljazeera, 2021). Being deeply involved in the Mideastern politics, Iran would prefer peace along its eastern borders with Afghanistan.

Narcotics – During the past two decades, Afghanistan has emerged as the largest producer of the world's opium. With nearly 90 per cent production (Sufizada, 2020), half of that amount enters Iran, to be used by Iran's estimated four million drug addicts and transits through Iran to reach other markets in Europe and the Middle East.

Water – Iran's arid east depends on waters that originate in the mountains of central Afghanistan. The water dispute between the two countries is almost a century old, and a treaty signed in 1973 was insufficient to regularize water management. Iran has to calibrate how its dependence on Afghan waters is resolved with its long-term interest in Afghanistan's economic development (Nader et al., 2014b). Iran has been sceptical of the international efforts to build power-generating dams for Afghanistan, which it sees as an attempt to weaken Iran.

Refugees – Iran has approximately 800,000 registered and over 2.3 million undocumented Afghan refugees as of 2020. According to UNHCR, only 275,000 have returned home since 2001. On occasions, Iran has used forced repatriation of Afghan refugees as leverage on the Afghan governments. Some returnees report harsh treatment by Iranian security forces, thus damaging Iran's image and creating cultural tensions between the two societies (Nader et al., 2014b). Iran would be inclined to adopt a common strategy with Pakistan at the international level for the return of the bulk of Afghan refugees to their country

Minority rights – Iran would be keen to protect approximately four million Hazara minority's rights in Afghanistan. It would also be interested in proper representation of the other Afghan minorities (the Persian/Dari speaking Tajiks, Ismailis, and other smaller groups). It may raise their issues with the Taliban interlocutors in future. Iran's investments in infrastructure and reconstruction projects have tended to be in the Hazara-populated areas, including Tajik-dominated Herat, once considered Afghanistan's most stable and prosperous city (Nader et al., 2014b).

Baloch insurgency – Iran is suspicious of a U.S. role in the Baloch insurgency that has plagued southeastern Iran ever since the Islamic revolution. In the recent past, cross-border activity by the insurgent groups *Jundullah* and *Jaishe Adl* had increased during 2009-2016, which caused tensions between Pakistan and Iran. However, Pakistan established Frontier Constabulary (F.C.) 's Southern Command headed by a Major General to look after the Iranian border exclusively. This step brought tangible improvement and dramatically reduced militant activity along Pakistan-Iran borders.¹⁰ Pakistan has voiced similar concerns with Iran and the involvement of Pakistani Baloch insurgents finding safe havens in the Iranian Balochistan with the aid of Indian handlers and sponsors. Concerns from both sides must be addressed, and further reassurances sought from the Taliban regime to ensure that the shared borders between the three countries are secure.

5. Iran's outlook towards the Taliban regime

5.1 A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Iran tried to broker peace twice by hosting meetings between the Taliban delegation and a group of Afghan figures who support the republican system.¹¹ However, once the Afghan army started melting down in provinces and finally, President Ashraf Ghani fled the country on August 15, Tehran had no option but to accept new realities.

The Iranian government maintained cordial relations with the Ashraf Ghani government and had substantially increased its trade links with Afghanistan. The Iranian Customs Organisation recorded \$2 billion in trade

¹⁰ Author's observations as Pakistan's ambassador to Iran from 2016 to 2018.

¹¹ For details, see: <<https://media.tehrantimes.com/d/t/2021/07/27/0/3841527.pdf>>

with Afghanistan from March 2020 to February 2021 (*Tehran Times*, 2021). After the Taliban came into power, Iran has maintained normal trade relations with Afghanistan, although the volume of trade has fallen by 15 per cent since the Taliban came to power.

Meanwhile, Iran and India agreed to develop Chabahar Port for the transit of Indian goods to Afghanistan. The port serves as an alternative to transit facilities offered by Pakistan to Afghan goods and services (Aljazeera, 2016). Secondly, the port would serve as an entry port for the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC), linking India to Russia and Europe. For Iran, the Chabahar port serves as an alternative trade opportunity in the wake of American sanctions. Since Afghanistan began pursuing connectivity projects, including Chabahar, in the region, the trade value between Afghanistan and Pakistan through the Torkham border declined to \$500 million from \$2.5 billion (Buneri, 2020). After the Taliban came into power, the volume of trade along the Pakistan-Afghan border has increased many folds. However, the bulk of the business is carried out in Pakistani currency.

Iran has adopted a pragmatic approach by maintaining normal relations with the Taliban government. For Tehran, the top priority has been tranquility along its eastern borders when Daesh/ISIS have become more active after the Taliban's takeover. Similarly, Iran has preferred to conduct regular trade with the Taliban regime, a gesture appreciated by the Taliban when the country needs food security. Nevertheless, Iran would remain watchful of the developments unfolding in Afghanistan, focusing on Shia minorities and Iran's partners in the erstwhile Northern Alliance.

5.2 PAKISTAN-IRAN UNDERSTANDING ON AFGHANISTAN

After the fall of the Taliban, Pakistan and Iran did not share much on the Afghan situation, especially when the U.S. declared Pakistan as a non-NATO ally. Iranians entertained a grudge against Pakistan for doing the American bidding in Afghanistan. Iran also realised that its opposition to the Taliban incurred greater harm to its interests in Afghanistan when the Americans entered Afghanistan and reached the Iranian borders. After the American attack on Iraq, Iran was virtually trapped by the Americans from the two sides. Later on, the American attack on Iraq proved to be a blessing in disguise for Iran. However, at the time, Iran feared that Pakistan might also fall to American pressure.

At the bilateral plane, both Iran and Pakistan have supported peace and stability in Afghanistan. In 2017, the two countries started bilateral consultations at the Directors General level in the respective Foreign Offices to discuss the Afghan situation. By then, it was becoming clear that Afghanistan was heading towards more chaos as the Taliban were gaining more ground. However, the two countries have not adopted a common course on political developments in Afghanistan, although they have made common causes about the repatriation of Afghan refugees to their country.

Pakistan and Iran have been part of the consensus amongst the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan to take a collective decision about recognition of the Taliban regime (RFERL, 2021). This is unprecedented in the history of the region. Prime Minister Imran Khan, in an interview with the BBC, echoed the Tashkent consensus on the sidelines of the SCO summit, which in a way may set the stage of emerging regional consensus on Afghanistan.¹² In fact, this consensus may be a precursor to the emergence of a formidable regional block of countries neighbouring Afghanistan.

6. Conclusion

The Biden administration's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan provided a mixed bag of potential and uncertain benefits for Iran, as well as many potential challenges. First and foremost, Tehran's reading that a militia group outdid the U.S. was perceived by Iranian policymakers as a vindication of their policy of supporting Islamist militias and movements as the best way to restrain and defeat Washington in the Middle East. It is as yet unclear how far Iran's efforts to rebrand the Taliban domestically as a reformed group will turn from a narrative into a reality, just as it is too early to predict how Taliban-ruled Afghanistan will act (Fathollah-N & Azizi, 2021).

In sum, Tehran hopes to benefit from the Taliban takeover in geopolitical and economic terms. The new geopolitical landscape, Iran hopes, will provide it with a chance to enhance its relations with China and Russia by presenting itself as the Middle East's indispensable power. Iranian officials have emphasized their "Look East" foreign-policy orientation, and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could be an unexpected gift in this regard,

¹² PM Imran Khan's interview with BBC's John Simpson on 22nd of September 2021.

providing a more successful "Eastern" anchoring, supported by Iran's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Fathollah-N & Azizi, 2021). However, there are numerous uncertainties regarding how the Taliban will govern, and these will prevent Iranian officials from entirely relying on the ideological and geopolitical gains they seem to have achieved in Afghanistan, at least for now (Fathollah-N & Azizi, 2021).

At the political plane, more interaction with diversified cultures and religions may widen the Taliban's worldview. Once the Iranian clergies were ultra-conservative during Imam Khomeini's days, but they changed gradually. Still, the hijab may be an issue in Iran, but other social freedoms maintain the equilibrium in Iranian society, of course, with a deep Iranian cultural imprint. The same is possible in Afghanistan, provided there is a sustained engagement with the theocratic order in that country. However, the change may take longer due to the orthodox nature of the Afghan society than Iran.

Iran is conscious of the unfolding situation in Afghanistan, especially the economic condition in the country. It is becoming challenging for the Taliban officials to arrest the sharp economic downturn. For Iran and Pakistan, the biggest worry would be the influx of Afghan refugees if the ongoing trend in the Afghan economy persists for another five to six months. Therefore, prudence demands that the two countries adopt a common approach to Afghanistan at the regional and international fora to address their concerns effectively.

Finally, Pakistan is the second largest Muslim country in the world with eighty per cent Sunni population. Similarly, Pakistan also has the second largest Shia population after Iran. Being the neighbour of Iranian and Taliban theocratic orders, Pakistan will have to tread carefully to secure the Pakistani way of life and its political system, free of sectarian prejudices.

References

- Abedin, Mahan. 2019. "How Iran found its feet in Afghanistan." *Foreign Affairs*, October 24th.
<<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2019-10-24/how-iran-found-its-feet-afghanistan>>
- Al-Jazeera. 2015. "Why Saudi Arabia and Israel oppose Iran nuclear deal." April 14th. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/14/why-saudi-arabia-and-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal>>
- Aljazeera. 2012. "US-Afghan partnership deal 'agreed upon'." April 23rd. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/4/23/us-afghan-partnership-deal-agreed-upon>>
- Aljazeera. 2016. "Indian, Iran and Afghanistan sign trade corridor deal." May 24th. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2016/5/24/indian-iran-and-afghanistan-sign-trade-corridor-deal>>
- Aljazeera. 2021. "Pakistan and Iran discuss border security, Afghanistan." October 6th. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/6/pakistan-and-iran-discuss-border-security-afghanistan>>
- Alterman, John & C. Clarke. 2021. "Iran's interests in Afghanistan." Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), September 7th. <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/irans-interests-afghanistan>>
- Alvi, Hayat. 2021. "Taliban control creates new risk for the region: clashes with India or Iran." *The Hill*, August 16th. <<https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/567963-taliban-control-creates-new-risk-for-the-region-clashes-with-india>>
- Aneja, Atul. 2103. "India to develop Iranian port." *The Hindu*, May 5th. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-to-develop-iranian-port/article4684162.ece?__cf_chl_captcha_tk__=IPU_b2HvrE9OBYG7_Kfx_zlD76xo3T7FCXgeI9u0gU-1638097888-0-gaNycGzNGuU>
- Arabi, Kasra. 2019. "The fundamentals of Iran's Islamic revolution." Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, February 11th. <<https://institute.global/policy/fundamentals-irans-islamic-revolution>>
- Barzegar, Kayhan. 2014. "Iran's foreign policy in post-Taliban Afghanistan." *The Washington Quarterly*, 37 (2), Summer. <<https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/twq/v37i2/04.html>>

- Basu, Nayanima. 2021. "Iran expects 'friend' India to resume oil purchase soon, says envoy Chegeni." *The Print*, November 1st. <<https://theprint.in/diplomacy/iran-expects-friend-india-to-resume-oil-purchases-soon-says-envoy-chegeni/759669>>
- Buneri, Aziz. 2020. "Pakistan, Afghanistan not exploiting trade potential despite 24 hour border opening", *Pakistan Today*, February 3rd. <<https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/02/03/pakistan-afghanistan-not-exploiting-trade-potential-despite-24-hour-border-opening>>
- Choksy, Jamsheed K., et al. 2021. "No friend of Iran: Tehran's responses to the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan." *E-International Relations*, September 13th. <<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/09/13/no-friend-of-iran-tehrans-responses-to-the-talibans-return-to-power-in-afghanistan>>
- Connable, Ben. 2020. "Iraq's vote to expel U.S. is Iran's true victory." *RAND Blog*, January 6th. <<https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/01/iraqs-vote-to-expel-us-troops-is-irans-true-victory.html>>
- Esfandiari, Golnaz. 2021. "US withdrawal could bring Iran opportunities, threats." *RFERL*, April 21st. <<https://www.rferl.org/a/us-afghanistan-withdrawal-iran-opportunities-threats/31215905.html>>
- Fassihi, Farnaz & S.L. Myers. 2021. "China, with \$ 400 billion Iran deal, could deepen influence in Mideast." *New York Times*, March 27th. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/middleeast/china-iran-deal.html>>
- Fassihi, Farnaz. 2021. "Iran wanted U.S. out of Afghanistan. It may be sorry the wish came true." *New York Times*, November 3rd. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/26/world/middleeast/iran-taliban-afghanistan.html>>
- Fathollah-N, Ali & H. Azizi. 2021. "Iran and the Taliban after the US fiasco in Afghanistan." *Middle East Institute*, September 22nd. <<https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-and-taliban-after-us-fiasco-afghanistan>>
- France 24. 2021. "Iran wary but pragmatic as Taliban resurges next door." July 17th. <<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210717-iran-wary-but-pragmatic-as-taliban-resurges-next-door>>
- Frum, David. 2019. "Take it from an Iraq war supporter—war with Iran would be a Disaster." *The Atlantic*, May 16th.

- <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/05/the-iraq-war-was-a-failure-war-with-iran-would-be-worse/589534>>
- Giustozzi, Antonio. 2017. "Afghanistan: Taliban's organization and structure." LANDINFO, August 23rd.
<https://landinfo.no/asset/3589/1/3589_1.pdf>
- Gupta, Shishir. 2021. "Jaishankar leaves for Russia via Tehran, agenda is Taliban in Afghanistan." Hindustan Times, July 7th. <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/jaishankar-leaves-for-russia-via-tehran-agenda-is-taliban-in-afghanistan-101625633349076.html>>
- ICG (International Crisis Group). 2018. "Iran's priorities in a turbulent Middle East." April 13th. <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east>>
- Jehl, Douglas. 1998. "For death of its diplomats, Iran vows blood for blood." *New York Times*, September 12th.
<<https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/12/world/for-death-of-its-diplomats-iran-vows-blood-for-blood.html>>
- Kermani, Hamed A. 2020. "What the US-Afghan agreement means for Iran." Al-Monitor, March 4th. <<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/03/us-afghan-agreement-taliban-iran-interests.html>>
- Lim, Kevin. 2021. "Afghanistan is a bigger headache for Tehran than it is letting on." *Foreign Policy*, September 15th.
<<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/15/afghanistan-iran-taliban>>
- Lüders, Michael. 2019. "Are the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia preparing for regime change in Iran?" *The German Times*, March. <<http://www.german-times.com/are-the-us-israel-and-saudi-arabia-preparing-for-regime-change-in-iran>>
- Maloney, Suzanne. 2008. "U.S. policy toward Iran: Missed opportunities and paths forward." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 32(2), Summer: 25-44.
- Milani, Mohsen M. 2006. "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan." *The Middle East Journal*, 60 (2), Spring: 235-279.
- Motamedi, Maziar. 2021. "US 'defeat' in Afghanistan a chance for peace: Iran President'." Aljazeera, August 16th.

<<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/16/raisi-us-defeat-in-afghanistan-should-become-chance-for-peace>>

- Motamedi, Maziar. 2021a. "Iran insists on 'inclusive' government in Afghanistan." Aljazeera, September 9th.
<<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/9/iran-insists-on-inclusive-afghan-government>>
- Nader, Alireza, et al. 2014. "Iran and Afghanistan: A complicated relationship." In *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*. RAND Corporation.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287mjf.8>>
- Nader, Alireza, et al. 2014a. "Iran and other powers in Afghanistan." In *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*. RAND Corporation. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287mjf.8>>
- Nader, Alireza, et al. 2014b. *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*. Washington, DC: RAND Corporation.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287mjf.8>>
- NRC (Norwegian Refugee Council). 2021. "Humanitarian needs in Iran rise as 300,000 Afghans arrive since Taliban takeover." November 10th.
<<https://www.nrc.no/news/2021/november/humanitarian-needs-in-iran-rise-as-300000-afghans-arrive-since-taliban-takeover>>
- Rasmussen, Sune E. 2021. "Taliban's return in Afghanistan poses a balancing act for Iran." *WSJ*, August 19th. <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/talibans-return-in-afghanistan-poses-a-balancing-act-for-iran-11629408210>>
- Reuters. 2020. "Iran dismisses US-Taliban agreement over Afghanistan." March 1st. <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-iran-idUSKBN200116>>
- RFERL [Tajik Service]. 2021. "SCO leaders call for increased Afghan aid, unfreezing of assets." September 17th.
<<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/shanghai-cooperation-organization-leaders-meet-in-dushanbe-with-afghanistan-in-focus/31464685.html>>
- Rubin, Barnett. 2016. "Iran's 'marriage of convenience' with Taliban." Center on International Cooperation NYU, June 1st.
<https://cic.nyu.edu/news_commentary/irans-marriage-convenience-taliban>
- Sadat, M. H. & J. P. Hughes. 2010. "US-Iran engagement through Afghanistan." *Middle East Policy*, 17(1), Spring: 31-51. <

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2010.00424.x>>

Safdar, Muhammad T. & J. Zabin. 2020. "What does the China-Iran deal mean for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor?" *The Diplomat*, August 14th. <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/what-does-the-china-iran-deal-mean-for-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor>>

Sarabi, Humayun. 2006. "Politics and modern history of Hazaras: Sectarian politics in Afghanistan." (Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Fall 2005). <https://www.nps.edu/documents/105988371/107571254/Politics_and_Modern_History-of_Hazaras-Humayun_Sarabi.pdf/dcb1063e-ab40-41b2-ae66-547b8c3b6cbc>

Sarkar, Saurav. 2020. "Iran's Afghanistan balancing act." *Stimson*, July 27th. <<https://www.stimson.org/2020/irans-afghanistan-balancing-act/>>

Slavin, Barbara. 2021. "The global war on terrorism wrecked relations with Iran." *Atlantic Council*, September 7th. <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/article/the-global-war-on-terrorism-wrecked-relations-with-iran>>

Stone, Rupert. 2020. "Will Iran sabotage Afghan peace talks?." *TRT World*, January 23rd. <<https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/will-iran-sabotage-afghan-peace-talks-don-t-bet-on-it-33176>>

Sufizada, Hanif. 2020. "The Taliban are megarich—here's where they get the money they use to wage war in Afghanistan." *The Conversation*, December 8th. <<https://theconversation.com/the-taliban-are-megarich-heres-where-they-get-the-money-they-use-to-wage-war-in-afghanistan-147411>>

Takeyh, Ray. 2021. "Where Iran stands on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan." *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 30th. <<https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/where-iran-stands-taliban-takeover-afghanistan>>

Taneja, Kabir. 2021. "Why there was no Northern Alliance 2.0 this time in Afghanistan." *ORF*, August 19th. <<https://www.orfonline.org/research/why-there-was-no-northern-alliance-2-0-this-time-in-afghanistan/>>

Tehran Times. 2021. "Value of 11-month export to Afghanistan hits \$2b." April 10th. <<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/459645/Value-of-11-month-export-to-Afghanistan-hits-2b>>

The Economist. 2021. "Qatar's unique role in Afghanistan." September 11th.
<<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/09/11/qatars-unique-role-in-afghanistan>>

Weinbaum, Marwin G. 2006. "Afghanistan and its neighbors." USIP Special Report no. 162, June.
<<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr162.pdf>>

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of Pak
Institute for Peace Studies

PIPS papers series on Afghanistan

This series of analytical papers is among the key components of a PIPS programme that aims at strengthening Pakistan's support for the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan. Therefore, larger focus of these policy-oriented analytical papers – whose second quarterly issue comprising two papers is in your hands – is placed on specialised aspects and themes of Afghan conflict and peace as seen from Pakistani perspective. The purpose of this series of analytical papers is to expand the knowledge base and awareness of key stakeholders on Pakistan's Afghan perspective, and its role and interest in Afghan peace and reconciliation. That purpose is linked to another underlying goal of developing and suggesting updated policy options and recommendations for Pakistani government and civil society. These papers are expected to demonstrate an overall understanding of a variety of viewpoints and positions mainly around emerging events and developments in Afghanistan and their implications for Pakistan and the region.

About PIPS

Established in 2005, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) is an Islamabad-based research and advocacy organisation. It offers a range of services through a combination of independent research and analysis, innovative academic programmes, and hands-on training and support that serve the following basic themes: Conflict analysis and peacebuilding; dialogue; prevent/counter violent extremism (P/CVE); internal and regional security; and media for peace and democracy. It also conducts frequent structured dialogues, focus group discussions, and national and international seminars to understand the issues listed earlier and strengthen partnerships. The outcomes of PIPS research and planned events have frequently and extensively been reported on media that adds to its credibility as an active, effective and well networked civil society organizations. Many of PIPS policy reports and recommendations have been credited and included in the state policy documents and discourses mainly those on security and CVE.



PAK INSTITUTE FOR PEACE STUDIES (PIPS)
P.O Box. No: 2110, Islamabad, Pakistan
Tel: +92-51-8359475 Fax: +92-51-8359474
Email: pips@pakpips.com
www.pakpips.com