

Afghanistan as Seen from Pakistan VIII

PIPS Paper Series

April-May, 2023

Situation Review 8

Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)

Copyright © PIPS 2023. 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

Finding a new equilibrium in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations

Mansoor Ahmad Khan¹ and Tahir Khan²

Contents

1. Taliban takeover and aftermath	7
2. The continuing stalemate	9
a) Inclusive government and political framework	10
b) Human rights and fundamental freedoms.....	11
c) Counterterrorism.....	12
3. Dynamics of bilateral engagement	15
4. Challenges to regional connectivity	17
5. Way forward.....	21
6. Prognosis	22

¹ Mansoor Ahmad Khan is former ambassador of Pakistan to Afghanistan.

² Tahir Khan is a senior journalist and expert on Afghan affairs.

Pakistan and Afghanistan are two inter-connected neighboring countries. For centuries, the people of the two countries have remained tied together through bonds of common culture, ethnicity, religion, history and geography. The 2,600-kilometer-long Pakistan-Afghanistan border traverses through an area with around 50 million Pashtuns³ living on both sides. The towns of Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu and erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas, now part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have deep-rooted cultural commonality and linkages with bordering provinces in eastern Afghanistan. Similarly, Balochistan's vast stretches have close affinity with Kandahar and other population centers in southern Afghanistan. The people in the border areas share their tribal roots. The commonalities, however, extend beyond ethnicity. More than 85 percent of the population in the two countries professes Sunni Islam.⁴

In view of these factors, the territory of today's Pakistan has historically been used by Afghans for their access to South Asia and through its ports to the rest of the world. Afghanistan on the other hand provides a potential route to Pakistan for connecting with Central and Eurasian region. Reflecting this inter-dependence, former Afghan President Hamid Karzai during his visit to Pakistan in 2010 had stated: "India is a close friend of Afghanistan, but Pakistan is a twin brother of Afghanistan. We are more than twins; we are conjoined twins. There is no separation. There cannot be a separation."⁵

Despite close religious and cultural commonalities as well as mutual economic stakes, since Pakistan's independence in 1947 the state-to-state relations have lacked harmony and are marked by differences in orientation at times leading to heightened tensions. Some initial trends in Afghanistan were disturbing for Pakistani state as well as the society at large. The spat by Afghanistan over Pakistan's entry into the United Nations, and in the later year's emergence of support for slogan of Pashtunistan and disputing the nature of the settled border continued to create a degree of unease in Pakistan and irritation in the bilateral

³ This is an estimate based on population of Pashtuns in Pakistan and Afghanistan and their demographic trends particularly in the areas along the 2,640 km long border between the two countries.

⁴ According to the CIA Fact book, 84.7 percent of Afghanistan's Muslim population is Sunni and in Pakistan between 85-90 percent of Muslims are Sunni.

⁵ President Hamid Karzai said responding to a question during a joint press conference in Islamabad with Prime Minister of Pakistan Yusuf Raza Gilani on 11 March 2010.

relations. Pakistan was concerned that the segments of Afghan polity actively agitating these issues around Pashtun nationalism and socialist ideology were receiving active Indian support. Thus, a counter move came from the strengthening of the religious parties and groups in line with the ideology of the creation of Pakistan.

Despite these irritants causing tensions in the relations between the two states, the interaction between the two societies particularly communities living along the border on both sides has remained close. Though Pakistan and Afghanistan from the beginning had a visa regime, the movement of people across the border took place in an unchecked and undocumented manner without causing any problems. Consequently, Pakistan remained the dominant transit route for Afghan transit. Smuggling of goods, drugs and human trafficking had some negative social and economic implications, but without becoming a security risk for either country. It is worth mentioning that during Pakistan's wars with India on eastern border in 1965 and 1971, Pakistan had no threat and no military presence on its western border.

However, the increasing ideological rift between communism and capitalism, which took Afghanistan into its grip in early 1970s ultimately culminating into the Soviet military invasion of the country in December 1979, dissipated the delicate equilibrium that existed in Afghanistan and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The next over four decades were characterized by 'Jihad' against Soviet occupation in 1980s, civil war and regional proxies and eventual emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s, and the US and NATO military presence during the past two decades following the 9/11 incidents. These events and developments have undoubtedly turned Afghanistan and Pakistan-Afghanistan border region into a constant theatre of war, conflict and now terrorism.

The US and NATO's military presence in Afghanistan came to an end in August 2021 leaving Afghanistan into more complex internal and external challenges than at the time of their entry in Afghanistan two decades ago. The issues of Afghanistan's political, constitutional and governance framework have remained unsettled. The opportunities of political reconciliation were delayed and squandered. The US and allies' narrative has oscillated from the claims of nation-

building in 2001 to designating Afghanistan as “a godforsaken place in 2022.”⁶ Terrorist groups of every kind found space in Afghanistan due to failure in erecting a disciplined institutional career-oriented Afghan security forces. Economy being wholly dependent on international aid has been in dire crisis. Afghanistan's relations with all neighbors have varying underlying tensions. Thus, Afghanistan's fault-lines on internal, regional and international issues have further deepened. The situation in Afghanistan has extremely serious implications for Pakistan. Afghanistan's other neighbors and the regional countries are also affected by the troubling developments in that country.

1. Taliban takeover and aftermath

When the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in August 2021, Afghans as well as the international community anticipated that the Taliban would adopt such policies that take the country towards durable peace and stability after a prolonged conflict. Though the Taliban had fought a long insurgency, they had also been engaged in an internationally sponsored peace process in Doha. While the peace process did not yield an intra-Afghan political settlement, the spirit of Doha accord of 29 February 2020 premised on commitments for an inclusive political framework, respect for fundamental rights of Afghans and not letting Afghan soil to be used by terrorist groups.⁷ With this context, the Taliban takeover of the country was peaceful and without any large-scale violence or fighting. Both the US and the Taliban have continued to accuse each other of violating the Doha agreement. As large sections of Afghan society had manifested strong resentment against the Taliban's regime in the 1990s, many expected that in their second stint they would be more responsive to the aspirations of their people.

This optimism survived for a few months. An Afghan interim government was instituted on 7 September 2021 with an exclusive Taliban cabinet, which despite additions and changes is hitherto exclusively comprised of the Taliban leaders.

⁶ The US President Joe Biden addressing the war veterans at an election rally in San Diego on 4 November 2022 said: “A lot of you have been to Afghanistan, I have been to every part of it. It's a Godforsaken place - It's a Godforsaken place”.

⁷ See “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America. <<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>>

There were, however, some indications that gradually progress would be made on devising a new constitutional framework, which could pave the way for making the system more anticipatory and inclusive. The focus of the new government was on consolidating their control and strengthening security as for the first time in more than past forty years a government had entire Afghan territory under its writ.

Following the takeover, Afghan Taliban leadership's decision of offering general amnesty⁸ sent positive messaging in Afghanistan and to the outside world. In the next few weeks, while isolated incidents of targeting political opponents and the officials of the past regime were witnessed, there were no gross or systematic human rights violations. The life in Afghan towns and villages was running normally. The access to all parts of country had been secured. The schools and educational institutions were open for both boys and girls. Although some checks and restrictions were imposed on the media, the news and entertainment channels continued their transmissions during the initial months after the Taliban takeover.

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations were also showing signs of better coordination. In order to craft consensus among neighbors on the developments in Afghanistan, Pakistan hosted an online conference of the foreign ministers of the neighboring countries. At Pakistan's initiative, special envoys of China, Russia and Pakistan visited Kabul and had interaction with the Afghan prime minister and other senior leaders urging them to take steps for making the structures more inclusive. Pakistan's foreign minister visited Kabul with a large delegation for progress on issues of mutual interest and concern with a view to strengthen bilateral cooperation. Apart from humanitarian assistance of Rs 5 billion, Pakistan exempted Afghan exports to Pakistan from all taxes and duties giving a space to Afghan economy while facing international sanctions and freezing of Afghan assets by the US.

⁸ Comments of Ehsanullah Samangani, a member of Taliban Cultural Commission, in an interview with Afghanistan's national Television RTA (Radio television Afghanistan) on 17 August 2022 as reported by Afghan and international media. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/taliban-announces-amnesty-urges-women-to-join-government>>

In November 2021, Afghan foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited Islamabad for bilateral consultations as well as meeting of the Troika Plus involving the US, China, Russia and Pakistan. This was the first formal contact between a US high official and the Taliban following the change of government in Afghanistan. The issues of inclusivity, human rights, counterterrorism, and Afghanistan's frozen assets were discussed during the meeting. Later, Pakistan hosted an extraordinary session of the OIC countries on humanitarian situation in Afghanistan which was attended by Afghan foreign minister providing an opportunity for his interaction with a large number of foreign ministers of leading Muslim countries.

By the end of 2021, with the hope that continued interaction with Afghan interim government would help move Afghanistan towards further normalization, many donor countries such as Germany, Norway, Japan and international organizations including the EU, World Bank and Asian Development Bank were considering re-opening of diplomatic missions in Kabul at Ambassadorial level. Had that trend continued, the third meeting of foreign ministers of neighboring countries, which was scheduled to take place in China in March 2022, was expected to consider substantive ways of widening interaction with the Afghan interim government. This could have yielded two dividends for the neighboring countries: (i) progress towards emergence of a strong Afghan state countering threats posed by global and regional terrorist groups including Daesh, Al-Qaeda, TTP, ETIM and IMU, and (ii) opening up the region for east-west and north-south connectivity within and through Afghanistan, which has remained choked for past fifty years due to prevalence of conflict, warfare and terrorism in that country. This indeed could become a win-win scenario for the entire region, but Afghanistan and Pakistan in particular would have been the major beneficiaries.

2. The continuing stalemate

However, by the beginning of the year 2022 the developments were seemingly taking a negative turn. Since then, a series of actions by the Afghan interim government has dampened the air of optimism and impeded the progress towards lasting stability and normalization in Afghanistan. The reports and speculations about aggravating divisions within Taliban ranks primarily driven by ideological considerations have continued to grow with time. Gradually the

decision-making in Afghan interim government and the Taliban Shura became dominated by a group of religious hardliners.⁹

During the past one-and-a-half-year rule of the Taliban, three key areas widening the gulf with the people of Afghanistan and the international partners includes (a) inclusive government and political framework; (b) human rights and fundamental freedoms; and (c) counterterrorism. Lack of progress in these areas is one of the key reasons, but not the only one, that has continued to adversely affect engagement between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The developments in Afghanistan relating to these areas need objective analysis.

a) Inclusive government and political framework

During first few months after the takeover, the Taliban circles had relayed an impression that they understood the need for drafting a new constitution¹⁰ to cater for Afghanistan's ground realities. However, it gradually seemed to have disappeared from the Taliban's priority list and their main focus shifted to consolidating their control and political hold on the instruments of power in Afghanistan. Even a jirga that the Taliban convened in Kabul from 30 June to 2 July 2022, which Taliban Amir Hibatullah also attended, turned out to be a gathering of religious scholars closer to the Taliban perspective endorsing an ideological approach on governance; it was not a traditional Loya Jirga for garnering political consensus as practiced in Afghan and Pashtun tribal culture.¹¹

Taliban's stance on inclusivity is that it is an internal political issue and cannot be dictated by other countries. They contend that Afghanistan like other countries should determine its own political structures. In their view, their government was removed through foreign military intervention, and they have fought for twenty years for liberation of their country and for restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They further claim that their government is inclusive with many key

⁹ Michael Kugelman, "The Taliban Hardliners are winning," *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2022, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/31/afghanistan-taliban-hard-liners-girls-education-press-freedom>>

¹⁰ Author's assessment based on his personal interaction with many key figures in the Afghan interim government between September 2021 to March 2022.

¹¹ Fazlminallah Qazizai, "For now, ideology trumps pragmatism in Afghanistan," *Newsline*, July 13, 2022, <<https://newlinesmag.com/newsletter/for-now-ideology-trumps-pragmatism-in-afghanistan>>

positions in the cabinet and the government institutions held by non-Pashtun Afghans (although all of them are Taliban).

This Taliban perspective surely has implications for relations with the neighboring Pakistan. The Taliban cannot continue to deny the historical fact that Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country requiring a framework providing opportunity for participation of all its ethnic minorities and political parties. Commonly held perception in Afghanistan as well as worldwide not only alienates Afghanistan's non-Pashtuns from Pakistan but also affects latter's interaction with the world at large. Pakistan's interests to strengthen relations with Afghanistan would be better served if the government in Afghanistan broadens its participatory framework.

b) Human rights and fundamental freedoms

A series of defiant actions in the areas of human rights and fundamental freedoms have tarnished the political image of the Taliban and has caused suffering to Afghans. Banning girls to go to high schools in March 2022 became the most damaging decision internally as well as externally. Later in December 2022, another decision preventing women from attending Universities further aggravated the situation and sparked widespread global criticism of the Taliban's ideology and governance. The Afghan interim government also imposed harsh restrictions on the media channels and journalists affecting the coverage of developments in Afghanistan and resulting in the outflow of trained professional journalists from the country. These restrictions have led many donors and humanitarian organizations to further curtail their operations in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, Pakistan's efforts to convince the Taliban during past one and a half year to adopt an approach of moderation in handling such matters affecting lives of the Afghan nations have not been fruitful. With the two societies so closely inter-twined, many apprehend that continued regressive policies in Afghanistan can cause problems in Pakistan's social and economic progress as in Pakistan girl-child enrollment as well as women's access to various professions is on a positive trajectory. Many Afghans blame Pakistan for the rigid approach of Taliban on human rights particularly relating to women.

c) Counterterrorism

The emergence of fault-lines in the areas of security and terrorism have further complicated the Afghan situation as well as relations with Pakistan. The terrorist groups including Al-Qaeda, Daesh, TTP, ETIM and IMU have continued to find space and support networks in Afghanistan during past two decades or even more. Major global powers as well as neighboring countries continue to have concerns over the perceived ambiguities in Afghan interim government's policies for actions against various terrorist groups on Afghan soil. While the Afghan security forces have been undertaking stringent operations against Daesh hideouts killing several key commanders and fighters on a regular basis, the cooperation with neighbors including Pakistan, China, Central Asia and Iran with regard to specific terrorist groups of their concern has many issues.

The TTP is considered as an existential security threat in Pakistan. After military operations (Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, and Raddul Fassad started in 2017), the formal structures of TTP were dismantled inside Pakistan and their commanders and fighters were forced to go into sleeper mode in Pakistan while also shifting their assets to neighboring provinces in eastern Afghanistan. Consequently, the level of TTP-sponsored violence in Pakistan registered significant decline for some time. Independent analyses have assessed that despite successes in these operations, there were signs of complacency shown by the state in comprehensively dealing with kinetic, political, and socio-economic dimensions of the counterterrorism and counter-extremism efforts in Pakistan.¹²

A general perception in Pakistan was that after the Taliban takeover systemic cooperation between the security and intelligence institutions of the two countries would be helpful in completely eliminating the cross-border threat of the TTP. Immediately after formation of the Afghan interim government, Islamabad started messaging with Kabul for decisive actions against the TTP leaders and commanders based in Afghanistan. On the advice of the Afghan Taliban leadership and with their facilitation, Pakistan's security officials held

¹² Madiha Afzal, "Terrorism in Pakistan has declined, but the underlying roots of extremism remain," Brookings, January 15, 2021, <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/15/terrorism-in-pakistan-has-declined-but-the-underlying-roots-of-extremism-remain>>

several rounds of talks with the TTP commanders in Kabul during the summer of 2022, but the process remained resultless as the TTP not only continued to insist upon imposing Shariah rule and its armed presence in certain areas but was also uncompromising on the demand for the reversal of ex-FATA's merger into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.¹³

In view of the acute divergence between Pakistan's expectations and TTP's demands, in November 2022 the TTP announced to end the ceasefire and resume full scale violence in Pakistan thus suspending the dialogue.¹⁴ While gearing for a renewed and full-fledged counterterrorism effort, Pakistan felt betrayed that the Afghan interim government had not only turned a blind eye to the presence of the TTP commanders on the Afghan soil but also ignored the 'support networks' that the TTP was using for carrying out terrorist activities in Pakistan. The statistics tend to show that the TTP-sponsored violence in Pakistan has shown a two-fold surge since the establishment of an Afghan Taliban government in Kabul.

The TTP offers a complex challenge and many of the interpretations and explanations of the two sides on this subject are quite varying, and often clashing with each other.

- There has been a contested debate on whether the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban are ideologically the same or have significant differences. The view that they are like the two sides of the same coin has been becoming a dominant thought in Pakistan's security apparatus in recent years.¹⁵ This view cannot be dismissed as Taliban's founding *emir* Mullah Omer in his lifetime had made efforts to remove differences among TTP leaders and the commanders like Hafiz Gul Bahadar in North Waziristan and Mullah Nazir in South Waziristan who at that time were not part of the TTP. Mullah Omer had announced a *shura* comprising all Taliban factions and a representative of

¹³ Assessment based on observing the dialogue from the sidelines as ambassador of Pakistan to Afghanistan in Kabul.

¹⁴ Hand-written statement issued and circulated to media on letterhead "Ministry of Defence Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan" dated 28 November 2022.

¹⁵ During 2021 and 2022, the then Chief of Army Staff assisted by the Director General ISI and other senior military and intelligence officials used the expression 'the two sides of the same coin' for the TTA and TTP.

Afghan Taliban deputy Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani.¹⁶ Since then, the TTP has not only been practically supporting the Afghan Taliban's insurgency but its leader also publicly announced allegiance to the Afghan Taliban's current Amir Hibatullah Akhundzada.¹⁷

- TTP is using tactics of militancy and violence which in many ways are similar to those used by the Taliban in Afghanistan during the US and NATO military presence, including the practice of appointing shadow governors of provinces and instituting a centralized training system for the members.¹⁸
- At political level, however, views vary from the need for an exclusive military approach against TTP to the vitality of a political approach for permanently ending this conflict. In general, the ruling Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and its allied parties do not favor dialogue with the TTP while Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) professes an approach that does not rule out the possibility of talks with the TTP, if needed.
- The Afghan Taliban while avoiding any comments on the ideological harmony with the TTP contend that these are Pakistani refugees living in Afghanistan and Pakistani authorities need to talk to them to address their concerns and enable them to go back to Pakistan.¹⁹ However, at times particularly after some major terrorist incidents in Pakistan the Afghan interim government itself contradicts its stance by denying the TTP's presence on the Afghan soil.²⁰
- Pakistan and Afghanistan also have differing perceptions about possible solutions of the TTP threat to Pakistan. Pakistan expects Afghan side to take tough measures against the TTP commanders based in Afghanistan. The Afghan security institutions are reluctant to adopt a military approach partly because of their close linkages with the TTP leaders and partly to avoid

¹⁶ Based on a letter from Mullah Omer for addressing internal feuds between TTP's leaders and commanders.

¹⁷ Asfandiyar Mir, "After the Taliban Takeover: Pakistan's TTP problem," United States Institute of Peace, January 19, 2022, <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/after-talibans-takeover-pakistans-ttp-problem>>

¹⁸ Abdul Sayed, "The evolution and future of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan," Carnegie Endowment, December 2021, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/21/evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-pub-86051>>

¹⁹ This position has been publicly stated by many Afghan Taliban leaders and officials as well as in the meetings with Pakistani officials.

²⁰ "IEA: TTP not using Afghan soil against Pakistan," Pajhwok, December 24, 2022, <<https://pajhwok.com/2022/12/24/iea-ttp-not-using-afghan-soil-against-pakistan>>

pushing the TTP towards Daesh or other anti-Afghan Taliban outfits. The Afghan Taliban leaders in their engagement with Pakistan have continued to underline the need for more time and patience for addressing this challenge. Other proposals being explored also include relocation of the TTP commanders and their families to places in Afghanistan away from Pakistan's border, but these issues so far remain unsettled.²¹

3. Dynamics of bilateral engagement

The prevalence of conflict, warfare, and militancy in Afghanistan for over past four decades has deeply affected the course of state-to-state engagement between the two countries. During this period, the bilateral political relations have been influenced by security considerations dominated by military and intelligence channels. This phenomenon has continued to overshadow the role of political channels as well as mutually dependent people to people and tribal ties.

Successive Afghan governments during the presence of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan had continued to emphasize the need for Pakistan to deal with the Afghan state and not the non-state actors (i.e. Afghan Taliban). Consequently, the bilateral engagement remained tense and manifested first in scuffles between the Pervez Musharraf regime and Afghan president Hamid Karzai, and later in the tirades of president Ashraf Ghani against Pakistani state particularly military establishment. This state of affairs prevented any result-oriented practical cooperation between the two sides despite establishment of a comprehensive institutional framework of APAPPS (Afghanistan Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity) in 2018.²²

The dynamics did not change even after the Taliban resumed power in Afghanistan in August 2021. The Taliban actually took little time in assuming the established position of the Afghan state. In fact, in their official stance on many issues *viz a viz* Pakistan such as border fencing, the TTP, movement of people and trade and transit modalities, the Taliban have been even more vociferous than

²¹ Gist based on bilateral discussions during the meetings on TTP related issues since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

²² APAPPS agreed between the two governments on 14 May 2018 in Islamabad as a comprehensive bilateral mechanism for addressing issues of mutual concern and promoting harmony and multi-faceted cooperation.

their predecessor governments. This obviously has been a source of great surprise and should be taken as a reality check by policymakers in Pakistan.

Over the past twenty months under the Taliban's interim government, the political exchanges between the two countries have gradually almost completely dried up. There are no regular institutional contacts. The Afghan interim government has not shown any interest in reviving or reviewing the APAPPS mechanism or evolving an alternative for it. The Joint Coordination Committee²³ has not been able to devise amicable ways for discussing and addressing cross-border issues in an effective manner.

Apparently, there is no appetite for expediting revision of APTTA²⁴ and moving forth regional transit arrangements for trade and transit between Central Asia and Pakistan. The volume of bilateral trade and the share of Pakistan's ports in the Afghan transit trade has continued to consistently decline in recent years. The import of Afghanistan's coal and other minerals for industrial use has also been facing serious bottlenecks. Despite huge economic complementarity between the two countries the quantum of actual commercial exchanges has remained quite limited.

The difficulties in properly comprehending and addressing each other's legitimate interests and concerns have progressively led to a visible decline in practical engagement. The productive political exchanges at ministerial level are almost absent. There is a visible descent in diplomatic engagement. Since the Taliban takeover the Afghan embassy remains at Charge d'Affaires level. After an attack on Pakistan's Charge d'Affaires (Cd'A) on 2 December at the Embassy compound in Kabul claimed by the Islamic State Khurasan Province (IS-K), the level of representation in Pakistan's mission in Kabul is also now at a lower level.²⁵ These

²³ In view of aggravating differences on cross-border issues, the two sides established a Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) during the visit of a Pakistan delegation to Kabul led by then Special Envoy Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq in January 2022.

²⁴ APTTA was signed in 2010 as a ten-year bilateral transit framework agreement and expired on 11 February 2021. Since there has been no agreement on the revised text, Pakistan in May 2022 unilaterally extended the provisions of APTTA to continue facilitation for Afghan transit, till a new APTTA is agreed and signed.

²⁵ Ayaz Gul, "The Islamic State group claims attack on Pakistan's top diplomat in Afghanistan," VoA, December 3, 2022, <<https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-group-claims-attack-on-pakistan-s-top-diplomat-in-afghanistan-/6861496.html>>

developments have relayed a negative messaging about the overall bilateral relations which should be concerning for both countries as most of the neighbors of Afghanistan and important regional countries have ensured political and diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan despite the ensuing challenges.

The statements coming from the latest visit of a Pakistan delegation led by Defence Minister Khwaja Muhammad Asif and senior intelligence and civilian officials on 22 February 2023 to Kabul indicated reiteration of strong messaging of respective positions. It appeared that Pakistan's singular focus was on action against the TTP while the Taliban emphasized its focus on enhancing movements of people, trade and economic cooperation. However, just a week later Pakistan's experienced Special Envoy Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq after serving for almost three years has relinquished his post.²⁶

One of the important indicators of the widening mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan is the constantly declining image and goodwill for Pakistan in Afghanistan. While on the one hand Pakistan's hospitality for hosting millions of Afghans on its soil for past several decades is deeply appreciated by all Afghans, at the same time Pakistan's state institutions come under serious criticism. This trend has continued to exacerbate even after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 and there is need for an objective introspection for a course correction on both sides.

4. Challenges to regional connectivity

Despite the state level frictions, a fair degree of connectivity had existed between Afghanistan and Pakistan prior to "Jihad" years. The tribal people living on both sides used to cross the border on a daily basis without much documentation under a system of easement rights. There was regular flow of public and private traffic between Peshawar and Kabul. The independent studies indicated that as

²⁶ The Government of Pakistan appointed Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq as Special Representative on Afghanistan on 8 June 2020. He resigned from his post on 1 March 2023.

late as 2010 thousands of people crossed border for socio-economic needs without any restrictions.²⁷

In recent decades, the movements of people and trade between the two countries have continued to become more difficult due to increasing militarization of the border. The lack of bilateral engagement and prevailing mutual mistrust are impeding progress on the larger agenda of trans-Afghan connectivity which can be a game-changer for the regional integration. The opportunities on 2,600 km long Pakistan-Afghanistan border for opening several new trade, transit and transport corridors in the region have been identified in recent years but remain unattended and unutilized. Pakistan's ports of Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar²⁸ connecting with Afghanistan, China, Central Asian countries, Iran and Eurasia can revolutionize the existing poor regional connectivity networks only if facilitative procedures are instituted.²⁹ So far, the vital needs for modernization of the border crossings have remained subdued due to a combination of counterterrorism considerations and corrupt mafias making fortunes through smuggling of goods, money laundering and human and drug trafficking.

The long years of war have prevented development of infrastructure linking Afghanistan with its neighbors. However, in recent years Afghanistan has already established railways in its north with Uzbekistan (Hairatan-Mazar-e- Sharif)³⁰,

²⁷ Amina Khan, "Pak-Afghan border: A case study of border management," Institute of Strategic Studies, 2017, <https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2-SS_Amina_Khan_No-3_2017.pdf>

²⁸ Adnan Amir, "Afghan transit a game changer for Gwadar Port," The Interpreter, January 31, 2020, <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/afghan-transit-game-changer-gwadar-port>>

²⁹ Successive Afghan governments have consistently contended that ports of Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar are preferred transit route for Afghans but raising questions about dependability.

³⁰ 75 km long Hairatan Mazar-e-Sharif railway line became operational in December 2011 under Asian Development bank (ADB) funding. For details, see <<https://www.carecprogram.org/?feature=hairatan-mazar-e-sharif-railway-opens-highlights-country-to-country-cooperation>>

Turkmenistan (Kushka-Torghundi)³¹ and Iran (Khaf-Herat)³². The transportation of cargo from China via Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan route³³ and from Turkey through Iran and Turkmenistan route³⁴ are now operational. While on the one hand Afghanistan has plans to build north-south and east-west railway linkages on Afghan territory, building Quetta-Kandahar³⁵ and Peshawar-Jalalabad³⁶ railways will be important for attracting Central Asian trade through South Asian ports. The trans-Afghan trilateral railway³⁷ project linking Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan has shown signs of renewed enthusiasm, but the momentum would depend on how the challenges of security, political interaction and funding are dealt with by the three countries.

Pakistan is currently facing severe economic and energy crises and needs early progress on mega-energy projects through Afghanistan such as TAPI gas pipeline, CASA-1000 and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP)³⁸ electricity transmission line. Peaceful Afghanistan provides avenues for transporting LPG supplies from Central Asia to Pakistan by road through Afghanistan, but the two countries have not yet paid serious attention to exploring this option. These

³¹ On 11 July 2011 two sleeper-laying ceremonies at Towraghondi in Afghanistan and Serhetabat (the new name for Kuskha) in Turkmenistan marked the start of work to rehabilitate the cross-border railway. For details, visit: <<http://www.andrewgrantham.co.uk/afghanistan/railways/torghundi-and-the-railway-from-turkmenistan>>

³² The Khaf-Herat Railway Project is a 225km-long cross-border railway project under construction between Iran and Afghanistan, linking eastern Iran to western Afghanistan. <<https://www.railway-technology.com/projects/khaf-herat-railway-project>>

³³ The multimodal route starts in China's northwestern Xinjiang province then passes through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan before entering Afghanistan. <<https://eurasianet.org/cargo-leaves-china-for-afghanistan-on-new-route-via-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan>>

³⁴ A special humanitarian train from Turkey traversed 4,168 kilometers via Iran and Turkmenistan to reach Afghanistan in February 2022. <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkish-charity-train-reaches-afghanistan-in-time-of-need/2495932>>

³⁵ The plans to link Quetta with Kandahar through Chaman-Spinboldak have remained in early stages of feasibility and discussions for many years without making any tangible progress.

³⁶ Peshawar-Jalalabad railway link project has also remained in planning and feasibility stage.

³⁷ Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, "The trans-Afghan railway line: back on track," *The Diplomat*, July 26, 2022, <<https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/the-trans-afghan-railway-line-back-on-track>>

³⁸ TAPI, CASA-1000 and TAP remain three mega-energy sector projects that have not made a tangible progress because of the underlying geo-political factors.

connectivity projects can accrue economic activity and prosperity for both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Apart from the gaps in Pakistan-Afghanistan engagement, a number of other factors also play a crucial role in scuttling the efforts for achieving concrete progress on projects of regional connectivity through Afghanistan. These are narrated below.

- First, the regressive environment in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover has continued to put hurdles in evolving an inclusive political framework. As a result, restrictions on girls' education and women access to work have led to economic sanctions and international isolation of Afghanistan. Suspension of transactions with Afghan banks and travel restrictions on senior Taliban ministers and leaders is also hindering connectivity initiatives.
- Secondly, the growing US-China tensions and competition for global supremacy is expected to continue to prevent consensus building on the way forward on engagement with the Afghan interim government. China's quest in the previous years for extending CPEC to Afghanistan as an arm of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was effectively resisted by previous Afghan governments. China's major projects in Afghanistan including Ainak Copper mining in Logar and Amu Darya oil exploration projects have also not moved forward in a significant way.
- Thirdly, following the conflict in Ukraine, Afghanistan and this region has receded in the strategic priorities of the US and Europe. There are indications that Ukraine conflict is likely to prolong making it difficult for Western donors to make investments in the mega connectivity projects in Afghanistan.
- Lastly, serious challenges remain to regional consensus on Afghanistan. India as a major regional country and also a member of Quad remains wary of any increase in China's space in Afghanistan. India and Pakistan also continue to fail to reconcile their perspectives for peace, stability and connectivity in Afghanistan. Russia remains extremely cautious to the prevailing environment in Afghanistan as a threat to Central Asia and itself. These and many other clashing regional dimensions continue to prevent an open approach for economic integration and connectivity through Afghanistan.

5. Way forward

In July 1973, the ouster of King Zahir Shah by Sardar Muhammad Daud Khan marked the beginning of the process that destroyed equilibrium not only internally in Afghanistan but also in its intrinsic relations with Pakistan. Today, half a century later, when the Taliban have resumed power in Afghanistan, and despite the withdrawal of foreign forces the situation in the country remains fragile, there is a need for Pakistan and Afghanistan to strive for establishing a new equilibrium in the bilateral equation. That is vital to ensure peace and stability in the region. This new equilibrium has to be founded on the mutual will for ending the politics of militarism and embarking on cordial interaction aimed at promoting mutual progress and prosperity of the two peoples.

Towards this end, it is important for the two countries to develop and strengthen state to state relations based on principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs of each other. This would imply that engagement has to be through official channels and not with the groups in Afghanistan. The two states have to show a better understanding of each other's positions, interests and concerns.

This approach can enable the two countries to create an environment of trust and confidence where leadership level exchanges take place on a regular basis and the institutional mechanisms are utilized to pave the ground for a positive momentum. For this purpose, either the two governments would need to revive the existing mechanism of APAPPS with necessary adjustments suggested by either side or evolve a new mechanism according to the prevailing ground realities. Absence of an institutional mechanism doesn't augur well for both countries to make forward movement on their multi-faceted relations and for promoting regional connectivity.

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations are marked by a long history of civilizational and tribal contacts. During the past four or five decades, prevalence of conflict, warfare and instability in Afghanistan has led to (i) relations guided by militancy dynamics, and (ii) hosting of millions of Afghans in Pakistan as migrants (*mohajirs*) causing strains on Pakistan's demographics and economy. Such trends have induced some resentment as well as derogatory attitudes towards these people and their nationality. Many Afghan leaders openly express an Afghan desire for

need to restore the civilized relations between the two countries that had existed prior to this long phase of instability in Afghanistan. Hoping that Afghanistan embarks on a political way forward, there is a need for pursuing a model of dignified engagement.

An effective way of achieving this objective is that the economic agenda should take lead in the bilateral interaction. In this regard, two sets of policies are vital:

- a) Bilateral trade and transit matters should be given priority. The Joint Economic Commissions in the previous years have already identified actions for increasing facilitation at border crossings, opening new trade/transit routes, harmonization of customs standards leading towards a common customs union, finalization of new APTTA, mutual investment frameworks, development health and education institutions for Afghans along the border, business visa facilitation and other such actions.
- b) Special effort should be made to expedite regional connectivity projects such as TAPI, CASA-1000, TAP, railway infrastructure, highway linkages and developing inter-connected transportation corridors.

Constructive engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan will provide new vistas and opportunities for the latter's opening up for the region and the world. Strengthening of bilateral economic stakes would enable Pakistan to play a more helping role in gradually addressing Afghanistan's current political challenges such as inclusivity in the political and governance framework, human rights issues particularly education of girls and women participation in national development and Afghanistan becoming part of the regional and international counterterrorism mechanisms.

6. Prognosis

Today, Afghanistan is at a crossroads. From here, two scenarios are possible. If the current negative trends prevail, the discontent between the Afghan interim government and the people is likely to further widen due to lack of participatory political framework, deteriorating situation of human rights and continuing economic restrictions. This may result into parts of Afghanistan becoming a breeding ground for terrorist outfits particularly Daesh to harbor terrorism and violence in Afghanistan and elsewhere. These developments would increase Afghanistan's isolation in the international system pushing the country deeper

into a vicious cycle of violence, instability and chaos. A new counterterrorism campaign through sophisticated drone warfare may further complicate the lives of the people living in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region for the next few years.

This scenario will not only exacerbate suffering of Afghan people but will also have adverse implications for the neighboring countries, region and the international peace and stability. Undoubtedly, Pakistan will be the worst affected country in the region from the Afghan fall out aggravating the magnitude of unprecedented political, economic and security challenges already confronting the country.

The human history is a witness that crises bring opportunities if handled boldly. Pakistan and Afghanistan together can avert disaster in the region if they are able to work on a paradigm shift in their bilateral engagement and addressing the regional dynamics. The two countries can take measures to restore their historical dignified relationship based on mutual respect between their states and the peoples. There is a need for discarding un-necessary security paranoia and bringing people to people and economic interaction to the forefront of the relations.

Learning the right lessons from the past, today there is a historic opportunity for both Pakistan and Afghanistan to establish a new equilibrium in their bilateral relations commensurate with the current ground realities. This can enable the two countries to steer a regional compact that eliminates confrontation and lays the foundation for embarking on a new era marked by policies driven by geo-economics and fostering regional connectivity for harnessing the shared prosperity in the region. There is a need for the entire region to demonstrate a visionary outlook.

Faith and faction: internal conflicts among Afghan Taliban

Ahmed Ali¹

Contents

1. Introduction.....	27
1.1 Connotation of Taliban’s infighting for Pakistan.....	29
2. Fault-lines in the Islamic Emirate: Taliban’s internal divisions.....	31
2.1 Taliban warlords, and the narcotics.....	32
2.2 Power struggles among key leaders	36
2.3 Ideological differences and factionalism	38
3. Major factions within the Afghan Taliban.....	44
3.1 The Haqqani Network.....	44
3.2 Quetta Shura	46
4. Implications of internal divisions.....	47
4.1 Impact on the Taliban's operational capabilities	47
4.2 Significance for stability in Afghanistan and the region.....	48
5. External influences on Taliban’s internal divisions	49
6. Conclusion	52

¹ Ahmed Ali is director of Islamabad-based Peace Research and Advocacy Institute. He is a researcher with interest in democracy, security policy, and religious minorities in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

1. Introduction

In the heartland of Taliban's Afghanistan, discord over how to run the country plagues the theocratic regime. The so-called Islamic Emirate is highly secretive and its internal affairs are largely hidden from the prying eyes of the world. However, the present political landscape in Kabul reveals a semblance to the ousted Ashraf Ghani government, triggering a sense of déjà vu for the Afghan observers. Not long ago, the power struggle between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah had created a sort of dual governance with some even mocking the two for running parallel governments in Kabul. Well, it seems that Taliban are not doing much better, for instance, as per insider accounts, the Presidential Palace in Kabul operates within four neighboring buildings, each with its own sphere of control. Strict security protocols necessitate body searches when staff members of one section move to the other. Prime Minister Hassan Akhund exercises authority over one part of the palace, while mullahs Baradar and Yaqoob jointly oversee another. Deputy Prime Minister Maulvi Kabir commands a third section, and the remaining quarter falls under the purview of Siraj Haqqani of the Haqqani Network.⁴⁰

The boundaries that demarcate these tiny fiefdoms within the palace are not mere structural divisions but symbolic representations of the varying ambitions and allegiances that permeate the corridors of power in Taliban's Kabul. Within the walls of the presidential palace, ambitions, ideologies, and personal agendas converge to create a tapestry of political intrigues and maneuvering. Within Taliban's clandestine ranks, different factions and varying shades of ideologies conflict and collide. Divisions within the Taliban were exposed publicly for the first following the news of Mullah Omar's death in 2015 which sparked a serious controversy and power struggle within the organization.⁴¹ As the news of Omar's death was reported, the Taliban in Quetta wasted no time in asserting their authority by swiftly announcing a successor to their deceased leader. The hasty move surprised many within the group who were still trying to come to terms with the news of Omar's passing. The speed at which the successor, Mullah

⁴⁰ Hassan Abbas, *The return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans left* (London: Yale University Press, 2023).

⁴¹ Frud Bezhan, "Can the Taliban survive Mullah Omar's death?" RFERL, July 29, 2025, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-can-taliban-survive-mullah-omar/27159618.html>>

Mansour, was appointed indicated a desire to maintain stability and avoid leadership vacuum that could potentially weaken the militant movement.

However, Mullah Mansour's appointment as the supreme leader was not accepted by all within the Taliban. Key figures such as Hassan Rahmani and Mohammad Rasool had objected to the appointment publicly, bringing the Taliban's internal conflicts to public domain. Here it may be noted that the emergence of internal conflicts for power and resources is not surprising because the Afghan Taliban is a complex network of different factions each of which has its own interests. Ever since Mullah Omar's death, internal power struggle has been a glaring characteristic of the Taliban movement, reflecting ideological differences, varying tribal and regional affiliations and loyalties as well as personal ambitions of senior Taliban leaders.⁴² As internal discords over key questions like inclusive government, women rights, and girls' education within the Afghan Taliban refuse to die down, the implications for the group's cohesion and unity become significant for the outside world. Incessant disagreements and power struggles can potentially lead to further divisions, rendering the so called Islamic Emirate unable to even take off on matters of governance and services delivery to the Afghan population. Likewise, the Taliban's ability to maintain its influence and negotiate with external actors may also be compromised, further complicating the already volatile political landscape in Afghanistan.

Internal fault lines rooted in ideology, tribal loyalties, regional affiliations, control over resources including narcotics business etc. defy the myth of Taliban being a united and cohesive organization. Within the Emirate, those relatively moderate clash with hardliners in a continuous battle to gain greater say over the matters of state including the overall course of the organization. While some advocate for a changed approach to governance that offers some semblance of moderation, others stick to rigid interpretation of Islamic principles, unwilling to back off from their uncompromising stance. The gulf between these factions remains unbridged.

⁴² "Mullah Omar's death might be bad news for Afghanistan," Tolo News, August 1, 2015, <<https://tolonews.com/opinion/mullah-omars-death-might-be-bad-news-afghanistan>>

Similarly, leadership succession has been a bone of contention within the Taliban's secretive realm. The mantle of power remains the ultimate prize for competing factions with varying political, ideological, and economic interests. And beyond the internal divisions lies the influence of external factors. In the past, regional and international actors made attempts to exploit the fault lines within the Taliban's ranks for their own gain. Afghanistan's neighboring countries and global powers have manipulated the fractured Afghan landscape to weaken the Taliban or to bolster their own strategic interests. And the Taliban have been vulnerable to external machinations. The ramifications of the Taliban's infighting are significant, stretching beyond the group itself. They affect the Taliban's relationship with the Afghan people whose lives increasingly become at risk as the Taliban's chaotic governance style fails to deliver. The divisions also shape the Taliban's interactions with other militant groups, influencing the alliances and rivalries that determine the dynamics of the jihadist landscape. And they have profound implications for the future stability and governance of Afghanistan, a nation stuck in humanitarian crisis and awaiting some miracle. In this context, understanding the intricacies of the Taliban's internal conflicts assumes critical importance. It is a key to understanding the group's behavior, assessing its stability and its changing internal dynamics that shape Emirate's trajectory.

1.1 Connotation of Taliban's infighting for Pakistan

Understanding the dynamics of internal conflicts within the Afghan Taliban is of great significance as it can help Pakistan foresee potential changes in the Taliban's behavior or shifts in their strategies. Such a crucial understanding can enable Pakistan to review and improve its border management and security measures and safeguard its national security objectives and interests. The Pak-Afghan border spanning over 2,600 kilometers has always been a porous and challenging frontier to man. The Taliban's activities and movements in Afghanistan have direct implications for Pakistan's internal security, thus making it crucial for Pakistan to closely monitor and comprehend the internal conflicts within the Taliban. Any changes in leadership, internal power struggles, or ideological debates within the Afghan Taliban can influence its policy towards and relations with Pakistan. For instance, a faction that previously remained friendly with Pakistan may undergo an ideological or strategic realignment and become hostile as a result. Therefore, understanding these dynamics can help Pakistan to

recalibrate its policies and responses accordingly, either fostering more cooperation or mitigating threats of attacks along the border.

Moreover, comprehending the internal conflicts provides critical insights into Taliban's evolving outlooks on governance, foreign relations, regional security etc. Different factions may adopt distinct approaches to achieve their objectives such as the question of TTP or facilitating peace talks between Pakistan and the TTP etc. Knowledge about Afghan Taliban's internal conflicts can also help identify opportunities for more concrete engagement and influence within the Islamic Emirate. By understanding the internal dynamics and identifying potential allies within the group, Pakistan can strategically engage with factions that exhibit a willingness to cooperate on bilateral challenges notably the growing threat of TTP terrorism in the merged tribal districts.

On the other hand, it would also help Pakistan to identify potential rivals among the Taliban ranks that hold opposing views or harbor ill-will towards Pakistan. With potential rivals in mind, Pakistan can strategically engage with different factions based on their specific positions and priorities. Such a nuanced approach can help Pakistan exert a degree of influence, promote stability, and contribute to a peaceful resolution of the crises in Afghanistan.

Similarly, in the realm of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, the Afghan Taliban's relationships with other insurgent outfits like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and terrorist groups such as TTP and Islamic State (IS) etc. can have profound implications for Pakistan's efforts to combat separatist insurgency and religiously inspired terrorism internally. Being cognizant of these factors can allow Pakistan to develop befitting responses and targeted measures to address these threats. The Afghan Taliban have had intricate relationships with other militants. They range from alliances and collaborations to rivalries and competition for influence. These connections within the broader militant landscape can directly impact Pakistan. A militant outfit with close ties with Taliban or specific factions within the Taliban may find safe havens in border regions, using them as launching pads for attacks into Pakistan. Likewise, relationships between the Afghan Taliban and other militant groups can facilitate exchange of resources, training, and tactics. This perilous sharing and exchange of knowledge and capabilities can enhance the operational capabilities of these groups, making them more formidable foes.

2. Fault-lines in the Islamic Emirate: Taliban's internal divisions

Within the newly found Islamic Emirate in Kabul, a cobweb of internal conflicts adds to the fragility of the regime and casts a shadow of uncertainty upon the Afghan Taliban's unity and purpose. As the international community including Pakistan watches the Taliban scramble with running the government in Kabul, it is imperative to examine the factors that contribute to these divisions and conflicts within the Taliban. At the heart of these internal conflicts lie ideological differences, conflicting visions, varying interpretations of Shariah, and tribal and regional loyalties and alliances that intertwine with Taliban leaders' personal ambitions for power and resources. Marked by commitment to their cause, the Taliban currently find themselves entangled in conflicting ideologies. From the hardliners who push for restrictive governance models from the 1990s to the relatively pragmatic moderates advocating for a more inclusive approach, these opposing forces vie for power and dominance within the organization, inevitably creating dissent and disagreements.

Beyond the ideological differences that affect the Taliban, disputes among different tribes over territorial controls intensify the existing conflicts within the group. The rugged country with its ethnic fault lines and deep-rooted tribal loyalties becomes a fertile battleground where competing factions within the Taliban seek to assert their dominance and safeguard their interests. The control over strategically or economically significant areas, natural resources, and key supply routes are highly contentious issues that complicate the Taliban's internal rivalries. Different tribal factions within the broader Taliban movement represent specific ethnic or tribal interests, often clashing over the control and administration of key regions. The country is rich in mineral reserves such as copper, iron ore, and rare earth elements. The control over these resources grants substantial economic leverage and enhances the controlling faction's ability to finance their operations. As a result, rival factions often engage in battles to gain control over resource-rich areas. Similarly, control of key supply routes particularly those facilitating the movement of fighters, weapons, and illicit trade, becomes a crucial factor in the internal conflicts. The Taliban relies heavily on these routes to sustain its operations and maintain its stronghold in various regions.

Furthermore, as cited earlier, regional actors and other external influencers can also exercise influence over the Taliban in various shapes and forms. Regional actors with vested interests and opposing agendas seek to establish influence over the group. For instance, the long-running tussle for dominance between Pakistan and India spills over into Afghanistan as various Taliban factions become vulnerable to working as 'collaborators' in the larger geopolitical landscape. But there are always risks of proxy warfare and clandestine support exacerbating internal rifts because factions may be manipulated by these external actors. Lastly, the personalities that shape the course of internal conflicts in Taliban cannot be discounted. Charismatic leaders like Mullah Omar emerge whose charisma and vision captivate the hearts and minds of their followers, while also sparking jealousy and resentment among their peers. This clash of personalities, egos, and ambitions becomes a breeding ground for internal strife as personal rivalries overshadow the collective goals of the group. Below we briefly examine the above-mentioned factors:

2.1 Taliban warlords, and the narcotics

Tribal dynamics tend to compound the complexities of the Taliban's internal conflicts. Tribal structures, deeply rooted in Afghan traditions, are characterized by intricate networks of loyalty. Tribal affiliations hold immense importance, shaping alliances and rivalries, and influencing power dynamics within the Taliban. The Pashtun tribal system plays a significant role with tribal leaders commanding respect and wielding influence over their followers. Loyalties to tribes often supersede loyalties to the overall Taliban leadership, resulting in fractures and internal divisions. These dynamics have had profound effects on the Taliban. For instance, since its inception in the late 1990s, the Taliban movement has been under the influence of a select group of individuals from the Durrani tribe. Led by prominent members of the Noorzai and Ishqzai sub-tribes, this group has played a significant role in managing the financial affairs of the Taliban and promoting the opium trade within the region. Among the notable figures associated with this group are Bashir Noorzai, Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, Abdul Ghani Brother, Gul Agha Ishakzai (also known as Hidayatullah Badri), and Haji Khairullah Barekzai. These individuals were closely affiliated with the Taliban's late founder Mullah Omer.

Bashir Noorzai, a former detainee at Guantanamo Bay, has earned the sobriquet of "Pablo Escobar of Afghanistan".⁴³ It is believed that Noorzai, along with the Ishaqzai (Ishakzai) sub-tribes, controlled the opium business within the Taliban's network. However, Noorzai's influence faced a significant setback when he was arrested by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) authorities in April 2005 in New York.⁴⁴ During Noorzai's arrest, General Abdul Raziq Achakzai capitalized on the opportunity to expand his own power and influence in Kandahar. Raziq, who hailed from the rival Achakzai sub-tribe, held the position of chief of police for Kandahar Province. He swiftly seized control of the lucrative drug trade from the Noorzai and Ishaqzai sub-tribes. Raziq's rise to power marked a significant shift in the dynamics of the drug business, as he employed forceful tactics to sideline the Noorzai and Ishaqzai drug lords, often resorting to brutal violence and bloodshed. General Abdul Raziq Achakzai, recognized as one of Afghanistan's most influential security officials during his tenure, solidified his grip on the drug business, relegating the Noorzai and Ishaqzai factions to the sidelines. His ascendancy not only reshaped the power dynamics within the drug trade but also had broader implications for the internal balance of power within the Taliban.⁴⁵

The arrest of Bashir Noorzai and the subsequent rise of General Abdul Raziq Achakzai reflected the ever-shifting landscape of Afghanistan's drug trade and its complex ties to the country's internal conflicts. These events underscored the multifaceted challenges faced in tackling illicit networks, maintaining security, and addressing the socio-political dynamics that contribute to the resilience of drug trafficking in the region. It is important to note that many of these figures have faced significant scrutiny from the international community. Several of them such as Bashir Noorzai have been sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury due to their alleged involvement in illicit activities including drug trafficking. Additionally, some individuals, including Akhtar Mohammad

⁴³ Ruchi Kumar, "Why America just set free the 'Pablo Escobar of Afghanistan'," *The Daily Beast*, October 9, 2022, <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-america-released-bashir-noorzai-the-pablo-escobar-of-afghanistan>>

⁴⁴ "U.S. agents arrest alleged Afghan drug kingpin," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2005, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/25/national/us-agents-arrest-alleged-afghan-drug-kingpin.html>>

⁴⁵ Kazim Ehsan, "Special report: Inside the Taliban's factional and tribal warfare to control," *Kabul Now*, April 3, 2023, <<https://kabulnow.com/2023/04/special-report-inside-the-talibans-factional-and-tribal-warfare-to-control>>

Mansoor, had been designated as terrorists by the U.S. Department of State.⁴⁶ The presence of these influential individuals within the Taliban highlights the web of alliances and interests that have shaped the group's trajectory. Their involvement in managing the Taliban's financial affairs and their association with the opium trade underscores the group's reliance on illicit sources of funding. Furthermore, the designation of these figures as terrorists or their inclusion in sanctions lists indicates the international community's efforts to disrupt their activities and hinder their influence within the Taliban.

To combat the narcotics business within Afghanistan, the Taliban leaders have issued fatwas, prohibiting the cultivation, production, and sale of drug-related products and denouncing such activities as being un-Islamic. The fatwas also warned that those found participating in these activities would be subjected to prosecution under the strictures of the Taliban-defined Islamic Sharia law. However, despite the official stance against the drug trade, opium cultivation has witnessed a significant surge, resulting in a substantial increase in drug-related income for the Taliban administration. According to Qayoom Suroush, a former researcher with the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and the Center for Civilian in Conflict (CIVIC), Taliban leader Dawood Muzammil held a prominent position within the Kandahari faction of the Taliban and played a crucial role in the management and operation of the drug trade within the Taliban's network. Suroush further claims that there are reports indicating the involvement of another Taliban leader Qayyum Zakir along with his network consisting of Ibrahim Sadr, Gul Agha Ishaqzai, and Dawood Muzammil in benefiting from and facilitating the drug trade across Afghanistan.⁴⁷

The inclusion of Dawood Muzammil in this network highlighted the significance of his role in the illicit drug trade. It suggests that he was not only involved in the operational aspects but also held influence and authority within the Taliban's drug trafficking operations. The alleged involvement of Qayyum Zakir, Ibrahim Sadr, and Gul Agha Ishaqzai further implicates high-ranking members within the Taliban hierarchy in the facilitation of and benefitting from the drug trade. According to a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC),

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ali Sajjad, "The killing of Dawood Muzammil [as translated from Dari language]," *8am*, <<https://8am.media/the-killing-of-dawood-mozamel-internal-tension-or-isis-attack>>

opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan experienced a staggering 32% increase in 2022 compared to the previous year. The total area under cultivation reached a remarkable 233,000 hectares, marking it as the third largest cultivation area recorded since monitoring efforts began. Alarming, the report also highlights the substantial growth in opium income, soaring from \$425 million in 2021 to a staggering \$1.4 billion in 2022, representing a remarkable 330% increase. This amount accounted for approximately 29% of the entire agricultural sector's value in 2021.⁴⁸

These statistics paint a disturbing picture of the ongoing drug trade within Afghanistan and its implications for the Taliban administration. Despite the religious decree and condemnations, the opium trade has continued to flourish, providing a significant source of revenue for the group. The substantial increase in opium cultivation and income suggests the challenges faced in effectively curbing the drug trade, particularly within the complex socio-political landscape of Afghanistan. Addressing the drug trade and its income is vital for any efforts towards stability and development in Afghanistan. It requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses not only law enforcement measures but also socio-economic development, governance, and international cooperation to disrupt the networks and incentives that perpetuate the drug trade within the region.

Within the Afghan Taliban, as noted earlier, different factions align themselves along tribal lines, vying for power and representation. Factionalism based on tribal affiliations and loyalties can exacerbate internal conflicts, as rival factions seek to safeguard their interests and assert their dominance. Power struggles emerge as various tribal factions within the Taliban compete for control over resources, territory, and influence, leading to internal conflicts within the Taliban. Besides, external actors may exploit ethnic and tribal fault lines within the Taliban to further their own interests. Regional countries may strategically align themselves with specific tribal factions within the Taliban to achieve their objectives. But such external interferences and favors tend to exacerbate existing internal conflicts and perpetuates further divisions within the group.

⁴⁸ "Afghanistan: Opium cultivation up nearly a third, warns UNODC," UN News, November 1, 2022, <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130057>>

2.2 Power struggles among key leaders

Taliban leaders driven by personal ambitions, ideological differences, and strategic calculations, often engage in internal competition in pursuit of supremacy and control over the group's direction. At the core of these power struggles lie divergent visions and interpretations of the Taliban's goals and strategies. Each leader possesses their own unique perspective on how to achieve the Taliban's objectives, whether it be through a hardline approach or a more pragmatic and inclusive stance. These ideological differences can lead to internal rifts, as leaders advocate for their preferred paths, triggering disagreements that pose risks to Taliban's unity as a cohesive group. Personal ambitions and aspirations of key leaders are a source of internal power struggles within the group. Many leading Taliban figures seek to carve out their own sphere of influence and solidify their position within the hierarchy. These ambitions can clash, creating rivalries and power dynamics that shape the internal landscape of the group. Leaders may engage in maneuvers by forming alliances, and courting support from fellow members to enhance their own standing and marginalize their opponents.

These internal power struggles are not always peaceful. Marked by suspicion and distrust, sometimes these struggles for more power lead to deadly infighting. For instance, the emergence of Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Yaqoob – Mullah Omar's son - as the new power players within the Taliban has brought forth an intricate dynamic characterized by a delicate balance between collaboration and eroding trust. While they appear to be working hand in hand publicly, behind the scenes, their mutual trust is diminishing as each harbors aspirations of succeeding Hibatullah as the leader of the group. To gain an advantage over one another, they have even resorted to spying on each other, revealing not only their ambition but also the ruthless competition taking place within the Taliban's cabinet. This internal power struggle within the Taliban paints a vivid picture of the high stakes involved and the lengths to which individuals are willing to go to secure their positions. The intense competition permeates every corner of the group, potentially leading to dire consequences and endangering everything they have fought for over the years.

In this environment of cut-throat competition, Siraj Haqqani has strategically maneuvered himself to seize critical posts within various departments under his

ministry. Recognizing the financial opportunities they provide, he has focused his efforts on positions related to taxation, the smuggling of goods, and the lucrative drug trade. By securing control over these revenue streams, Siraj Haqqani not only consolidated his power but also ensured a substantial financial backing for his faction within the Taliban.⁴⁹ The rise of individuals like Siraj Haqqani, driven by their strategic positioning and control over key financial resources, underscores the interplay of power, politics, and economic interests within the Taliban. As the group navigates its future, the outcomes of these internal power struggles will significantly shape its direction and potentially impact the stability and cohesion of the Taliban as a whole.

In addition to political maneuvering, the internal conflicts can also take violent forms as is suspected in the cases of the deaths of Taliban leaders Mullah Pir Agha and Dawood Muzammil in 2022. Pir Agha gained notoriety when he orchestrated the killing of Mullah Dadullah's entire family and numerous members of the Kakar subtribe in Zabul province back in 2016. Mullah Dadullah himself was widely recognized as "the butcher," one of the most brutal commanders within the Taliban. As a leader influential among the Kakar subtribe in Kandahar province, his demise at the hands of Pir Agha solidified the latter's reputation. However, in July 2022, Mullah Pir Agha, the head of the Taliban's elite Rapid Response Force, known as the "Red Unit," met his end in a car accident while returning from the Haj pilgrimage and traveling to Kandahar. This sudden and unexpected demise marked the end of a prominent figure within the Taliban's ranks.

Similarly, Dawood Muzammil, a trusted individual close to Mullah Hibatullah and a senior member of the Taliban's Halmend shura, met a tragic fate. He served as the Taliban governor for Balkh but fell victim to a suicide attack in his office. Prior to his role in Balkh, Dawood had served as the governor of Nangarhar and deputy interior minister. His involvement in coordinating and overseeing the opium business along the western borders during his time as Farah's shadow governor added to his significance within the Taliban's network.

Though the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K) claimed responsibility for Muzammil's killing, there were suspicions that both Pir Agha and Muzammil's deaths were connected to internal conflicts within the Taliban and potentially

⁴⁹ Hassan Abbas, *The return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans left*.

orchestrated by the powerful Haqqani Network.⁵⁰ It is important to note that both Pir Agha and Muzammil were key military commanders within Mullah Hibatullah's inner circle. They hailed from Kandahar province, shared tribal ties with Haibatullah, and played key roles in suppressing dissenting voices and upholding the authority of Mullah Haibatullah. Considering these factors, it is plausible that their deaths were a result of internal power struggles and conflicts within the Taliban.⁵¹ The loss of figures like Pir Agha and Muzammil highlights the volatility and tensions within the Taliban's ranks. These internal conflicts not only impact the group's leadership but also have broader implications for Islamic Emirate's stability. As the Taliban navigate through these challenges, the outcomes of such internal power struggles will shape the group's future trajectory and influence its ability to maintain control and unity.⁵² The internal power struggles among key Taliban leaders can also be fueled by personal charisma of individual leaders. Those who possess a magnetic presence and the ability to inspire loyalty like Mullah Omar can attract devoted following and cement their influence within the group.

2.3 Ideological differences and factionalism

Ideological differences

Despite having a common goal of establishing an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan, the Taliban rank and file are not devoid of ideological differences. Due to secretive nature of the Taliban organization, most of the internal issues remain hidden from the public eye, but since August 2021 many ideological differences within Taliban factions have come to the fore. For instance, the Taliban's decision to bar girls from resuming their education shed light on the influence of a hardline faction within the group. This faction comprising three influential clerics from the southern region wields considerable power over Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah. Chief justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani, minister for religious affairs Noor Mohammad Saqib, and minister for the promotion of virtue and prevention of

⁵⁰ Zehra Joya, "Internal divisions in Taliban: are the Taliban seeking new leadership? [as translated from Dari language]," <<https://www.etalatroz.com/165908/طالبان-گروهی-درون-اختلاف>>

⁵¹ Kazim Ehsan, "Special report: Inside the Taliban's factional and tribal warfare to control," *Kabul Now*, April 3, 2023.

⁵² Ali Sajjad, "The killing of Dawood Muzammil [as translated from Dari language]," *8am*, <<https://8am.media/the-killing-of-dawood-mozamel-internal-tension-or-isis-attack>>

vice Mohammad Khalid Hanafi constitute the core of this hardline faction. Due to their strong influence over top leadership, the Afghan girls have not been able to return to schools. The decision disappointed not only many Afghans but also some Taliban leaders. Their rigid views and interpretations have perpetuated intolerance and prejudice. The three clerics directly confronted the supreme leader in Kandahar, leading to the ruling that prohibited girls from continuing their education.

However, it is important to note that there has been pushback against this decision from within the ranks of the Taliban. Even among Taliban members, there is recognition that this reversal goes against the aspirations and desires of a significant portion of the Afghan population. This internal dissent shows Taliban subscribing to varying shades of their ideology in addition to their struggle for influence. While the hardline faction's views have had a temporary impact on Taliban policies, their stance does not reflect the broader sentiment within the organization. The disappointment expressed by Taliban leaders and the resistance from within their own ranks indicate that there is a recognition of the importance of education and a more inclusive approach among a significant faction of the group. The ideological differences surrounding girls' education reveal the changing dynamics of the Taliban as a movement. It also underlines the complexity of decision-making processes and the influence of various factions and individuals on shaping policies. As the Taliban continue to grapple with internal conflicts and navigate the challenges of governance, the resolution of such ideological disputes will be pivotal in determining the group's future trajectory and its ability to gain wider acceptance both domestically and internationally.⁵³

The ideological differences within the Taliban have also led to contradictory approach to governance and policymaking. Initially, the hardline faction within the group took a firm stance, declaring that individuals who had served in previous administrations would be excluded from positions in the Islamic Emirate. This decision aimed to distance the new regime from the previous government and establish a clean break. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented instances where Taliban forces carried out targeted killings of

⁵³ Hassan Abbas, *The return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans left*.

former officials in various provinces. Additionally, reports emerged of Taliban squads forcibly evicting people from their homes in several regions including the Hazarajat region. However, the Taliban's stance seemed to shift soon after these initial actions. The administration announced a surprising change in policy, expressing willingness to welcome back former government officials and technocrats. Amnesty was granted to those who had previously held positions in the government, signaling a more conciliatory approach and a recognition of the need for experienced individuals to support the functioning of the new regime. This sudden reversal demonstrated the internal divisions and competing interests and priorities of different factions.⁵⁴

This also highlights the complexity of decision-making processes within the Taliban and the struggle to strike a balance between ideological adherence and pragmatic governance. Similarly, the ideological divisions have also manifested in more violent forms. Consider the incident of August 2022 in which a Taliban ideologue Rahimullah Haqqani was targeted and killed in Kabul. Haqqani was famous for his staunch opposition to Salafi ideology and had issued fatwas against the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). Initially, IS-K was considered the prime suspect in his murder due to these factors. However, investigative journalists tell a different story. According to local sources, Haqqani had also been actively advocating for the reopening of girls' schools, as reported by the BBC. He firmly believed that there was no justification in Sharia law to oppose female education. This position put him at odds with some extremist factions within the Taliban who held more conservative views. According to an Afghan observer, it was plausible that Haqqani was assassinated by factions within the Taliban who opposed his stance on girls' education. It was an opportune strike for them as they knew that suspicion would naturally fall on IS-K. Besides, IS-K was to gladly claim responsibility to perpetuate fear and build its reputation as a formidable terror outfit.

This incident highlights the nature of the challenges stemming from internal ideological divisions within the Taliban. The internal conflicts can be brutal with extremist factions promoting bigotry and intolerance. The clash between those

⁵⁴ Rhea Sinha, "Taliban's takeover: Challenges in establishing control," Observers Research Foundation, June 15, 2022, <<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/talibans-takeover>>

advocating for more progressive positions and those holding onto conservative ideologies underscores the tensions within the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. The Haqqani episode serves as a stark reminder of the ideological rifts within the Taliban. As the group struggles to govern Afghanistan and reconcile diverse viewpoints within, the internal divisions and their potentially consequences continue to pose challenges to the Emirate. It remains to be seen how these conflicts will shape the future trajectory of the Taliban and its ability to govern effectively while addressing the diverse needs and aspirations of the Afghan population.⁵⁵

Nationalist standpoint

To solidify its legitimacy, the Taliban government has taken a firm stance on issues concerning Afghan sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, this militarized hyper-nationalism can potentially isolate the Taliban regime from its neighboring countries particularly Pakistan. The Taliban's emphasis on Afghan sovereignty and territorial integrity is driven by their desire to establish themselves as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan and to distance themselves from the perceived foreign interference that occurred during the previous Afghan government. By adopting a stern stance on these issues, the Taliban seeks to resonate with the common Afghans who have grown wary of incessant foreign interventions and yearn for a government that can safeguard their nation's sovereignty.⁵⁶

The landlocked country shares borders with Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These countries have their own security concerns and interests in Afghanistan which they seek to protect. The Taliban's rigid stance on sovereignty may clash with the interests and policies of these neighboring nations particularly Pakistan on the question of Durand Line, potentially leading to strained relations and regional instability. To avoid further alienation, the Taliban government needs to strike a balance between asserting Afghan sovereignty and engaging constructively with its neighbors and the broader international community. It is crucial for the Taliban to demonstrate a willingness

⁵⁵ Hassan Abbas, The return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans left.

⁵⁶ Umar Karim, "Taliban's hyper-nationalism is complicating ties with Afghanistan's neighbours," Arab News, January 18, 2022, <<https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2006986>>

to address concerns and engage in meaningful dialogue with neighboring countries as well as to address the international community's concerns regarding political inclusion of minorities and women rights.

International jihadism

A relatively insignificant ideological faction of the Taliban harbor aspirations for global jihad. These elements hold a broader perspective on global struggle against perceived enemies of Islam.⁵⁷ They seek to export their version of Islamic system beyond Afghanistan's borders and forge alliances with similar groups worldwide. This faction draws inspiration from the ideology of global jihad which calls for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and the unification of Muslim lands under a single authority. This ideology has its roots in the teachings of Islamist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam, who advocated for armed struggle against perceived enemies of Islam. Members of this faction view the struggle in Afghanistan as part of a larger battle against Western imperialism, perceived puppet regimes, and what they perceive as the erosion of Islamic values. They consider themselves part of a global movement that seeks to counter these forces and establish a puritanical interpretation of Islam in Muslim societies.

The pragmatists

The Afghan Taliban also have factions that prioritize pragmatism over rigid ideology. These pragmatic factions emphasize practical considerations, political expediency, and the pursuit of power and control to achieve their political objectives. Unlike the hardline elements, these individuals are more open to negotiation, compromise, and engagement with external actors including the international community. Key figures within the pragmatic faction of the Taliban include Mullah Yaqoob, Mullah Baradar, Sirajuddin Haqqani, and Khairullah Khairkhwa. These individuals have shown a willingness to engage in dialogue and seek political solutions. They recognize the importance of maintaining stability both domestically and in their interactions with the international community. However, as the Taliban's directives continue to emanate mainly from Kandahar,

⁵⁷ Dr. Antonio Giustozzi, "Afghanistan under the Taliban: The global jihadist threat to Europe and the Middle East," *European Eye of Radicalization*," Report no. 36, March 2023, <<https://eeradicalization.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Antonio-Giustozzi-Report-Afghanistan.pdf>>

a growing discontent is emerging within the pragmatic factions. They feel that the directives issued by the hardline elements do not align with their practical and diplomatic approach. This dissatisfaction highlights the tension within the Taliban as different factions vie for influence and push for their preferred policies.⁵⁸

The pragmatists within the Taliban understand the necessity of balancing their ideological principles with the realities of governing and engaging with the international community. They recognize that a purely hardline approach may hinder their ability to establish stability and gain international recognition. Therefore, they seek to navigate a more nuanced path that allows for pragmatic decision making and strategic engagement. The dynamics between the hardline and pragmatic factions within the Taliban will play a crucial role in shaping the group's governance and its interactions on the national and international stage. The tensions between these factions reflect the ongoing struggle within the Taliban to strike a balance between ideology and practicality. How this internal division is resolved or managed will have significant implications for the stability and legitimacy of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan.⁵⁹

Evolving perspectives

Over the last two decades, the Afghan Taliban have undergone ideological shifts influenced by changing geopolitical dynamics and internal debates. The group's engagement in peace talks with the United States and negotiations with the previous Afghan government fueled internal discussions and reevaluating of its ideology and approaches. The Taliban did emerge as a hardline Islamist militant movement in the mid 1990s, but the group's ideology and outlook have not remained static. The several rounds of Doha talk between the US and Taliban marked a departure from the Taliban's earlier stances. These negotiations provided an opportunity for the group to reassess its ideology and explore potential avenues for reconciliation and political participation. The Taliban do have certain degree of realization that they need to address concerns raised by the international community regarding women rights, girls' education, and

⁵⁸ Kathy Ganon, "Friction among Taliban pragmatists, hard-liners intensifies," AP News, September 16, 2021, <<https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-afghanistan-kabul-taliban-abdul-ghani-baradar-56455c9c2e145c3e5bf57d697d968834>>

⁵⁹ Hassan Abbas, The return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans left.

inclusivity. However, it is essential to recognize that the group still remains rooted in its fundamental principles. The Taliban's vision of an Islamic Emirate and their adherence to a strict interpretation of Sharia law still form the basis of their ideology. However, they are also attempting to navigate a delicate balance between preserving their core principles and engaging with the international community.

3. Major factions within the Afghan Taliban

3.1 The Haqqani Network

The Haqqani Network is a key faction within the broader framework of the Afghan Taliban. Founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, the network has a long and complex history intertwined with the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network is notorious for its sophisticated tactics, including high-profile attacks and suicide bombings. It was responsible for several deadly attacks targeting Afghan and international forces as well as Afghan civilians in the past. The network operates primarily in eastern Afghanistan with its stronghold in the Paktia, Paktika, and Khost provinces. It has also maintained a presence in Pakistan's tribal regions along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.⁶⁰ The relationship between the Haqqani Network and the Afghan Taliban is multifaceted. While the Haqqanis have their own distinct structure and command, they maintain close ties to the Taliban's leadership, collaborating on military operations and strategic decision making. The Haqqanis played a crucial role in the Taliban's insurgency, contributing to the group's resilience and ability to sustain its fights.⁶¹

The Haqqani Network's alliance with the Taliban is not merely a marriage of convenience. It is rooted in shared ideological objectives mainly the desire to establish an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. Additionally, the Haqqanis provide the Taliban with a unique set of capabilities including extensive networks, financing channels, and operational expertise. The Haqqani Network's ties to Pakistan's security establishment have also influenced its relationship with the

⁶⁰ National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC, "The Haqqani Network," https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/haqqani_network.html)

⁶¹ Institute for the Study of War, "The Haqqani Network," <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/haqqani-network>

Afghan Taliban. It is believed that Pakistan provided sanctuary and support to Haqqanis to maintain influence in Afghanistan and counter the Indian presence. The network's association with the Pakistani security agencies has complicated the dynamics between the Taliban, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, adding an additional layer of complexity to the already complex web of regional politics. The network's chief Sirajuddin Haqqani is currently the deputy leader of the Afghan Taliban. His leadership role has solidified the group's influence within the Taliban. Sirajuddin has forged close ties with other Taliban leaders such as Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar the de facto Taliban leader and his brother Anas Haqqani who they got released from custody in 2019 in return for the release of two Western hostages.

Likewise, another important figure in the Haqqani Network is Ibrahim Haqqani, another son of Jalaluddin Haqqani. Ibrahim is known to be involved in the network's financial operations and has played a significant role in expanding its funding networks. He oversees the Haqqani Network's financial resources which are reportedly obtained through illicit activities such as smuggling, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom. Ibrahim's role is crucial in sustaining the network's operations and providing the necessary resources for its activities. He is a key financier for the group and has been subject to numerous designations by the US and other countries. Yet another key figure within the Haqqani Network is Khalil al-Rahman Haqqani. He is the uncle of Sirajuddin and Ibrahim Haqqani and is considered a senior leader within the network.⁶² Khalil al-Rahman Haqqani has been involved in shaping the group's ideology and has played a role in maintaining the network's relationships with external actors including the Pakistan. His position within the network adds to its credibility and influence. Other important figures in the Haqqani Network include Nasiruddin Haqqani, another brother of Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin's uncle, who was responsible for fundraising and logistics for the group before he was killed in 2013. Another relative of Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin, Badruddin Haqqani, was a key operational commander for the group but was killed in a US drone strike in 2012.

⁶² Khudai Noor Nasar, "Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say," BBC, September 15, 2021, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58560923>>

A key friction between the Haqqani Network and other Taliban factions is the network's transnational jihadist outlook. The Haqqanis harbor ideals of global caliphate which diverges from the localized focus of some Taliban factions who seek establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan only. Some Taliban segments accuse the Haqqanis of being manipulated by Pakistan and question the network's autonomy and potential prioritization of Pakistani interests over the goals of the Afghan Taliban.

However, despite these internal conflicts, the Taliban have maintained a semblance of unity. The group has historically been adept at managing internal divisions and presenting a unified front to the outside world when necessary. The Taliban's desire for power and control often outweighs the internal differences, allowing the Taliban to overcome these conflicts and maintain a united front.

3.2 Quetta Shura

The Quetta Shura of the Taliban was a clandestine group that remained shrouded in secrecy for about two decades. Consisting of senior leaders, the Quetta Shura is seen as the ultimate decision making body within the Taliban organization. This shadowy committee is believed to have been operating from the Pakistani city of Quetta since the early 2000s and has been instrumental in shaping the behavior and strategy of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite its lead role, the Shura members have historically gone to extreme lengths to preserve their anonymity. Throughout the past years, few details of the Shura members were known to the public. Nonetheless, the Quetta Shura has been an essential force within the Taliban, guiding its operations and shaping its ideology. It played a key role in coordinating a range of militant activities including attacks on Afghan government targets, American and NATO forces, and others in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Their tactics were brutal which often drew criticism and condemnation from the international community. However, despite all criticisms, the Quetta Shura persisted as a critical force within the Taliban organization.

The Quetta Shura serves as a symbol of authority and legitimacy in the Taliban movement. Its decisions carry weight and are respected by the Taliban, lending credibility to its leadership and enhancing its ability to exert influence over various factions and networks. The Shura's pronouncements and directives guide the actions of the Taliban's fighters, ensuring a cohesive and coordinated

approach. The Shura's significance extends beyond the internal dynamics of the Taliban. It was a key player in the Afghan peace process including in negotiations with international stakeholders. In essence, the Quetta Shura stands as the fulcrum of power within the Afghan Taliban. Its significance lies in its ability to unite diverse factions and guide the movement's actions. The most notable figure within the Quetta Shura is Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, the current leader of the Taliban. As the head of the Shura, he holds ultimate authority and is responsible for guiding the Taliban's overall objectives. Hibatullah is known for his religious scholarship and has been influential in shaping the Taliban's ideological framework.

Likewise, another important figure in the Quetta Shura is Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the co-founder of the Taliban and a key negotiator in the Afghan peace process. Baradar, who previously served as the deputy leader of the Taliban has played a pivotal role in engaging with international stakeholders and participating in peace talks. He brings strategic acumen and political expertise to the Shura. Additionally, Mullah Yaqoob, the son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar, holds a prominent position within the Quetta Shura. Yaqoob has been involved in military leadership and has commanded the Taliban's military operations in southern Afghanistan. His role reflects the importance of military strategy within the Shura's decision-making processes. Other figures include Mullah Abdul Salam Hanafi who serves as the deputy leader of the Taliban, and Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, a prominent Taliban negotiator. These individuals, among others, bring a range of expertise to the Shura's discussions and decisions.

4. Implications of internal divisions

4.1 Impact on the Taliban's operational capabilities

The internal conflicts within the Afghan Taliban that from ideological differences, power struggles, tribal rivalries etc. can potentially undermine the Taliban's organizational cohesiveness and its ability to successfully run the Islamic Emirate and deliver basic services to the Afghan people. Understanding the potential repercussions of these internal conflicts is critical for assessing the Taliban's ability to perform as rulers of Afghanistan. Divisions within the group can lead to emergence of rival factions that may prioritize their own interests over the broader goals and objectives of the Taliban. Any serious fragmentation can

compromise the centralized command and control within the organization. Perennial disputes over resources, territorial control, and leadership positions can deteriorate the fragmentation, potentially leading to a breakdown in communication and cooperation among different Taliban units.

Furthermore, continued internal conflicts can undermine the morale and discipline of the Taliban forces. When factions within the group are in conflict, it can create a sense of mistrust and erode the cohesion necessary to govern Afghanistan. And internal conflicts can also impact the Taliban's external relations and support networks. Disagreements among factions may lead to the loss of support from key sponsors or external actors, further undermining the group's operational capabilities. But it is worth noting that the Taliban has historically demonstrated resilience and overcome in-house issues and divisions. Moreover, internal conflicts are not unique to the Taliban and are common among armed groups operating in complex political and social environments.

4.2 Significance for stability in Afghanistan and the region

Internal conflicts within the Taliban have the potential to impact the stability in Afghanistan. The country has been plagued by violence and insurgency and any fractures within the Taliban can exacerbate existing challenges. Divisions within the Taliban can lead to intensive and brutal power struggles and competition for resources, leading to increased clashes among different factions. The resulting violence can destabilize communities, displace civilians, and create a cycle of retaliation that undermines the country's stability. What's more worrying is that infighting among the Taliban can create space for rival groups such as the IS-K and TTP etc. to exploit the situation. Other insurgent groups, criminal networks, or regional actors may attempt to take advantage of the divisions within the Taliban to advance their own interests. This can lead to an increase in overall violence and instability. This can undermine public confidence in the Taliban's ability to provide essential services, maintain law and order, and govern the country.

Any serious infighting among the Afghan Taliban will also have spillover effects on regional stability. Afghanistan shares borders with several countries, and any instability within the country can have implications for regional security. Rival factions within the Taliban may seek support or sanctuary from neighboring countries, potentially fueling regional rivalries and tensions among other states

too. Lastly, internal conflicts can have adverse economic consequences for the region. Afghanistan is located at a strategic crossroads, and its stability and development are crucial for regional connectivity and economic integration. However, infighting among the ruling Taliban can deter investment, development, and impede regional trade. This can adversely affect the economic growth and prosperity of neighboring countries.

5. External influences on Taliban's internal divisions

Many Taliban leaders including Mullah Omar received refuge in Pakistan. Taliban enjoyed both material and diplomatic support including political recognition and protection. However, in recent years, Pakistan has sought to diversify its outreach toward Taliban factions with some factions receiving less support than others. This has led to resentment within the Taliban leadership with some factions alleging that the group's senior leadership has become too close to Pakistan. In fact, the issue of seeking Pakistan's help to govern Afghanistan has emerged as a divisive topic among Afghan analysts and even within the Taliban itself. Many Afghan analysts are apprehensive about the perception that Pakistan has exerted its influence over Afghanistan through the Taliban. They are wary of relying on Pakistan for assistance in running the government, as it could further reinforce the belief that Afghanistan is under Pakistani control.

Interestingly, even within the ranks of the Taliban, there are differing views on the relationship with Pakistan. While Pakistan has historically provided support to the Taliban, there is a significant portion of the Afghan population including members of the Taliban who hold negative opinions about Pakistan. These sentiments stem from the troubled history between the two countries and the perception that Pakistan has not consistently acted in the best interests of Afghanistan.

The Islamic Emirate's initial request to Pakistan not to send Pakistani journalists to cover the developments in Kabul showcases the complex dynamics between the two nations. It suggests that the Taliban is cautious about the narrative that could be shaped if Pakistani journalists were covering their governance. This cautious approach reveals a level of mistrust and a desire to maintain a degree of independence from Pakistan. Moreover, the strained relationship between Kabul and Islamabad is evident in the limited support from the Afghan government in

persuading Pakistani Taliban factions to reconcile with Islamabad. The sporadic clashes along the Pak-Afghan borders highlight the deep-rooted distrust between the two nations.⁶³ Like Pakistan, Iran too has deep interests in the Taliban's affairs. Iran has long been a supporter of the anti-Taliban forces and fought a bloody war with the Taliban during the 1990s. However, in more recent times, Iran has developed relationships with Taliban factions. The connections between Ibrahim Sadr, Qayyum Zakir, and Akhtar Mansour, the former Taliban leader, and Iran have been a subject of interest and speculation.

Mansour had particularly strong ties to Iran. However, his connection with Iran ended when he was killed by a US drone strike in Pakistan's Baluchistan province in May 2016 while returning from Iran. Both Mansour and Sadr belonged to the Ishaqzai branch of the Durrani tribe, which shows their tribal and regional affiliations. These connections likely played a role in their interactions with Iran. Additionally, it is worth noting that Mansour assumed leadership of the Taliban following the death of Mullah Omar, further indicating his significance within the group and his potential influence in forging ties with Iran. Former Governor Shahjahan has made claims suggesting that during Dawood's tenure as the Taliban's shadow governor of Farah, Iran provided support to the Taliban militia, including supplying them with weapons and equipment to fight against the Afghan republic government. While these claims cannot be independently verified, they highlight the complex dynamics at play and the potential involvement of external actors in supporting certain factions within the Taliban.⁶⁴

Russia has also had an interest in the Taliban's internal affairs, particularly in recent times. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and Taliban delegates have conducted eight rounds of bilateral and multilateral meetings on issues of humanitarian aid, human rights, and Afghanistan's future economic recovery. To strengthen Afghanistan's internal security, Putin has even proposed the Taliban's removal from the list of international terrorist organizations. Moscow's pragmatic and soft approach toward Afghanistan signals its acceptance of the new reality. From providing humanitarian and financial aid to urging the removal of the Taliban from the list of terrorist organizations, Moscow acknowledges that they

⁶³ Hassan Abbas, *The return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans left*.

⁶⁴ Kazim Ehsan, "Special report: Inside the Taliban's factional and tribal warfare to control," *Kabul Now*, April 3, 2023.

can neither be ignored nor isolated. Furthermore, Russian officials also did not evacuate their Kabul embassy, exhibiting their reciprocity and trust in the Taliban's governance. All in all, Russia seems optimistic about the Taliban and their future, citing them as a powerful force and people of sound mind. However, Russia's real and tangible interests of safeguarding its own economic and security interests will always come first.⁶⁵

Amidst the internal rivalries and power struggles within the Taliban, it is interesting to note the consistent messaging that the group is projecting to the outside world. Despite the factions and differing ideologies within their ranks, key figures such as Yaqoob and Siraj have conveyed a desire for improved relations with the United States and the international community, emphasizing the importance of establishing constitutional law and adhering to global norms and principles. Yaqoob, in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) expressed his wish for better relations with the US. He acknowledged the necessity of constitutional law in Afghanistan, indicating a willingness to engage in a more structured and governed system. This statement highlights the potential pragmatic approach taken by some factions within the Taliban who recognize the importance of maintaining diplomatic ties and pursuing constructive relationships with foreign powers.

Similarly, in a conversation with CNN's Christiane Amanpour, Siraj emphasized that the Taliban no longer sees the US as an enemy. While they may have reservations about the US's intentions, Siraj expressed a desire to establish good relations with the US and the international community based on the existing rules and principles that govern the rest of the world.⁶⁶ This statement suggests that the Taliban recognizes the importance of engaging with the global community and following international norms and standards. The consistent messaging from key Taliban figures regarding their foreign affairs strategy indicates a calculated approach to the group's international relations. It suggests a desire to present a more moderate and cooperative image to the world, potentially aimed at gaining

⁶⁵ Hassan Abbas, The return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans left.

⁶⁶ Jo Shelley, et al., "Top Taliban leader makes more promises on women's rights but quips 'naughty women' should stay home," CNN World, May 19, 2022, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/18/asia/amanpour-haqqani-taliban-women-interview-intl/index.html>>

recognition and support from the international community. However, it remains to be seen how these statements align with the actions and policies implemented on the ground in Afghanistan, especially given the internal divisions and ideological differences within the Taliban. The evolving dynamics of the Taliban's interactions with foreign powers will undoubtedly shape the future trajectory of Afghanistan and its relationships with the international community.⁶⁷

6. Conclusion

The internal conflicts among the Afghan Taliban reveal the complex dynamics and power struggles within the group. These conflicts arise from a variety of factors including ideological differences, regional and tribal rivalries, personal ambitions of key leaders, and divergent approaches to governance and external relations. One of the main sources of internal conflict is the clash between hardliners and pragmatists. Hardliners push for rigid policies and resist compromise, mirroring their policies from the 1990s. On the other hand, pragmatists prioritize practical considerations and political expediency, seeking negotiations and engagement with external actors. This divide leads to conflicting policies and approaches within the group as exemplified by the contrasting debate over girls' education and the acceptance of former government officials into the Islamic Emirate's fold.

Additionally, regional and tribal rivalries contribute to the internal conflicts. Various factions within the Taliban are affiliated with specific tribes or regions, and these affiliations can lead to power struggles and competition for resources and even infighting. The Durrani tribe, for instance, has played a significant role within the Taliban with sub-tribes like the Noorzai and Ishaqzai involved in managing financial affairs and promoting the opium trade. Such tribal dynamics often intersect with ideological differences, exacerbating internal tensions. Moreover, external influences and relationships add another layer of complexity to the internal conflicts. Some Taliban leaders have had connections with neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Iran which can influence their perspectives and actions. These external alliances may contribute to divisions

⁶⁷ Hassan Abbas, *The return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans left*.

within the group as different factions align themselves with different foreign actors.

The potential implications of these internal conflicts can be significant for country's stability, governance, and international relations. They not only impact the group's ability to govern effectively but also influence the broader political landscape of the country. The factionalism and power struggles within the Taliban can hinder the establishment of a cohesive and inclusive government, resulting in fragmented and unstable state. Moreover, these conflicts pose challenges to the Taliban's engagement with the international community, as divergent ideologies and policies may complicate efforts to gain recognition and support. It is crucial to recognize that the internal conflicts within the Taliban are not static, but rather dynamic and evolving. As power dynamics shift and new leaders emerge, the balance of power within the group may change. External factors, such as the involvement of neighboring countries and the influence of international actors, can also shape the trajectory of these conflicts.

To address these challenges, the Afghan Taliban will need to strike a balance between accommodating diverse perspectives and maintaining a unified front. Inclusive decision making processes and mechanisms for resolving disputes will be essential to prevent fragmentation. Additionally, fostering a culture of dialogue and compromise can help bridge ideological differences and foster a more cohesive and effective leadership. Ultimately, the resolution of internal conflicts among the Afghan Taliban will have significant implications for Afghanistan's future. The ability of the group to reconcile its differences, build inclusive governance structures, and engage constructively with the international community will shape the prospects for peace, stability, and development in the country and the larger region.