PAKISTAN'S AFGHAN PERSPECTIVE AND POLICY OPTIONS

Final report of PIPS analyses and expert consultations since July 2021

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Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) is grateful to The Royal Norwegian Embassy in Islamabad for its generous support to this project, allowing the organization to conduct policy-driven research and hold expert consultations highlighting the role Pakistan can play in promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan.

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1. Introduction & methodology

With the aim of strengthening Pakistan’s support for the peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan, Pak Institute for Peace Studies initiated a comprehensive research and advocacy program in July 2021. The overarching aim or goal pursued two linked objectives of improving knowledge-base and awareness of key stakeholders on Pakistan’s Afghan perspective and role in Afghan peace and reconciliation; and updating policy options and recommendations for Pakistani government and civil society. To achieve these objectives, PIPS implemented three types of activities or measures, including:

(i) Monitoring and analysis of the opinions of different segments of Pakistani society and state institutions on Afghanistan’s political, social and security situations and their perceived impact on Pakistan.

(ii) Engagement with subject specialists and experts to produce analytical papers or research reports on different topics structured around the themes of Afghan conflict and peace process as seen from Pakistani perspective.

(iii) Establishment of a ‘network of resource persons’ and their participation in quarterly consultations to discuss multiple aspects of Afghan conflict and political reconciliation and suggest policy options and strategies to the government of Pakistan and other stakeholders with the aim to support Afghan peace and reconciliation and tackle the trickledown effect of Afghan situation including in terms of militancy and insecurity, among other things.

The outcomes of all these implemented measures were documented and published in the form of 8 quarterly monitors titled "Perspectives from Pakistan on Afghan peace and reconciliation," a same number of expert consultation reports, and 16 analytical papers embodied in 8 quarterly situation reviews titled "Afghanistan as seen from Pakistan."
INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

This policy-oriented final report builds upon the findings of the entire PIPS monitoring and analysis produced as well as consultations held over the project course.

The main focus of this report is placed on exploring, analysing and informing Pakistan’s policy responses and options to support Afghan peace and stability. It comprises eight chapters. While chapter 2 provides a brief historical background of Pak-Afghan ties, chapter 3 narrates official and public responses from Pakistan since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Chapter 4 analyses the challenges confronting the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan and the following chapter discusses the fallout of emerging Afghan situation on Pakistan. Chapter 6 offers a detailed account of challenges and opportunities in Pakistan’s bilateral engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. Chapter 7 evaluates evolving geopolitical dynamics and developments in relation to Afghanistan including international concerns and responses, the refugee issue, humanitarian aid and assistance, the recognition issue, as well as an analysis of geopolitical machinations and standpoints on Afghanistan and regional politics. The eighth and last chapter exclusively focuses Pakistan’s Afghan policy challenges and options as well as policy recommendations.
2. Historical background of Pak-Afghan relations

Bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have always been more or less uneasy. Afghanistan had started to promote the idea of annexing Pakistan’s Pashtun-dominated areas immediately after the founding of Pakistan and continued troubling it in this regard through the 1950s and 1960s to the late 1970s. The Pashtun-dominated Parcham (Flag) party in Afghanistan made a few lackadaisical attempts to promote the idea of a greater Pashtunistan as an independent country that would be constituted by the Pashtun-dominated areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although the idea never became popular in either country, it heightened Pakistan’s security concerns about its western border. Nonetheless, Afghanistan continued to challenge Pakistan over the Durand Line “through diplomatic pressure, tribal incursions, and support for secessionist movements” in Pakistan.¹

To counter such perceived threat and moves by Afghanistan, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto’s government had started supporting the anti-Daud resistance movement (mainly Islamist leaders Burhanuddin Rabbani and Gulbadin Hekmatyar) in Afghanistan as early as 1973 in the form of providing weapons and clandestine guerrilla training. Later, during Ziaul Haq’s rule in Pakistan, these Afghan leaders continued to receive funding, training and equipment from Pakistan. Both leaders were also on good terms with Pakistan’s Jamaat-e-Islami.²

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent Soviet-Afghan war (1979-89) gave Pakistan the opportunity to counter the notion of a greater Pashtunistan

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PAK-AFGHAN RELATIONS

and Indian and Soviet influences in Afghanistan, and to attempt to install a friendly government there. Although the war was called a “jihad” against “Soviet infidels”, there is a near consensus among political analysts that Pakistan’s decision to support the Afghan Islamist resistance groups in the 1970s and 1980s was strategic and not ideological in nature. General Zia’s use of religion as a motivating factor was merely a tactical move to obtain recruits and funds for the war and also to justify it. Similarly, the Pashtun ethnic ethos was used to persuade tribesmen in the north-west of Pakistan to fight along with their Pashtun brothers in Afghanistan against Soviet aggression and the occupation of their land.

Not all of the Afghan mujahideen groups received equal treatment from Pakistan in terms of the channelling of funds and weapons to them and training. Pakistan expected that extremist Pashtun groups and those friendly to Pakistan would be able to “transcend ethnic divisions and denounce the traditional Afghan claim on Pashtunistan.” Pakistan’s former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, described the strategic purpose of Zia regime’s selective treatment of mujahideen groups in the following words:

There were significant elements within it [the Afghan mujahideen] that were more open to cooperation and civility with the West, and there were hardliners. But the hard-liners were supported by General Zia … the ISI, looking beyond the end of the war, seemed keen on developing close working relations with these elements within the mujahideen whom they would try to empower to rule the new Afghanistan and give Pakistan strategic depth

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by extending Islamabad’s influence northward to counter Kabul’s traditional ties with India.

While Pakistan was courting mujahideen groups to seek strategic depth in Afghanistan, India considered it extremely important that Afghanistan should not fall under Pakistani influence. Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi had told the Soviet president in 1987 that such a scenario would be absolutely unacceptable to India. Afghan president Najibullah told his Soviet counterpart during his meeting with him in Moscow on August 23, 1990, that India was pursuing its own interests in connection with Kashmir and was “stubbornly trying to involve Afghanistan in opposing Pakistan without trying very eagerly to give specific support to settling the Afghan problem.”

During the 1990s Afghanistan witnessed the fall of the Najibullah regime, a subsequent civil war and then the rise of the Afghan Taliban to power, during which the country became a hub for an assortment of militant groups, including al-Qaeda, Central Asian militants, and Pakistani sectarian and jihadist groups. During this period four democratically elected governments, two each of the Pakistan People’s Party and Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz, alternately ruled Pakistan, but none completed its due term. Pakistan’s Afghan policy remained more or less the same as during the Soviet-Afghan war, although now with limited resources and

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6 The strategic depth doctrine was designed to use Afghanistan as a buffer to counter Indian and (previously) Soviet encirclement of Pakistan.

7 Safdar Sial, “Pakistan’s role and strategic priorities in Afghanistan since 1980.”

8 Ibid.
leverage on political stakeholders in Afghanistan.\(^9\) As in the 1980s, Pakistan’s security establishment largely led Pakistan’s Afghan policy during these years.\(^10\)

The Taliban emerged as a direct consequence of this civil war. Under the leadership of a seminary teacher, Mullah Omer, the Taliban drew up a minimum agenda: to restore peace, disarm the population, enforce sharia law, and defend Islam in Afghanistan.\(^11\) Besides military and financial support, Pakistan also provided political support to the Taliban regime in collaboration with Saudi Arabia. During Benazir Bhutto’s second government in 1993 Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam leader Maulana Fazlur Rahman “made several trips as chairman of the National Assembly’s Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to seek financial and military help for the Taliban.”\(^12\) The role of the then-interior minister, Naseerullah Babar, was also very significant in this way. Benazir Bhutto claimed in her book, *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy and the West*, that her government encouraged the Taliban to work with the international community.\(^13\) Pakistan Muslim League governments led by Nawaz Sharif (1990-93 and 1997-99) did not make any difference as far as Pakistan’s Afghan policy was concerned. According to some counts Nawaz liked, admired, and wanted to emulate the Afghan Taliban and even tried to pass legislation during his second term that

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\(^9\) Ibid.


\(^13\) Benazir Bhutto, *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy and the West*. 

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would grant authoritarian powers to the Pakistani chief executive similar to those held by Mullah Omer in Afghanistan.\(^\text{14}\)

The foreign militants, including those from Pakistan, saw a ray of hope and started concentrating in Kandahar, where the Taliban movement originated. Osama bin Laden also moved his headquarters there. Most observers agree that Pakistan's Afghan policy coupled with developments in Afghanistan militarized and radicalized the Pakistani-Afghan border areas. It also politically isolated Pakistan because no other country in the region was happy with either the Taliban or Pakistan's support for it. Pakistan was one of the three nations that had recognized the Taliban government, the other two being Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.\(^\text{15}\)

India, Iran and Russia supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, fearing that the Arab, Central Asian and Pakistani militant groups sheltered in Afghanistan could create security challenges for them. India was concerned about the Kashmir-focused Pakistani militant groups’ nexus with the Taliban and the Arab and Central Asian militant groups. Vehement Saudi support for the Taliban and its involvement in sectarian-related killings in Mazar-e-Sharif heightened Iranian concerns. The fears of regional and other countries were further strengthened after the Taliban gradually came under the influence of the global jihadist network Al-Qaeda, which, according to Ahmad Rashid, “had a strong desire to keep the Taliban isolated from the world, but too dependent on its financial and logistic support base as a means

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ahmed Rashid, “Pakistan’s coup: planting the seeds of democracy?” *Current History*, December 1999: 409-14.
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\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ahmed Rashid, “Pakistan’s coup: planting the seeds of democracy?” *Current History*, December 1999: 409-14.
of tactic and strategy”. He further notes that between 1996 and 2001 al-Qaeda trained an estimated 30,000 militants from around the world in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{16}

Al-Qaeda’s September 11, 2001, terror strikes in the US revealed the intensity of the danger the Taliban regime in Afghanistan posed by its sheltering of al-Qaeda and other terrorists. Pakistan once again became the frontline ally of the US in the ensuing war on terror in Afghanistan, but this time against the Taliban regime that it had groomed and supported. By joining the US-led war on terror, President Pervez Musharraf tried to avoid Pakistan’s isolation from the world and its being bracketed with the militants, counter India’s possible rise in the Afghan theatre, and secure political legitimacy and financial assistance for his regime.\textsuperscript{17}

After coming to power in 2008 the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP)-led coalition government provided full support to the army in its counter-militancy campaign in KP and the erstwhile FATA. However, as in the country’s internal security activities, the army also had the leading role in the security and defence aspects of Pakistan’s foreign policy towards Afghanistan and in the US-led war on terror. With regard to the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan’s traditional approach of inertness continued despite repeated requests from the international allies in Afghanistan for Pakistan to act against the Taliban and threats to force it to do so. Meanwhile, Pakistan continued to regard India’s political, economic and military activities in Afghanistan with suspicion. Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s signing of a strategic partnership with India in October 2011 further increased Pakistan’s fears that it was being marginalized in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{17} Safdar Sial, “Pakistan’s role and strategic priorities in Afghanistan since 1980.”

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
Unlike his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani has adopted a policy of rapprochement towards Pakistan. To that end he delayed the implementation of the strategic partnership agreement with India, sought close ties with Pakistan’s security establishment, and instituted specific initiatives to alleviate Pakistani concerns over cross-border terrorism. Pakistan, in turn, managed to bring Taliban representatives to the negotiation table in Murree on July 7, 2015. The fledgling Afghan government-Taliban peace process derailed after the announcement of the death of Mullah Omar. The news not only derailed the fledgling peace process, but also exposed and increased internal rifts among the Taliban leaders, besides prompting the new Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, to take a hardliner stance to appease the dissident Taliban commanders who did not want to engage in talks with the Afghan government. Consequently, the Taliban reverted to their traditional stance – that they would not hold talks with the government until international forces are completely withdrawn from the country and the Afghan government’s agreements in this regard are abrogated – and increased their attacks inside Afghanistan. Secondly, the announcement of Omar’s death took the level of trust between Pakistan and Afghanistan back to that of the pre-Ghani era, when the two countries were caught in the mutual blame game of not doing enough to stop cross-border terrorism and providing sanctuary to the other’s militants.

Meanwhile, since the US-Taliban February 2020 deal in Doha, Pakistan’s responses on the Afghan situation have remained oriented around some of its key strategic as well as geoeconomics foreign policy objectives. Before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Pakistan repeatedly asserted that it supported a negotiated settlement of

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20 Ibid.
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the Afghan conflict led by the intra-Afghan reconciliation process. Pakistan opposed the Taliban taking over Afghanistan militarily and frequently stated that it did not want the Afghan soil to be used for perpetrating and supporting terrorism against Pakistan. At the same time Pakistan did not support the idea of a “hasty” U.S. withdrawal. Responding to Ghani administration's allegations, Pakistani officials reiterated time and again that their country could not be blamed for the failures of the Afghan government or international community in bringing peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. Pakistan also tended to softly handle the Taliban, who some ministers said were now ‘wise’ and ‘civilized’.

On 15th of August Kabul fell at the hands of the Taliban. At the outset, as will be described in the following section, most in Pakistan welcomed the Taliban's takeover. But it took no more than few months for Pakistan to realize that its optimism in the Taliban was misplaced. The Afghan Taliban have since distanced themselves from the matter of the TTP, a key Pakistani concern, and have now publicly taken a position that the TTP is an internal problem of Pakistan, and that Afghan soil is not being used against any country including Pakistan. They have also said that “the Taliban’s track record has been consistent. The group doesn’t turn on its militant allies. It didn’t turn on Al-Qaeda, so why would it turn on the TTP, with which the Taliban has been ideologically aligned with for years?”[21]

Nonetheless, they have taken nationalistic stand on the Durand Line and Pakistan's border fencing triggering insecurity and occasional skirmishes at the border.

3. Responses from Pakistan since Taliban takeover of Afghanistan\(^{22}\)

3.1 Government and officials

After the Taliban takeover of Kabul, most official and public responses from Pakistan were welcoming. Some government officials even described it as victory for Pakistan and defeat of India. Pakistan urged the international community to engage with the Taliban and not leave Afghanistan alone in an effort to avoid humanitarian crisis, governance collapse as well as a possible civil war. Pakistan has also been influencing the US and other stakeholders to reactivate the funding channels to Afghanistan and unfreeze its assets. Similarly, Pakistan has been facilitating the international community’s efforts to provide humanitarian aid to the country. Still, Pakistan may not be the first country to recognize the Taliban government because there are many political risks and security threats attached to that. Pakistan has made its stance clear time and again that it would take its own decision regarding Afghanistan following in the footsteps of the international community, and not recognize the Afghan government unilaterally.

Moreover, Pakistan unflinchingly defended its standpoint on the inclusive nature of Afghan government. For instance, in an extended Troika meeting held in Islamabad in November 2021,\(^{23}\) it called on the Taliban to work with fellow Afghans to take steps to form an inclusive and representative government that respects the rights of all Afghans and provides for the equal rights of women and girls to participate in all aspects of Afghan society. However, Pakistan’s anxiety about the

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\(^{22}\) This section largely builds upon 8 quarterly monitors PIPS has produced since July 2021, titled “Perspectives from Pakistan on Afghan peace and reconciliation.” These monitors can be seen here: <https://www.pakpips.com/publications>

\(^{23}\) On November 11, 2021, Islamabad hosted a meeting of the extended Troika, comprising Pakistan, China, Russia and the United States to discuss the latest situation in Afghanistan.
Afghan refugees, as it already hosted about three million registered and unregistered Afghan refugees from previous wars, made it declare that it cannot afford to host more due to its devastated economy.

Pakistan hosted the 17th Extraordinary Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of Organization of Islamic Cooperation on December 19, 2021, at the National Assembly Hall with 20 foreign ministers and 10 deputy foreign ministers in attendance from across the Muslim world. Pakistan hosted the session to hold discussions with the international community and United Nations system for unlocking financial and banking channels for delivery of resources to the people of Afghanistan.

Pakistan took special actions to synergize various streams of efforts on Afghanistan across the government, including international coordination for humanitarian assistance and effective border management to prevent any negative spillover into Pakistan. In this regard, Pakistan’s federal government set up a 22-member high-level Afghanistan Inter-ministerial Coordination Cell (AICC). During the first Apex Committee meeting of the AICC, held in Islamabad on November 22, 2021, the former Pakistani prime minister announced to allow the 50,000 metric tons of wheat India had offered to provide Afghanistan as humanitarian assistance to go through Pakistan. Similarly, the ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan gave strict instructions to meet the health needs of Afghanistan after which the Health Services Academy Islamabad started training for medical personnel in Afghanistan.

Moreover, for enhancing trade and transit, Pakistan allowed, in September 2021, the duty-free import of fruits and vegetables from Afghanistan to facilitate bilateral trade, and border-crossings also remained open 24/7 for trade. Besides this, the Foreign Office announced that Afghan businessmen could get a visa on arrival, adding that the embassy in Kabul had also been authorized to issue five-year visas to businessmen.
As the year 2022 began, many political analysts projected that Pakistan’s relations with the Taliban will become tense due to the growing tension along the border, mainly due to the Taliban’s aggressive response to Pakistan’s fencing of the border, and an increase in terrorist violence in Pakistan by the TTP and Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) terrorist groups. However, Pakistan did not slow down its diplomatic as well as humanitarian support to the interim government of Taliban. Afghanistan was one of the highlights of Pakistan’s first National Security Policy 2022-2026, which held that “Pakistan remains committed to facilitating and supporting peace and stability in Afghanistan in close collaboration with the international community through addressing economic, humanitarian, and security issues. Chairing the 3rd and 4th meetings of the Apex Committee on Afghanistan (in January and February 2022, respectively), the former Prime Minister Imran Khan said that Pakistan is committed to provide all-out support to the Afghan people to avert a humanitarian crisis, and priority must be given to trade, healthcare, and communication projects in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, on the US decision of dividing half of Afghan assets among 9/11 victims’ families, Pakistan reiterated its position on the frozen Afghan central bank assets in the US, saying that “these are owned by the Afghan people and should be released.” On February 12, 2022, the Foreign Office spokesperson stated that “the utilization of Afghan funds should be the sovereign decision of Afghanistan.”

When the Taliban resistance to Pakistan’s border-fencing activities turned violent, Islamabad showed utmost restraint and repeatedly raised the issue with the Taliban government in Kabul. However, a cross-border attack martyring three soldiers of Pakistan Army coupled with some other high-impact TTP attacks during the month of April 2022 drew a strong reaction from Pakistani government and security

24 For details, please see the press release issued by the MoFA: <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-release-491>
RESPONSES FROM PAKISTAN SINCE TALIBAN TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN

forces. Pakistan demanded of the Afghan government to take strict action against the TTP and other militants attacking Pakistan while being sheltered in Afghanistan. Similarly, the situation at the Chaman border in Balochistan also remained tense during November 2022. The border remained close for more than a week before Pakistan agreed conditionally to reopen it. Pakistan summoned the Afghan chargé d’affaires in Islamabad and lodged a strong protest over the incident of “unprovoked cross-border shelling” by the Afghan Taliban forces. A high-level delegation comprising civil and military officials also went to Afghanistan to meet top officials, and a peace jirga was held in Spin Boldak.

When the Taliban issued a ruling stating that its scholars had evaluated the university curriculum and environment, and the attendance for girls would be suspended "until a suitable environment" was provided, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan Bilawal Bhutto Zardari expressed disappointment, but advocated engagement. However, most Pakistani political leaders and parties criticized the Taliban's renewed ban on girls' education and stated that the Taliban's action presented a baseless and false conception of Islam to the world.

After the Afghan authorities held Pakistan responsible for military violations in Khost and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan in April 2022, Pakistan’s Foreign Office said the government was looking into the situation. The government of Pakistan also made it clear to Taliban’s regime to secure the Pak-Afghan border region and take stern actions against the individuals involved in terrorist activities in Pakistan, which is in the interest of peace and progress of the two brotherly countries.

While the Ukraine crisis distracted the world’s attention from the troubles in Afghanistan, Pakistan reached out to the Afghan government to prevent the Afghan economy from collapsing, which would have terrible consequences for the entire region. Relief goods including food, winter clothing and other necessary items were regularly sent to Afghan officials under Pak-Afghan Cooperation
Forum. Hospitals were also established on Afghanistan border to treat serious patients, especially women and children. Furthermore, to strengthen trade ties with Afghanistan, government of Pakistan allowed barter trade to help the neighboring country. For easing trade for Afghanistan, in January 2022 Pakistan removed 45 per cent regulatory duty on the import of Chilgoza (pine nut) from Afghanistan. Pakistan also announced a temporary waiver of Electronic Import Form (EIF) for Afghanistan to facilitate trade activities.

### 3.2 Political and religious parties

Until the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, there was little to no response from political parties, mainly those in the opposition, on any aspect of Afghan situation and its interface with Pakistan. In July 2021, members of the parliament including from the opposition were briefed by Pakistan’s military and intelligence chiefs on the emerging Afghan situation. Many announced to stand behind the military leadership on the matter of internal security of Pakistan and peace process in Afghanistan. In early August 2021, a Pakhtun nationalist and religious syndicate, “Pakhtun Qaumi Jirga” released a 21-point declaration strongly condemning the turmoil in Afghanistan and decided to organize peace rallies at the district level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

After the Taliban took over Kabul in 2021, there were varying responses. Religious-political parties strongly welcomed and praised the Taliban for their so-called ‘victory’. For one, Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazal (JUI-F) hailed Taliban’s victory, stating that ‘mujahideen’ had liberated their country from foreign invaders. Similarly, Jamaat-e-Islami chief Sirajul Haq while congratulating the Taliban leadership said

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that the defeat of the American imperialist force in Afghanistan was a landmark victory for the entire ummah, or comity of the Muslim nations. Likewise, social media platforms were flooded with Pakistanis, including officials and ministers and members of religious-political parties, hailing the Taliban ‘victory’ in Afghanistan. However, mainstream political parties were careful and demanded of the government to take all the stakeholders into confidence by initiating a debate in the Parliament. Nevertheless, political parties mainly expressed apprehensions about the possible fallout of the Afghan situation and Pakistan’s preparedness to deal with it. At the outset, some nationalist political parties from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan denounced the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul but later adopted a more cautious and accommodative approach.

In the months following the Taliban takeover, mainstream political parties apparently continued a wait and watch policy on the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Afghanistan remained out of their prioritized areas of focus and most of the statements from political leaders, other than those in the government, remained focused on rhetorical criticism of the government’s policy and action on Afghanistan without providing an alternative scheme of dealing with the Afghan situation. Meanwhile, the parties with religious ideologies, or so-called religious-political parties, demanded the government to recognize the Taliban’s government in Afghanistan. Some representatives of such parties stated that it was illegal, immoral, and inhumane to not recognize the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. However, Pakhtun nationalist parties opposed the Taliban’s ‘occupation of Afghanistan.’ All nationalist democratic leaders including Aftab Sherpao, Mahmood Khan Achakzai, Asfandyar Wali Khan and the Mazdoor Kisan Party were

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of the view that Afghanistan should be ruled by a government elected by its people.

As the Afghan situation evolved, major political parties urged the government to concentrate on Afghan situation mainly in terms of its fallout for Pakistan. Some alerted that remnants of Afghanistan’s National Directorate of Security were still on the payroll of India and Islamabad needed to keep this in mind. Some political leaders asserted that Pakistan alone was not responsible for averting the impending humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and that the international community must play its due role in this regard. Religious political parties also called for urgent steps to alleviate the sufferings of the Afghan people besides issuing supporting statements for the Afghan Taliban. JUI-F leader Fazal-ur-Rehman stressed to avoid confrontation and war-like situation with Afghanistan to “foil the nefarious designs of the United States” which wanted to pit them against each other on the issue of Durand Line. However, nationalist political parties largely remained silent or least vocal on the issue of Afghanistan.

In June 2022, a series of meetings were held between representatives of Pakistan and the outlawed TTP in Kabul to broker a peace deal. The flurry of meetings led to the TTP announcing an indefinite ceasefire. In response to this development, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) demanded that public representatives “must be taken on board” on the issue and formed a three-member committee to liaise with political parties on the developments related to talks with the Afghan Taliban and the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

With the passage of time, the nationalist parties’ focus shifted from what was happening across the border to the needs of their own people. They urged the government to open Afghan trade links, as this is the livelihood of natives. For this purpose, the Awami National Party (ANP) submitted a resolution in the Khyber
Pakhtunkhwa Assembly demanding the opening of all trade routes with Afghanistan.

Most political parties also criticized the Taliban’s curbs on girls’ education and other similar restrictions. The religious-political parties were however more diplomatic in their response to such issues.

3.3 Religious organizations

Like religious-political parties, Pakistan’s religious organizations were also extremely elated by the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul. Many religious scholars congratulated and wished good luck to the Afghan Taliban on their victory in Afghanistan. Some urged the Taliban to take strict measures so that foreign elements should not intervene in their country. Few also raised the Taliban’s flag (though momentarily), including the clerics of Lal Masjid in Islamabad.

Pakistan’s religious organizations were also annoyed by the government’s decision of not recognizing the Taliban’s government in Afghanistan. In November 2021, Pakistan Ulema Council issued a letter to the most important leaders of the Islamic world, urging them to immediately start a consultative process to address the dangers posed by Afghan situation and the humanitarian crisis there. They reiterated that the nature of the crisis and the operations of international terrorist organizations in Afghanistan indicated that if the world did not take the path of dialogue and cooperation with the Taliban, then the danger of terrorism could increase worldwide. Many religious scholars urged the government to announce its recognition of the Islamic government of the ‘victorious Taliban’ which they considered will become the brotherly Islamic neighboring country of Pakistan. They welcomed the ‘peaceful and peace-harboring’ government of the Taliban.
Members and representatives of some religious organizations also criticized the “West’s old way of putting economic sanctions and blockades on Muslims” and argued that the Afghan Taliban were suffering from the atrocity of sanctions. Few even went on to relate the situation to the Quraysh tribes’ economic boycott of the Prophet Muhammad’s (Peace Be Upon Him) family “Banu Hashim” in the seventh year of the prophethood in Mecca.

The Pakistan Shariah Council announced in January 2022 that it had successfully celebrated 10 days of support for the Afghan people. Furthermore, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Sami (JUI-S) convened an All-Parties Conference (APC) in January 2022 to discuss the problems being faced by the Afghan Taliban government and people in Afghanistan. This conference was convened to take up issues and difficulties of the Taliban government and people of Afghanistan and present suggestions to the Pakistan’s government for a viable solution.

Additionally, different religious organizations held and demanded that a regular campaign should be organized to finance the “Emirate of Islamic Afghanistan” and more efforts should be made to send aid or goods via Embassy of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in Islamabad. They requested to support the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” and condemn “American ambitions,” calling religious groups and people to organize public opinion make progress towards a common struggle in this regard. They also emphasized that traders and industrialists should be encouraged for trade and investment in Afghanistan. They even instructed that letters and memoirs should be sent to Muslim governments and their embassies in Islamabad in order to bring their attention to this matter.

When the Taliban banned girls’ education, and also put other restrictions on Afghans, such decisions raised concerns in religious organizations worldwide as well as in Pakistan. Despite of their strong support of the Taliban government, most religious scholars and leaders in Pakistan did not support these strict measures of
the Taliban. Various religious scholars from different schools of thought in Pakistan called upon Afghanistan’s government for girls’ access to education and urged that Afghanistan ought to show restraint and not become a laughingstock for the world. Prominent religious scholar Mufti Taqi Usmani wrote a letter to the Taliban government in Afghanistan and urged them to allow girls’ schools to be reopened. Similarly, Allama Syed Hashim Musavi, a religious leader of the Hazara community from Madrassa Baqirul Uloom, Quetta, said the step taken by the Taliban had deprived girls of their basic right to education. Likewise, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s chief Khateeb Maulana Tayyab Qureshi said the Afghan Taliban’s decision to bar girls from education had created uncertainty.

3.4 Militant groups

Except for the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), almost all other militant groups in Afghanistan or Pakistan were reportedly jubilant over the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda, TTP, and ETIM, among others, also issued congratulatory statements.

The TTP has fully supported the Afghan Taliban, particularly since the later started capturing Afghan provinces. Apparently encouraged by the Taliban march, the TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud said in an interview in late July 2021 that his group will continue its war against Pakistan’s security forces and its goal is to take control of the border regions and make them independent. He admitted his group’s good relations with Afghan Taliban and hoped to benefit from Taliban victories across the border inside Pakistan.

Moreover, the TTP’s spokesperson acknowledged that the interior minister of Afghanistan’s Taliban regime, Sirajuddin Haqqani, played a mediating role between Pakistan and the TTP, bringing the two sides under one roof to engage in face-to-
face talks. The Afghan Taliban and Pakistani officials vindicated that claim. However, in a response to the TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mahsud's statement that his outfit came under the larger "umbrella" of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), the interim government of Taliban clearly mentioned that "[the TTP] was not, as an organization, part of IEA and Afghan Taliban did not share the same objectives."

As the archrival of the Afghan Taliban, the IS-K has been trying to undermine the former’s government in Afghanistan calling them puppets of the West who have deviated from their religious-ideological cause. In January 2022, the group published a 14-page message commenting on a Taliban delegation’s visit to Norway, writing a fictional dialogue between Afghan foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and the EU Special Representative for Afghanistan Mr. Tomas Niklasson. It claimed that it is all part of an ongoing "drama" directed by ISI, CIA, and KGB. The IS-K message argued that the Taliban leadership was issuing orders on paper on hijab and mahram etc. to appease their own militants and they have no intention to enact them. The IS-K also claimed that the Taliban were teaching schools curricula approved by the West in order to introduce democracy which is why they promised to open the schools countrywide. (The Taliban later only allowed a partial opening of the schools and backtracked from the earlier decision of opening the girls’ schools).

3.5 Civil society

Worried about the worsening of women and human rights situation in Afghanistan, Nobel prize winner Malala Yousafzai said in an open letter to the Taliban authorities to reverse the de facto ban on girls’ education and re-open girls’ secondary schools immediately. She also expressed her fear that the ban on girls’ education by the Taliban might not be temporary.
RESPONSES FROM PAKISTAN SINCE TALIBAN TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN

Tons of humanitarian aid have been sent to Afghanistan by different civil society organizations of Pakistan since the Taliban takeover. Moreover, concerned about the situation of orphans in Afghanistan, the Al-Khidmat Foundation Pakistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Humanitarian Assistance Society, a leading Afghan welfare organization, for the establishment of Aghosh Home for the sponsorship of orphans in Afghanistan. On the other hand, business communities and trade groups demanded that the State Bank of Pakistan should allow trade with Afghanistan in cash until the banking channel with Afghanistan was made functional.

Various civil society institutes and organizations raised voice for the war-ravaged neighbor by conducting workshops, sessions, and webinars etc. For instance, in February 2022 a webinar on “The Afghanistan impact - security threats to Pakistan confirmation” was organized by Sustainable Development Policy Institute. Experts at the webinar called upon the world to resolve the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan immediately which, they said, lingered on with each passing day and may cause a security threat to Pakistan. Similarly, Pak Institute for Peace Studies organized eight quarterly expert consultation on “Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan’s interests and policy options” in Islamabad between July 2021 and May 2023. Prominent experts, political leaders, academicians, civil society representatives and media persons from Islamabad, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan participated.

Pakistan’s civil society activists also severely criticized the discriminatory policies of the Taliban government against women as they ordered women to wear traditional burqa, imposed travel restrictions for women, and banned girls' school education, which caused anger at the national and international level. For instance, Pakistan Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai urged world leaders to take collective action to hold the Taliban accountable for violating the human rights of millions of Afghan
women and girls. Moreover, elders of the FATA Qaumi Jirga asked the government of Afghanistan to take serious and practical steps for the restoration of peace in the former tribal areas and negotiate with the government of Pakistan with the Taliban.

3.6 Military leadership

The Pakistani military leadership has been hoping that the Afghan Taliban leadership would take measures to stop TTP from operating against Pakistan. Besides, it kept on ensuring about the 100 percent completion of the border fencing. When border skirmishes increased, Pakistani military leadership gave a very composed reaction. It asserted that the purpose of border was not to divide the people, but to protect them. Former Director General Inter Services Public Relations (DG ISPR) Major General Babar Iftikhar mentioned that while eradicating false news, hearsay, misconceptions, a few localized issues had to be resolved with open heart to achieve the fundamental objective of peace. “There is complete harmony between Pakistan and Afghanistan governments on this matter,” he added. However, after the killing of seven soldiers in a cross-border attack in April 2022, Pakistan’s military leadership opted for action against the TTP militants sheltered in the border region. Military drones of Pakistan reportedly targeted TTP hideouts in Khost and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan. The raids, according to senior officials, were carried out following intelligence reports that TTP affiliates were present in the area. However, military leadership continued to assure its full support for Afghan peace in frequent meetings with Afghan delegation and also acknowledged the Afghan Taliban’s support in Pakistan dialogue with the banned TTP.
3.7 Media commentary

Most media reports and analyses followed or supported Pakistan’s official stance, advertently or inadvertently, on Afghan situation including on intra-Afghan reconciliation, an inclusive government, protection of human rights, regional and international support for the Taliban, and securing Pakistan from the Afghan fallout. While many in the Urdu press glorified the Taliban before and after the latter’s capture of Kabul, English-language press however provided more critical analyses highlighting security, political, economic, and sociocultural implications of the Afghan conflict.

Moreover, few Urdu newspapers welcomed the coal import agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan stating it will also benefit the war-affected Afghanistan economically. However, the matter of increase in the coal tax by the Afghan interim government annoyed many media writers. On this pretext, some even labelled the Taliban as the new nationalists of Afghanistan.

In addition, some Op-ed writers were of the view that Pakistan should excel in its relations with Afghanistan as with China and Saudi Arabia, irrespective of their internal systems and policies. They stressed that any negative attitude towards a war-ravaged neighbor on the basis of its internal matters will fritter away all opportunities for Pakistan to trade with and through Afghanistan. They emphasized that internal problems should be left to the Afghans. Pertaining to the US declaration of freezing the remaining 3.5 billion dollars of Afghan assets, almost every media group criticized this action by stating that although the US has a point in stopping funds from reaching militant organizations, the fact is that the money in question belongs to the people of Afghanistan, not America or the Taliban.
4. Emerging Afghan situation: Taliban's challenges and reactions

The Taliban face a multitude of challenges with regards to governance, international recognition, economic and humanitarian crisis, and small-scale insurgencies started by different groups in northeastern provinces. Failure to deal with these challenges will only add to the concerns of the Afghan people as well as countries in the region.

**Peace and security in Afghanistan** have witnessed relative improvement under the current Taliban administration. Some participants of PIPS-led expert consultations held in Islamabad underlined that even the Afghan people who disapprove the Taliban government have testified this claim. However, experts argue that as long as governance and economic issues remain unresolved in Afghanistan, the problems of security and violence would remain unresolved too, and this would have a fallout on Pakistan.\(^{27}\)

Others believe that as the Taliban themselves were a major factor of insecurity and instability in the country, their coming to power has eliminated much of the security threat. However, a formidable security challenge still persists from an assortment of militant groups and their activities in Afghanistan. According to some analysts, insecurity and violence are gradually increasing with groups like IS-K directly challenging the Taliban regime and its claims of ensuring security in the country. The group perpetrated 339 attacks in Afghanistan in 2021 compared to 82 such attacks it claimed in the country in 2020.\(^{28}\) Indeed, the Taliban’s great challenge [on internal and external fronts] is coming from a multitude of militant

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\(^{27}\) Dr Simbal Khan, political & security analyst. Comments in PIPS consultation-3 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 27, 2022, in Islamabad

\(^{28}\) <https://twitter.com/abdsayedd/status/1476827070307127298>
groups present on Afghan soil including those who are in synch with their ideology (such as Al-Qaeda, TTP, ETIM, etc.) and also those who are their ideological rival, mainly IS-K. That challenge is largely in terms of the Taliban’s ideological constraints to progressively connect and respond to the world’s expectations of them. The Taliban will not be able to take strict action against likeminded groups due to ideological consonance as well as a fear of disgruntlement among its lower cadres. Similarly, becoming or pretending to be moderate and connecting or adapting to the international system of governance and political order will only add to ideological problems for the Taliban where even its allied militant groups could be annoyed.

All official and independent estimates and analyses also deny the Taliban’s 'security' claims. For instance, the latest report by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UNSC released on February 13, 2023 noted that Afghanistan remains the primary source of terrorist threat for Central and South Asia. This threat, the report said, mainly originated from groups including the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as well as ETIM/TIP, and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, among others. What is worrisome, according to the report, “these groups enjoy greater freedom of movement in Afghanistan owing to the absence of an effective Taliban security strategy.” The report also observed that the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan had emboldened TTP to escalate attacks against Pakistan, while strengthening its position in Afghanistan. Previous report of the same UN-led team had noted that while the situation in Afghanistan remains complex, international terrorist organizations based there view the victory

of the Taliban as a motivating factor for disseminating their propaganda in the neighboring regions of Central and South Asia, and globally.\textsuperscript{30}

A summary of the Afghanistan’s emerging militant landscape with a focus on the evolving strength, agendas, and future course of action of transnational terrorist groups present on Afghan soil is given below:\textsuperscript{31}

- **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan**: The banned TTP has become largely entrenched in Afghanistan, with its members mainly concentrated in Kunar province of Afghanistan bordering on Pakistan’s tribal areas, where they have developed good relations with the Afghanistan’s Pashtun tribes. The July 2022 report by the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team maintained that the TTP constitutes the largest component of foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan,\textsuperscript{32} with about 5,000-6,000 members. The Taliban’s to return to power in Kabul had given hope to many in Pakistan that they will limit anti-Pakistan groups’ freedom of action. However, “contrary to these expectations, the Afghan Taliban’s return has so far strengthened the TTP.”\textsuperscript{33}

- **Al-Qaeda**: Although the Taliban have been denying the presence of Al-Qaeda militants in Afghanistan, the Unite Nations and others have been constantly indicating the presence of Al-Qaeda members and leaders in multiple Afghan provinces (at least in 15, according to UN, mainly in the south and east of Afghanistan).

\textsuperscript{30} The report was released around mid-July 2022 and can be downloaded here: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2075689/N2239429.pdf>


\textsuperscript{32} Report can be seen here: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2075689/N2239429.pdf>

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Afghanistan but also in Farah and Herat provinces in the north). The group has been keeping a strategic silence in Afghanistan, apparently to avoid any possible trouble or inconvenience to its ally, the Taliban. The presence of Al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan may also have more strategic and security purposes than operational ones. On 31st of July (2022), the US reportedly killed the leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in a drone strike in Afghanistan.34 In addition to Zawahiri, several other senior leaders likely reside in Afghanistan, including Saif al-Adel and bin Laden’s security manager Amin Muhammad ul-Haq Saam Khan. Similarly, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which is led by Osama Mehmood and his deputy Atif Yahya Ghouri, also reportedly retains a presence in Afghanistan’s Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Paktika and Zabul provinces, where the group fought alongside the Taliban against the ousted Ghani government. AQIS is estimated to have between 200 and 400 fighters, mainly from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Pakistan.35 Afghanistan continues to be a central place for Al-Qaeda including in terms of refuge, security and connectivity with its regional franchises or allied groups. What makes Afghanistan different from any other country is that the Al-Qaeda enjoys a regime by its sympathetic and brotherly Taliban. Over decades, Al-Qaeda leaders have maintained close relationship at least with some Taliban leaders including the Taliban’s interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani.36

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Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K): IS-K is currently led by Sanaullah Ghafari alias Shahab al-Muhajir, an Afghan national. Aslam Farooqi, a former IS-K leader, escaped from prison and has subsequently re-joined the group in a senior role. The former leader of IS-K, Abu Omar Al-Khorasani, was killed by the Taliban in August 2021, shortly after they took control of the prison in which he was being held. The US withdrawal has allowed the group to recover, regroup and strengthen its membership and position in Afghanistan. For instance, in July 2021, a month before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, the number of IS-K fighters in Afghanistan was estimated at around 500 to 1,500. However, according to multiple accounts, since the Taliban takeover the number of IS-K militants is believed to have doubled in the country. The release of several thousand prisoners has also added to the number. An estimated current strength of the group is 3,000 fighters; some believe it could be 6,000. The IS-K core cells are located mainly in the eastern Kunar, Nangarhar and Nuristan Provinces of Afghanistan, with a large cell active in Kabul and its environs. Relatively smaller cells of the group are also present in the northern and north-eastern Badakhshan, Faryab, Jowzjan, Kunduz, Takhar and Balkh Provinces. For being most developed region in the north, Balkh has been gaining IS-K's increased focus for raising finances. The IS-K has been receiving support including in financial terms from the Islamic State's core leadership in Iraq and Syria.

Islamic State group views Afghanistan as a "base for expansion in the wider region for the realization of its “great caliphate” project. In that regard IS-K seeks to strengthen its capabilities by recruiting members from other terrorist groups, as well as by attracting disaffected Taliban fighters and dissatisfied local ethnic minorities. The group also portrays itself as the primary rival to the

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Taliban de facto administration and portrays the Taliban as incapable of providing security in the country. Another strategic objective of the IS-K has been to undermine the relationship between the Taliban and neighboring countries including through attacks on and threats to foreign missions. The group has also claimed to have perpetrated cross-border attacks inside Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, from Afghanistan’s northern Balkh and Takhar provinces, respectively, which experts view as an effort to drag immediate neighbours into Afghanistan to create chaos and anarchy where IS-K could flourish more taking stock from its experience in Iraq and Syria.

- Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)/East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM): The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), also known as East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is actively operating in Afghanistan. Some believe that ETIM/TIP has even expanded its operational space in the post-Taliban Afghanistan, cultivating relations with local commanders to operate locally. The group is seeking to further entrench its presence in the country by both organizing marriages to local women and facilitating the relocation of Uyghur women to Afghanistan. As per various counts, the number of ETIM/TIP members in Afghanistan is between 200 and 700 fighters. Like other allies, Central Asian and ETIM/TIP fighters in Afghanistan celebrated the Taliban takeover for multiple reasons.38 For one, they anticipate more freedom to live on and operate from the Afghan soil. Secondly, they also hope that international recognition of the Taliban might also help in removing the “terrorist” label from them also.

Some reports indicated that after coming into power, the Taliban relocated ETIM/TIP fighters from their traditional strongholds in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province bordering on China to Baghlan, Takhar and other

38 Only a few days after the fall of the Afghan government, the TIP had issued a statement lauding the Taliban’s “victory” and the “restoration of the Islamic Emirate.”
provinces. Experts say that by doing so the Taliban tried on one hand to convince China about their efforts to restrain the group and on the other hand to protect their old ally. Some recent account also suggest that the ETIM/TIP continues its relocation from Badakhshan to Baghlan province, establishing operational sites and arsenals there.\textsuperscript{39}

Besides historically being a key ally of the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the ETIM is recently being lured by the IS-K. There is evidence to suggest that cooperation between ETIM/TIP and IS-K has been growing. They reportedly "exchanged personnel and planned joint operations, with ETIM/TIP providing military instructors to IS-K and sending members to join its operational unit responsible for tracking Chinese nationals and carrying out attacks."\textsuperscript{40} Both groups had also jointly published Uyghur-language propaganda posters. The reported nexus is understandable in the context of IS-K’s growing anti-China rhetoric and propaganda including for facilitating its efforts to get recruitment from anti-China groups mainly ETIM and Uyghurs. Some observers also hint at similar operational cooperation arrangements between ETIM and the TTP.

- **IMU and other Central Asian groups**: Like other Central Asian terrorist groups such as Islamic Jihad Group (IJG) and Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) had also actively participated in the Taliban-led fighting against the international forces in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's capture of Kabul last year, these are all now experiencing greater freedom of movement in the country.

  Founded in 1998, **IMU** intended to replace the ‘secular’ Uzbek government with sharia law and establish Islamic rule. Experts assert that an increasingly

\textsuperscript{39} The 31st report by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UNSC, February 13, 2023.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
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repressive regime fanned militant Salafism in Uzbekistan and boosted the supply of Uzbek fighters to both Afghanistan and Syria. Until Islamic State group emerged, IMU as a whole remained closely aligned with the Afghan Taliban, TTP, and Al-Qaeda. In August 2015, IMU’s emir Omar Ghazi and hundreds of fighters pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group. Around that time, IMU fighters in Syria were already absorbed into the Islamic State, and many had relocated from Afghanistan to there. Subsequent clashes with the Taliban and the killing of Ghazi accelerated internal discord within the IMU, and in June 2016 an IMU faction publicly denounced IS-K, reaffirming its loyalty to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.41 After losing greater alliance with the IMU, Al-Qaeda has been improving its ties with a number of other Central Asian groups in Afghanistan, such as Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, and Islamic Jihad Group, which remain based in parts of northern Afghanistan.42 Al-Qaeda has also maintained relations with the ETIM and has forged ties with the breakaway factions of the IMU.43

Islamic Jihad Group (IJG) is led by Ilimbek Mamatov, a Kyrgyz national; his deputy, Amsattor Atabaev is from Tajikistan. The group is termed as the most combat-ready Central Asian group in Afghanistan. It operates primarily in Badakhshan, Baghlan and Kunduz provinces.

Meanwhile, the Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) is led by Dilshod Dekhanov, a Tajik national. The group is currently located in the Bala


42 Asfandyar Mir, “Afghanistan’s terrorism challenge: the political trajectories of Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State,” Middle East Institute, October 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/Afghanistan%27s%20Terrorism%20Challenge.pdf>

43 Ibid.
Murghab district of Badghis province. The group’s strength has increased through the recruitment of local Afghans. In September 2021, Mamatov and Dekhanov, the IJG and KIB leaders, respectively, separately visited Kabul. Each leader lobbied for support from the Taliban to unify the Central Asian groups under their respective leadership, in recognition of their contributions to the Taliban victory. The Taliban reportedly rejected the proposals, preferring to incorporate the groups as distinct military units within the newly established Taliban army.

**Jamaat Ansarullah** (banned in Tajikistan as a terrorist group) is closely associated with Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan. Following deteriorating relations between Tajikistan and the Taliban in the autumn of 2021, Ansarullah fighters were deployed with Taliban special units along the border of Tajikistan in Badakhshan, Kunduz and Takhar Provinces. Jamaat Ansarullah senior leader Muhammad Sharipov (alias Mahdi Arsalan) controls security in five districts of Badakhshan province under the Taliban administration. Arsalan and other Tajik militants are known as the “Tajik Taliban” in Afghanistan.44

Many experts see growing militant and resistance violence directly linked to the Taliban’s incapacity to govern and deliver goods and services. They assert that as long as governance and economic issues remain unresolved in Afghanistan, the problems of insecurity and violence would increase manifold and this would have a fallout on Afghanistan’s neighbors, too.

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Governance in Taliban-led government is hugely suffering due to financial, political and sociocultural reasons where the Taliban have failed so far to get domestic recognition and form an inclusive government; nor do they have enough governance experience to steer the country out of crisis. Experts argue that as a post-conflict state, Afghanistan has a 51% chance of relapsing into violence within the next five years. The factors that could intensify this conflict relapse in Afghanistan include its being the least developed country in Asia, growing poverty and political instability, elusive intra-Afghan reconciliation, and rising resistance in the north and elsewhere.

Analysts also underline that the Taliban have no immediate politico-military threats within Afghanistan or from any of the neighboring countries. But their ultraconservative ideology, a 'medieval mindset' and fear of losing to their rivals in the war of narratives seem to be few of many hurdles in performing equally effectively on the political, social and economic fronts.

To start with, the Taliban have a daunting task of transforming themselves from a formidable guerrilla warfare force into a functional governing entity. Apparently, they lack the necessary skills and capacity to realize such a shift, at least in the short run. Some observers believe that the Taliban “will forcefully need to look somewhere else for help, and perhaps to ask for external support, [and] such a conjuncture could present the opportunity to try to convince the Taliban to open a dialogue channel with the international community about the need to find a

45 Viola Fee Dreikhausen, “Taliban in or out? Afghanistan in 2025,” The EU Institute for Security Studies, Brief 5, April 2022.
sustainable balance between their strict religious ideology and the fundamental rights of a population aspiring to a safe and dignified future."\(^47^\)

The Taliban have been putting restrictions on girls’ education, mobility and working. In November 2021, the Afghan Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice issued some guidelines that included a ban on television dramas featuring women actors and an instruction for female anchors to wear Hijab.\(^48^\) The said Ministry was established in September 2021 in the very building which once housed the Women’s Affairs Ministry. The regime also sacked female government employees and barred secondary education for girls.\(^49^\) However, according to some accounts, only a handful of hardliner Taliban leaders are against reopening schools above sixth grade reportedly fearing moral corruption, including the Taliban supreme leader Sheikh Hibatullah, and his close aides.\(^50^\) "They outmaneuvered the rest of the Taliban officials and leaders because of their senior positions and authority, [while] most other Taliban leaders including members of Haqqani network, Mullah Yaqub, son of late Mullah Omer, ministers, and military commanders support girls’ education."\(^51^\) However, those close to the Taliban underline that In Taliban’s era, Afghanistan has always been controlled by

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\(^{50}\) They mainly include Mullah Hassan, the prime minister; Mullah Noor Mohammed Saqib, minister of Hajj and religious affairs; Sheikh Abdul Hakim, head of judiciary; Sheikh Mohammed Khalid, minister of promoting virtue and preventing vice; and Mullah Mahmood.

leadership in Kandahar and the situation is the same in this regime as well, which implies the verdict of the Taliban supreme commander will be deemed final.

Similarly, the Taliban's favoritism or lack of inclusivity is causing serious problems in the Taliban ministries impacting the service delivery and its effectiveness. According to Sami Yousafzai, a senior Afghan journalist, not only 33 ministries are occupied by the Taliban, but offices of 34 governors, police commanders, and health, education, energy, mining, and financials directorates are also led by Mullahs, or Taliban leaders, and insurgency veterans. During last year's Herat Security Dialogue, which was held on 29th and 30th of November in Dushanbe, the view that resonated throughout the event was that the current setup in Kabul is non-inclusive and non-representative of all Afghans. Most participants were Persian speaking Afghans from the north, and many talked about the decentralization of power and authority in Afghanistan.

For some political analysts, it is somewhat inappropriate to expect the Taliban to form an inclusive government with their political opponents as this is not practiced elsewhere in the world. Senior journalist Tahir Khan agrees that the Taliban are less likely to provide space to anyone not named Taliban. When they came into power, Mohammad Hassan Akhund stated in his meeting that “we do not have room for those who were associated with governments that were in power for the last 20 years.” They have been following an almost similar narrative since then. Tahir Khan also asserts that high expectations cannot be attached to the Taliban.
regarding governance. Hibatullah Akhundzada repeatedly mentioned not to make appointments on the basis of associations, which implies a prevalence of governance lapses.\textsuperscript{56} Former diplomat Aziz Ahmed Khan believes that the Taliban will not establish a broad-based government, but they might not be as rigid as the previous Taliban government of the 1990s was.\textsuperscript{57}

Some Afghan observers don't absolve previous Afghan governments of the continuing bad governance affairs. For one, Mirwais Yasini, former first deputy speaker of the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament, believes that Ghani, Hamid Karzai and Khalilzad are equally responsible for that. Corruption, mismanagement, and inflated egos led Afghanistan to the failure over the past twenty years. Previous governments made a lot of blunders and then concealed them under colorful reports that were sent to Washington. So, there was all types of corruption, be it financial, political or judicial and even some of the international agencies were involved in that while raising the slogan that they were there for the sake of democracy. However, there was no democracy.\textsuperscript{58}

There also has been a debate, as hinted at earlier, if there is a difference between the current Taliban and the Taliban of the 1990s. To tell the difference, many participants of PIPS consultations on Afghanistan alluded to presence of moderate leaders among the current Taliban ranks who want to interact with the world, and receive assistance from the world, as opposed to those who do not want to change their beliefs and want to run the country according to their own strict belief system. Responding to a question about the \textit{internal resistance to reform}, Maulana Abdul

\textsuperscript{56} Tahir Khan, senior journalist and expert on Afghan affairs. Views expressed in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.

\textsuperscript{57} Aziz Ahmed Khan, former ambassador of Pakistan. Comments in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.

\textsuperscript{58} Views expressed in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.
Qadir Luni said that Afghanistan has fought 40 years of war and over this time period thousands of people have been martyred and all of them sacrificed their lives under one slogan or cause of establishing Islamic order or Islamic system of justice. “It was not easy for them to compete in elections. There is no one in this [Taliban] government who has not lost a family member in drone attacks or bombing attacks. They went through these hardships and sacrifices for a cause, and that is the Taliban’s first priority and center of attention [after coming into power]: they want to make Afghanistan not only an Islamic state but a model for Islamic, or Muslim-majority states worldwide.”

However, some observers assert that even if the Taliban survived politically, with its current ideology, it will not be for very long. Saudi Arabia today provides a good example of this as it is leaving behind its Salafist past and becoming progressive.

**Domestic legitimacy and international recognition** are two other factors which are fundamental for the Taliban not only to seeking financial support and aid but also to improving governance and service delivery. Although in UN and more than 50 countries, the Afghan embassies and diplomatic mission are still in control of diplomats appointed by the previous government, but Taliban have taken control of Afghan embassies in Pakistan, Iran, Russia, Qatar and some other countries. Meanwhile the embassies of China, Japan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Russia, India, and Iran are open in Afghanistan and providing services at different levels. Political observers believe, as cited earlier, that the lack of international recognition is marginalizing the Taliban government on global level besides negatively affecting

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59 Maulana Abdul Qadir Luni, leader of JUI-Nazriyati in Balochistan. Comments in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 27, 2022, in Islamabad.

60 Riaz Mohammad Khan, former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan. Comments in PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad.
the business, diplomatic and economic sectors in the country. It is not yet clear when the Taliban and the world will understand each other and get along, if ever.\textsuperscript{61}

\textbf{Poverty and economic crisis} present another key challenge to the Taliban and Afghanistan. Under the Ghani government, approximately 40 percent of Afghanistan’s gross domestic product (GDP) came from foreign aid. Since the US withdrawal and Taliban takeover in August 2021, Afghanistan’s economic situation has been further deteriorating. As a result, Afghans are suffering from poverty, starvation, and a lack of access to healthcare and other services. According to Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, nearly a million jobs had been lost in about a year of the Taliban rule,\textsuperscript{62} and daily incomes had dwindled greatly.

On February 15th last year the International Rescue Committee announced that humanitarian needs across Afghanistan had witnessed a phenomenal increase and about 97 percent of the population could fall under the poverty line by the end of the year. The IRC report also noted that more than half of the country's population was facing acute food insecurity, and one million children were at the risk of a severe malnutrition. According to IRC country director Vicki Aken the international community’s cutting off non-humanitarian funds following the Taliban takeover had led to the worsening economic problems.\textsuperscript{63} The World Food Program counted the recurrent drought in the country as one of the main factors for decreasing agriculture harvest and further threatening the income and livelihood.\textsuperscript{64} The strong

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\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Details can be seen here: <https://www.rescue.org/eu/press-release/six-months-change-power-irc-warns-starvation-could-kill-more-afghans-last-twenty>
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earthquake that hit the south-eastern provinces of Paktika and Khost in June last year further compounded the problems. It killed more than 1,000 people besides destroying a large number of houses in both provinces. Similarily, the heavy floods during June and July (2022) also harmed the livelihoods of Afghans in many parts of the country.

The Taliban government does not have enough resources to deal with the overall economic and humanitarian situation, and they also lack international recognition and monetary privileges. The Afghanistan Central Bank had about seven billion US dollars in reserve in a US bank that were frozen by the US government immediately after the Taliban takeover of Kabul to prevent terrorists' access to them. This step critically affected the services of private banks, a flourishing business in Afghanistan, and limited their ability to pay only about $400 or its equivalent in Afghani to their costumers per week and stop cash transactions out of the country for business deals. In September 2022, the US government announced that USD 3.5 billion of the frozen money will be transferred to a newly created Afghan fund to benefit the Afghan people as the hunger gripped every province in the country. According to US officials, the Taliban government will not have access to the fund, which will be held at the Bank for International Settlements in Switzerland.

The Taliban also face political opposition and an insurgency in the north. Persisting economic and political turmoil and the Taliban’s reluctance to make their government more inclusive could provide an impetus to the resistance forces.


66 Sami Yousafzai, “Afghanistan’s “uncertain” future: domestic and regional implications.”

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former police and military personnel remain unemployed, they could feed into the pools of resistance fighters. Afghanistan’s complex geology and mountainous terrain could offer vast areas of potential hideouts for such resistance groups and curtail the Taliban’s ability to clamp down on their opponents. The Taliban nonetheless hardly comment on the activities of their armed opponents in the country; nor do they acknowledge the existence of armed insurgency against their government.

Ahmed Massoud, the son of former northern alliance military commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, and Amrullah Saleh, the former vice president of Afghanistan, lead the National Resistance Force. Since having been pushed by the Taliban to mountains from Panjshir, the fighters of NRF have been openly engaging in asymmetrical warfare against Taliban. Moreover, in the second half of 2022 their insurgency extended beyond its birthplace of Panjshir and Andrab valley to the northern Takhar and Badakhshan provinces, inflicting losses on Taliban forces. However, their obtrusive struggle is not strong enough to shake the Taliban’s power base in the country. Afghan analysts believe that countries in the region seem unwilling to support anti-Taliban resistance forces with the exception of Tajikistan that has allowed the NRF leadership to use the country for living and traveling abroad to lobby for support.68

Similarly, Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) has presence in some provinces. In areas like Baghlan, they conduct joint strikes with NRF against the Taliban.69 The AFF was created and is being led by previous government deputy defense minister and chief of the general staff, General Yasin Zia. It is, however, less known compared to NRF, but its attacks in the Taliban heartlands, although sporadic, in

68 Sami Yousafzai, “Afghanistan’s "uncertain" future: domestic and regional implications.”
Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul are a sign of their wider presence. On the other hand, the NRF is concentrated in the north-eastern provinces. However, like Ahmed Massoud, General Zia also complains of lack of international support to AFF. Some other groups also claim to have established armed resistance forces against Taliban. The NRF Noor led by Atta Mohammed Noor—the former powerful governor of Balkh in Hamid Karzai government—the Jabha e Azada Gan (Front of Freedom Seekers), and Afghanistan’s National Islamic Freedom Movement are among these groups, but their existence is limited only to social media propaganda.

The Taliban have been quite active in kinetic actions against resisting ethnic factions and militant groups such as IS-K. For instance, the Taliban’s [or Islamic Emirate’s] special forces which are formed of those seeking martyrdom, istishhadis, are very active in elimination of IS-K networks and hideouts across the country. Similarly, while the Taliban have been trying to quell the resistance in the north through military action, they have reportedly also set up additional check-posts in some areas such as Panjshir. According to a Hasht-e Subh report, several such checkpoints have been established on the way between villages where “the Taliban check the identity cards of the residents who enter a village, and if they are not from the same village, they send them back to their village.”

Nonetheless, residents and international human rights watchdogs criticize the Taliban for grave rights abuses that have been reported in its military campaign against dissidents. For instance, Taliban’s action against a dissident commander in a remote part of northern Afghanistan, Mehdi Mujahid, is a case in point. Formerly the most senior ethnic Hazara security official in the Taliban government, and a former head of Taliban intelligence in the central province of Bamiyan, Mujahid...
was angered by the Taliban leadership after he was dismissed for unspecified reasons in early June last year. Mujahid accused Taliban leaders of alienating the predominately Shi’ite Hazara minority by depriving them of government posts and civic rights.\textsuperscript{71}

5. Fallout of Afghan situation on Pakistan

Strategists in Pakistan believe that if the economic and governance situation in Afghanistan does not improve, it will add to internal conflict lines thus giving way to external actors to become part of a new 'proxy war' game. The militant groups will then not operate in isolation from external influences.\(^{72}\)

In the national security policy, issued in 2022 as the first comprehensive security policy of Pakistan, Pakistan stressed on the growing instability in Afghanistan as a security threat for the country. As the policy was focused on the non-traditional economic and human security, it explained that Pakistan’s push for peace and stability in Afghanistan was dictated by the country’s need for westward connectivity “given that eastward connectivity was held hostage to India’s regressive approach.”\(^{73}\)

Immediate neighbors of Afghanistan including Pakistan, Iran, China, India and Central Asian states are concerned about the regional security implications of the Taliban takeover of Kabul. For instance, the 31st report by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UNSC, released on February 13, 2023, noted that Afghanistan remains the primary source of terrorist threat for Central and South Asia. As explained earlier in the report, the threat mainly originates from groups including the IS-K, Al-Qaida, Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan, ETIM/TIP, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Group, Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, Khatiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, Jamaat Ansarullah, and others.\(^{74}\) Earlier, May 2022 report by the same UN team had noted that the most lethal anti-Pakistan terrorist group TTP “has arguably benefitted the most of all the foreign extremist groups in

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\(^{72}\) Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, Professor at the School of Politics & International Relations, QAU, Islamabad. Comments in PIPS consultation-3 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 27, 2022, in Islamabad.


\(^{74}\) The 31st report by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UNSC.
FALLOUT OF AFGHAN SITUATION ON PAKISTAN

Afghanistan from the [Afghan] Taliban takeover.” The report also noted that being based along the east and south-east Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, the group has conducted numerous attacks and operations in Pakistan. The TTP also “continues to exist as a stand-alone force, rather than feeling pressure to merge its fighters into Afghan Taliban units, as is the prospect for most foreign terrorist fighters,” the UN report revealed.75

After Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, the threat of militancy had actually shifted to Afghanistan, but since August 15, 2021, a new shift in the threat has been observed. Worsening the situation are cross border movements of militants, who cross border and attack Pakistani security personnel. Not only the TTP and IS-K chapter have intensified their attacks inside Pakistan, but the Balochi and Sindhi nationalist groups have also perpetrated some high-impact attacks in recent months including on security forces and Chinese nationals and interests in Pakistan.

Overall, since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, incidence of terrorist violence has significantly increased inside Pakistan. A Pak Institute for Peace Studies’ report in 2022 noted that during one year after the Taliban takeover, the number of terrorist attacks om Pakistan increased by 51 percent, as compared to previous corresponding year. However, when counted for the 21 months since the Taliban takeover (August 2021 to April 2023), the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan has posted a phenomenal increase of 73 percent, as compared to corresponding 21 months before the Taliban takeover (See Table 1). The number of people killed in these attacks has increased by 138 percent.

Apparently, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces have witnessed a marked impact of the Afghan situation in terms of terrorist violence, where the

75 The report can be downloaded here: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3975071?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>
number of attacks (during these 21 months) surged by 92 percent and 81 percent, respectively (See Table 1). However, the number of terrorist attacks in Punjab/Islamabad and Sindh has posted a relative decline since the Taliban takeover as compared to corresponding 21 months pre-August 2021.

Table 1: Terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 21 months since the Taliban takeover

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(21 months)</td>
<td>(21 months)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of Attacks</td>
<td>Killed</td>
<td>No. of Attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KP</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balochistan</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab &amp; Islamabad</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sindh</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GB &amp; AJK</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>274</strong></td>
<td><strong>444</strong></td>
<td><strong>473</strong></td>
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These emerging trends of terrorism will only add to Pakistan’s persistent security challenge in terms of Taliban militancy in KP and the erstwhile tribal areas, Baloch nationalist insurgency in Balochistan, ethno-nationalist violence in Sindh and Karachi, as well as growing religious extremism and radicalism. Protracted over longer period of time, such environment of insecurity, militancy and violence can pose serious threats to political and economic stability as well.

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76 Data and statistics are derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies’ digital database on conflict and insecurity: <www.pakpips.com.app/database>

77 ↑ and ↓ represent increase and decrease, respectively, from the corresponding period of previous year(s), as given at the table.
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According to a report released by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in March 2023, "the influx of US weapons has boosted the military capabilities of the TTP militant group and ethnic Baloch separatist groups that are waging insurgencies against the government in Pakistan, which has witnessed a surge in violence over the past two years." Militants who carry out attacks inside Pakistan have obtained US weapons left behind in Afghanistan. "When the United States pulled out its forces from Afghanistan in 2021, it left behind around $7 billion worth of military equipment and weapons, including firearms, communications gear, and even armoured vehicles. The Afghan Taliban seized the arms during the chaotic US withdrawal," the report claimed.

Some social media posts by KP journalists also claimed the TTP militants used night vision sniper rifles in their attack on a Lakki Marwat police station during March 2023.

As the level and nature of this threat is not uniform, it is useful to have separate sets of analysis for different parts of the country with the main focus on post-US withdrawal and post-Taliban takeover trends and developments.

**Khyber Pakhtunkhwa** has been witnessing heightened level of terrorist violence by the TTP as well as IS-K since the August 2021, although militants had been trying to regroup there long before that. In July 2021, when the Afghan Taliban emerged as a more critical component in the Afghan power calculus by reportedly extending their control "roughly [over] a third of all 421 districts and district centers in Afghanistan," the TTP also started intensifying attacks against Pakistani security and law enforcement personnel. Pak Institute for Peace Studies’ (PIPS) monthly

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79 Ibid.

security reports for July and August 2021 had noted that the TTP and affiliates had perpetrated 33 attacks mainly against police and army personnel in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa causing 47 deaths. Since then, the TTP and affiliates have been constantly increasing their presence and activities in the erstwhile FATA and other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The twin Waziristan and adjacent KP districts in southern KP such as Lakki Marwat, Tank, Bannu and DI Khan, as well as the provincial capital and neighboring Khyber districts have, in particular, emerged as flashpoints of insecurity and violence since August 2021.

Most of TTP and other militants had relocated to Afghanistan after the 2014 military operation in North Waziristan. However, in 2017, TTP instigated regrouping, along with an ideological transformation leading towards nationalism. Since then, the group has been strengthening its position in bordering areas and adding to its operational strength including with the help of Al-Qaeda. Separately, the TTP has continued to add more groups in its fold, a process it started in 2020. For instance, at least four new groups had reportedly announced their merger with the TTP in March 2023, and another one in May. This takes the count of such mergers with the TTP since July 2020 to 28. Though it is not clear how many members or militants each of these merging group has, but still, it should be a worrisome development for the security forces and the government. It indicates that the group has been consistently adding to its strength that will certainly add to its operational capabilities in the areas where these newly merged groups are based in KP and even Balochistan.

It was in March 2022 that the leadership council of the TTP announced to start operation *Al-Badr* from the first of Ramadan as part of its spring offensive in Pakistan. The operation was announced for one year but only after one month of its launch, the TTP announced ceasefire on Eidul Fitr, which the group extended more than once, finally for an indefinite period in May, due to its talks with Pakistani
government in Afghanistan, which were mediated by the Afghan Taliban. The ceasefire continued until November 2022 when the TTP announced it null and void putting blame on the government for the failure of the talks. However, even before that there were reports that the TTP may have ended the ceasefire and again resorted to violence. In the beginning of September, the TTP claimed multiple attacks including in DI Khan, Lakki Marwat, Khyber and Peshawar districts but the TTP spokesman termed these attacks as 'defensive'.

The month of August 2022 also witnessed reported relocation of few small groups of Pakistani Taliban militants into parts of KP from Afghanistan. Local tribesmen spotted the movements of such groups in multiple areas. While local accounts stressed there had been visible movement of militants in Swat, Dir and few other areas mainly twin Waziristan districts, there was confusion about what allowed or led them to relocate to these areas. Multiple protest demonstrations were observed in Swat and other areas against rising terrorism and growing militant activities. For one, on October 18th, the PTI activists, schoolchildren, transporters, lawyers, and traders, held white flags and banners inscribed with slogans of peace.\(^{81}\) Earlier in the month, a huge protest demonstration was held in which local residents, and leaders and representation of various parties and bodies participated including Swat Qaumi Jirga, Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party, Pakistan People's Party, Awami National Party, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Qaumi Watan Party, Swat Ulesi Jirga, Pashteen Tahaffuz Movement, and civil society organizations. The participants raised slogans against terrorism and vowed to establish peace and not allow any militant actors to regroup in their area.\(^{82}\)

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\(^{82}\) For details, see: <https://mashriqtv.pk/story/?story=202210080109>
Most recently, in January 2023, the participants of a protest sit-in continued to protest and block roads in Wana, South Waziristan for a week. It was organized by Waziristan Aman Olasi Pasoon (Waziristan Peace Public Movement) to demand that the government restore durable peace to the militancy-wracked district and ensure better law and order in the region.\textsuperscript{83} Local representatives from various political parties, including the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), Awami National Party (ANP), JUI, JI, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), National Democratic Movement (NDM), Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), lawyers, businesspersons, PTM, and tribal elders and youngsters, were present on the occasion.\textsuperscript{84}

Pak Institute for Peace Studies’ annual security review of Pakistan for 2022 noted that IS-K members were believed to be active in Bajaur, Peshawar, Mohmand, Orakzai, and Kurram areas of KP; Bolan, Sibi, Awaran, Mastung, and Quetta districts of Balochistan; and Karachi and northern Sindh.\textsuperscript{85} There is a heightened risk of IS-K attacks on non-Muslims and Shias in Pakistan, which could also trigger communal and sectarian tensions; in Afghanistan they are already doing that. The March 2022 suicide blast by the group in a Shiite mosque in Peshawar is just one example; the attack caused over 65 deaths. Later in August alone, the Islamic State’s Khorasan chapter claimed five attacks in Pakistan including four in KP and one in Balochistan’s Mastung district. Overall, IS-K perpetrated a total of 23 terrorist attacks during 2022 including 21 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and two in Balochistan. As many as 92 people lost their lives and another 222 were injured in these attacks. In KP, one of the IS-K’s main targets has been Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam


\textsuperscript{84} \textit{The Nation}, January 13, 2023, <https://www.nation.com.pk/13-Jan-2023/mass-protest-ends-on-7th-day-in-south-waziristan>

leaders, mainly in Bajaur. The IS-K has indeed carried out several attacks against JUI-F leaders in Bajaur in past few years. The group believes that the religious-political party's ideology resonates with that of the Taliban, their main rival. Bajaur, Mohmand and Orakzai were the tribal regions from where the Pakistani Taliban commanders had first declared allegiance to the Islamic State group in 2014.

Islamic-State Khorasan in its propaganda campaign also has increasingly started to focus Pakistan, mainly the KP province bordering on Afghanistan; this campaign also includes anti-TTP ideological and operational propagation. For one, the group's Al-Azaim media in July 2022 released several videos and text outputs declaring the TTP leaders as "apostates" and calling on TTP fighters to join the IS-K for "true jihad". The group through its Eid message in 2022 sent instructions to its cells in Central and South Asia to enlist for lone-wolf and suicide attacks. Similarly, in an 11-page message/pamphlet in Urdu, the IS-K has urged the people of Bajaur tribal district to extend assistance to the group either through manpower or financially.

Similarly, situation in Afghanistan has been impacting Balochistan in many ways. First, the number of terrorist attacks has increased in Balochistan like in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There is evidence to suggest that not only have the militants been crossing over to Balochistan since August 2021, but they were also found in possession of more sophisticated weapons as was observed in Nushki and Panjgur attacks on FC camps by the BLA militants early 2022. Experts also underscore that the Baloch insurgents will certainly draw inspiration from the changing environment in the region and will further increase and intensify their attacks. Meanwhile the banned TTP has also become more active in Pashtun belt of Balochistan as well as Quetta and IS-K has also been operating in certain districts of the province including Quetta and Mastung.
As many as six (6) Baloch insurgent groups were on the forefront in claiming responsibility of different terrorist attacks reported from the province and Karachi and parts of South Punjab since August 2021. These included BLA, Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), Baloch Republican Army (BRA), United Baloch Army (UBA), Baloch Republicans Guards (BRG) and a newly formed group Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA). The BLA claimed a suicide attack that killed 3 Chinese teachers at Karachi University’s Confucius Institute in April 2022. "Hundreds of highly trained male and female members of the BLA's Majeed Brigade are ready to carry out deadly attacks in any part of Balochistan and Pakistan," BLA spokesman Jeeyand Baloch said in a statement published in English. He threatened Beijing with "even harsher" attacks unless the neighboring country halted its "exploitation projects" and "occupying of the Pakistani state". Secondly, the leaders and members of the Baloch insurgent groups from Afghanistan have also been relocating to Balochistan in recent months. Others have also relocated to Iran or other [presumably safe] regions within Afghanistan.86

Another problem regarding impact of Afghan situation on Balochistan is that there is large number of Bugti Baloch living in Kandahar. In one of PIPS consultations on Afghanistan, Maulana Abdul Qadir Luni, JUI-Nazriyati leader in Balochistan, said that when Shazain Bugti was appointed as advisor to Mr. Imran Khan [on Baloch reconciliation], he came to him and asked what would happen to our people (Bugtis) who are in Kandahar? Maulana Luni said he talked to the Governor Kandahar and sent a message regarding the Baloch people there, and he clearly replied: “we cannot expel Baloch people from here and people who came here, [and] we won’t sabotage them as there is no restriction. We allow them to move out freely but if they want to stay here then they are welcome because Afghanistan also belongs to Hazaras and Baloch so we would not compel anyone to

86 Conversation with Shahzada Zulfiqar, Quetta-based journalist and president PFUJ.
leave." Afrasiab Khattak contended that it was also possible that the Taliban leadership in Kandahar wanted to keep Baloch insurgent groups such as BLA close with a view to use them as a leverage against Pakistan in times of need. Afghanistan’s impact on Balochistan’s politics and society has always existed, particular in terms of militancy and insurgency. Starting from the 1948, the five major insurgencies in Balochistan have had a role of Afghanistan as the Baloch militants used to have bases in Afghanistan. In particular, the fifth insurgency has strong connections in Afghanistan. However, when things started changing in Afghanistan recently, the radical Baloch militant groups shifted their bases to Iran. And this is a new dimension to the insurgency. There was policy understanding in Pakistan that once the Afghan Taliban are in power in Afghanistan, the external support to the Baloch militants from Afghanistan will evaporate. However, this did not happen. The Baloch militants perceived this and shifted their base to Iran. Now, apart from Afghanistan, Iran has become the second most important player in this scenario.

While the number of terrorist attacks has posted a relative decline in Sindh since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, the number of people killed in these attacks have increased indicating a rising incidence of high-impact attacks there. Indeed, in recent years significant shifts have happened in the militant landscape of Sindh. First, violent religious and sectarian groups have made inroads in interior Sindh as well. Secondly, Sindhi nationalist groups have started to launch high-impact attacks reportedly in collusion with the Baloch insurgent groups. Thirdly, Baloch

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87 Maulana Luni made this statement in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.
88 Comments in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.
89 Manzoor Ahmed, Professor of Political Economy and Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Gwadar. Views expressed in PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad.
insurgent groups have also become more active operationally in parts of Sindh, in particular Karachi where they have perpetrated few major attacks on foreign nationals/interests and security forces in recent years. One such major attack took place on April 26, 2022, as noted earlier, when a female suicide bomber of BLA Majeed Brigade blew herself up near the gate of the Confucius Institute at the Karachi University when a van carrying Chinese nationals, who taught at the Chinese language center, came in her range. Four people – three Chinese nationals and their Pakistani driver – were killed in the blast.90

Growing insecurity and violence at Pak-Afghan border has been seriously concerning Pakistan since the Taliban took power in Kabul. The Taliban have apparently taken a stricter and nationalistic stance in their response to Pakistan’s efforts to fence the border. For one, a Taliban Defense Ministry spokesman criticized the fencing project in January 2022, saying Pakistan had “no right to erect barbed wire along the Durand Line and separate the tribes on both sides of the line.”91 Secondly, the cross-border incursions and attacks by militants, refugee issue as well as illegal cross-border movements have also added to border tensions. As a result, not only the number of cross-border attacks and clashes has increased but intensity of such incidents has also grown resulting in more deaths and injuries.

Only in 2022, 34 Pakistani citizens lost their lives (including 20 security officials) in 13 such attacks/clashes along the Durand Line. As many as nine of these attacks/clashes happened in North Waziristan and Kurram bordering districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and another four took place along Chaman border in


91 <https://twitter.com/AbdulhaqOmeri/status/1477682063402848257>
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Balochistan. Importantly, in the past, or during Ghani regime, most of the cross-border attacks from Afghanistan were carried out by the TTP or other militant groups, but now many of such incidents involve Afghan border forces under the Taliban regime.

In April 2022, three soldiers of the Pakistan Army embraced martyrdom and four others were injured when terrorists from inside Afghanistan opened fire on Pakistani troops in North Waziristan district.\(^\text{92}\) This cross-border attack, coupled with some other high-impact TTP attacks during the month, drew a strong reaction from Pakistani government and security forces. Meanwhile, Afghan media as well as social media platforms were rife with reports on Pakistan's strikes against TTP militants' hideouts inside Afghanistan. Some reports quoted Afghan officials saying the "death toll had risen to 47 following Pakistan military strikes in the eastern Afghanistan provinces of Kunar and Khost."\(^\text{93}\) Pakistan's Foreign Office said the government was looking into the allegations of airstrikes.\(^\text{94}\) Similarly, in September 2022, three cross-border attacks happened from across the Durand Line in KP which martyred five soldiers of Pakistan Army. At the outset, the TTP claimed the attack, but the Afghan Taliban later attributed the cross-border firing to attempts by Pakistani forces to build a post close to the Durand Line, which they said led to an exchange of fire between the two sides. Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari

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condemned the attack and demanded that the Afghan government should stop terrorists from carrying out operations from across the border.⁹⁵

Also, following the episode of border clashes at Chaman in November 2022, Pakistan summoned the Afghan chargé d’affaires in Islamabad and lodged a strong protest over the incident of “unprovoked cross-border shelling” by the Afghan Taliban forces. Between October and December 2022, the Chaman and the Spin Boldak border-crossings experienced temporary blockages due to border skirmishes. However, the borders reopened again after meetings between Pakistan and Afghanistan authorities. A high-level delegation comprising civil and military officials went to Afghanistan to meet top officials, and a peace jirga was held in Spin Boldak.

Growing cross-border attacks by the militants, mainly belonging to the TTP and IS-K, challenge not only the Taliban’s monopoly over violence but also the latter’s claim that Afghanistan’s soil would not be used against any other country. Apparently, the Taliban have been insisting on keeping the border open and allowing cross-border movement without travel documentation. For Pakistan, open border policy means a rise in arms and drug trafficking, refugees’ inflow, and terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, strict border policy also resulted in Afghans using illegal means to enter Pakistan; these undocumented Afghan refugees neither benefited from the UNHCR facilities nor repatriated, which resulted in them being stuck in Pakistan.⁹⁶

Experts also assert that the tension at the border and the consequent tensions in bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan will only help the militants to


exploit the situation and create more chaotic environment in which they feel more comfortable to operate. While Pakistan needs to enhance bilateral, official engagement with the Afghan Taliban, the latter shall also need to respond to the Pakistan’s border and security sensitivities, which have been conveyed and stated repeatedly.

The way the Taliban managed to sustain a long-term insurgency and eventually took over Kabul has raised questions about how they financed their operations over more than a decade. Apparently, most of their funding came through local taxes in the areas under their control, mainly on goods transport, commerce, and local land and agricultural production. "In some districts, the Taliban derived additional income from taxation of mining operations as well as trade in minerals." However, another possible source of their funding, which "has been extensively mentioned in the [available] literature, is taxation of the narcotics trade, specifically trade in opium, heroin, and cannabis."\(^{97}\)

Pakistan is a transit as well as an end use country for **opiates coming from Afghanistan**. Experts assert that the future of the regional narcotics trade is closely tied to developments in Afghanistan. "If peace prevails and a broad-based government is formed, there can be progress on counter narcotics operations in the short term. [However], if the situation remains unstable, or a civil war erupts, the narcotics trade is likely to flourish as warring factions will rely on the trade to generate financing. The second scenario has grave ramifications for Pakistan."\(^{98}\)


\(^{98}\) Safiya Aftab, "Afghanistan, Pakistan and the regional narcotics trade."
6. Pak-Afghan bilateral engagement: challenges and opportunities

As noted at the beginning of this report, former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani had adopted a policy of rapprochement towards Pakistan thinking that the latter could help in the Afghan political reconciliation. Pakistan, in turn, contributed to bringing the Taliban leaders to the negotiation table in Murree, a mountain resort town near Islamabad, on July 7, 2015. Before that Pakistan had reportedly also facilitated a session of back-channel talks between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban in Urumqi, China on May 19 in the same year. “The talks were attended by some Afghan Taliban leaders based in Pakistan, including Mullah Abdur Jalil and Mullah Hassan.” However, the peace process almost derailed after the announcement of the death of the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar in July 2015. Later, in the fifth Heart of Asia Conference, held in Islamabad on December 6, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the US, and China formed the Quadrilateral Monitoring Committee with the purpose of facilitating and supporting the Afghan reconciliation process. However, by that time the damage had already been done to the arising warmth in Pak-Afghan bilateral diplomacy.

The Ghani government time and again accused Pakistan of being the mouthpiece of the Taliban. A striking example was the allegation by the Afghan government that Pakistan’s foreign minister acted as the Taliban’s spokesperson when he said that the latter did not want Daesh to grow in Afghanistan. Ghani administration also claimed that Pakistan's support for the Taliban allowed them to weather 20


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years of war.\textsuperscript{101} However, in the light of urban territorial advancements made by the Taliban, Pakistan had clearly stated that it could not be held responsible for Afghan forces’ lack of will to fight, poor capacity-building and shortage of equipment.\textsuperscript{102} US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also endorsed Pakistan’s stance by stressing that the Afghan security forces proved incapable of defending the country.

Although a statement issued by Pakistan’s National Security Committee after the fall of Kabul confirmed Pakistan’s position of non-interference in Afghan affairs, but some statements from Pakistani officials and politicians had only prompted the world to question Pakistan’s stance. For one, in an interview with Becky Anderson for CNN, Pakistani former National Security Adviser, Moeed Yousuf, stated that the Afghan population had welcomed the Taliban rather than opposing them.\textsuperscript{103}

6.1 Pakistan’s misplaced optimism and growing concerns

As early as July 2021, officials in Islamabad had started stressing that Taliban had changed. According to them, the “new” Taliban had given up on their hardline approach of Mullah Omar and were endorsing tolerance and coexistence – a narrative that was not received well by analysts in Pakistan and abroad. When the Taliban captured Kabul and announced their government three weeks later, Pakistan viewed the event as cleaning up of the unwanted externalities in its neighborhood i.e., a complete pullback of Indian and Western presence and

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\textsuperscript{103} Moeed Yousaf (Pakistan’s National Security Advisor), interview with CNN’s Becky Anderson, August 13, 2021.
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influence. However, the initial exhilaration has morphed into disappointment since then.

While Pakistan still remains as the most vocal supporter of the Taliban regime, the relations between the two governments are not entirely convivial, as is often perceived. Not only has the Taliban regime adopted traditional approach to Durand line, but they are also believed to be turning a blind eye to the safe havens of anti-Pakistan terrorist groups on their soil. Secondly, the failure of the Taliban in establishing an inclusive government, allowing women’s equal access to education and employment opportunities and protecting religious and ethnic minorities worried the policymakers in Islamabad and other neighboring nations. Notably, unlike before, Pakistani officials no more emphasize the 'moderation' of the Taliban.

At the outset, as described at length in Chapter 3, most official and public responses from Pakistan to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan were welcoming. Religious-political parties strongly welcomed and praised the Taliban for their so-called victory. Mainstream political parties were still careful and demanded of the government to take all stakeholders into confidence by initiating debate in parliament. Some nationalist political parties from KP and Balochistan denounced the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul but later adopted a cautious and accommodative approach. Like religious-political parties, Pakistan’s religious organizations were also extremely elated by the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul. Few also raised the Taliban’s flag (though momentarily), including the clerics of Lal Masjid in Islamabad. Many in northern Balochistan, which has predominantly Pashtun population, also welcomed the Afghan Taliban. For instance, following the Taliban

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takeover, large groups of people came out in different towns and displayed flags of the Afghan Taliban. Similarly, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Nazriyati (ideological), a far-right political party based in Balochistan, held a gathering in Quetta on September 30, 2021, where its members wearing white shalwar-kameez and the white Taliban-like caps were carrying their party and Afghan Taliban flags. They had gathered from Quetta and northern parts of the province to celebrate the victory of the Afghan Taliban under the slogan of “Sadaey Mujahid Conference”. Similarly, many in Islamabad were cheering for having a friendly government in their western neighbor. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on August 16 said that Afghanistan had broken the "shackles of slavery". However, some observers have been highlighting from the outset that Pakistan should not have given the impression that it is celebrating the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. For instance, DG ISI must not have visited Afghanistan, and if he did, he must have kept it low key. Most importantly Pakistan must not forget that the Taliban might be thankful to Pakistan but would not necessarily act according to Pakistan’s wishes as we had seen during their first regime in the 1990s. For one, when it was about breaking the sculpture of mahatma buddha, Pakistan had tried to stop the Taliban by writing letters and sending envoys, but they outrightly told Pakistan to not intervene in their religious responsibility.

One of the reasons for Pakistan's misplaced optimism has been linked to Pakistan's understanding of the Afghan Taliban. According to some observers, it is quite difficult to read their minds and behaviour. For instance, as noted by Afghan

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106 Inam-ul-Haque, former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, and former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. Comments at PIPS consultation-1 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held in Islamabad on September 24, 2021.
journalist Sami Yousafzai, in February 2023 visit of a high-level delegation from Pakistan, the delegates talked about terrorism and were very serious with the Afghan Taliban. However, in response Mullah Baradar told them that because of Pakistan’s closing the border Afghanistan’s food stuff and fruit expired on the way before reaching the Pakistani markets. He also said that because of this border closure, business has stopped. This shows how Pakistan misunderstands the Afghan Taliban; while Pakistan was stressing on terrorism and tackling the TTP, the Afghan Taliban emphasised on food stuff and fruits.  

Similarly, another major challenge in the way of improved bilateral relations is Pakistan’s myopic Afghan policy, which has always made it mandatory for Pakistan to establish ties with one group or another in Afghanistan rather than the government. However, as the group supported by Pakistan comes into power in Afghanistan, it changes, and makes totally different policies, which are mostly opposed to Pakistan’s wishes. For instance, when Hekmatyar and other mujahideen groups were fighting, they were considered as good guys. Nonetheless, after coming into power their priorities and desires changed and they did not listen to Pakistan and eventually lost its favours. "[In a similar way] Pakistan has received a setback from Afghanistan, as it had believed that with their coming into power the Afghan Taliban would clamp down on the TTP, but now the Afghan Taliban are not listening to Pakistan’s pleas to rein in the TTP." 

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107 Sami Yousafzai, journalist and expert on Afghan affairs. Views expressed in PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad.
108 Ibid.
6.2 Ties with the Taliban regime: developments and prospects

As a strong proponent of ending Afghan conflict through political settlement, Pakistan played a significant back-channel role in facilitating the talks between the Taliban and the US officials in late 2018, that eventually led to Doha deal in February 2020. Pakistan released former Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in October 2018 after nearly nine years of detention. Soon after, the Taliban emir appointed Baradar to lead peace talks with the US and the group’s political office in Doha.109 The deal committed withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghan soil in return of a guarantee from the Taliban that the Afghan territory will not be used “by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.”110 Pakistan welcomed the deal terming it the “start of a peace and reconciliation process to end decades of war and suffering of the Afghan people.”111

Soon after the signing of Doha agreement, Pakistan revamped its efforts to facilitate talks between the Taliban and Afghanistan government, then led by President Ashraf Ghani. Pakistan’s good offices played a pivotal role in courting the Taliban leadership to negotiate with the Kabul government, signaled by the visit of the Taliban delegation to Islamabad just two weeks before the onset of the intra-Afghan dialogue in September 2020. Pakistan also reached out to the government officials in Kabul and a delegation of Afghan government led by Dr Abdullah


Abdullah, then chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, visited Pakistan a few weeks after the first round of intra-Afghan talks.

Pakistan's commitment to Afghan peace has been built on the rationale that it is linked to peace in Pakistan and the wider region. Pakistan also feared an influx of refugees, a surge in militarization and extremism and spillover of violence to its territory in case of any civil war in Afghanistan. Moreover, Pakistan believes that peace in Afghanistan is a pre-requisite for economic stability of Pakistan as regional connectivity projects depend on it.

Throughout July 2021, as violence in Afghanistan picked up pace and the Taliban started scoring military ‘victories’ across Afghanistan, Pakistan consistently underscored that it would not accept a forceful takeover of Kabul. It was part of the “Extended Troika” that jointly called all parties to reduce violence and opposed restoration of so-called ‘Islamic Emirate’ by the Taliban.\(^{112}\) Pakistan was similarly concerned about the use of local warlords by Kabul government to tackle the Taliban advancement but its efforts to reach out to the Ghani regime were mostly met with mistrust. Pakistan also tried to dispel the impression of providing any tactical support to the Taliban group yet recognized their presence in the refugee camps.\(^ {113}\) The world, nevertheless, remained skeptical of Taliban-Pakistan ties and many analysts blamed Pakistan for supporting the Taliban as they swiftly gained control of Kabul. However, Moeed Yousuf, Pakistan's former National Security Advisor (NSA), proclaimed that the inaptitude and corruption in the Ghani regime and the Afghan security forces had led to the Taliban victory and, therefore, Pakistan should not be used as a “scapegoat.”


Similarly, on several occasions, Pakistan’s civil and military leaderships passed statements in support of an inclusive government in Afghanistan, presenting the Taliban as one among many other political actors.

**The Taliban takeover and aftermath: Pakistan’s perspective and role**

There was no shift in the policy even after the Taliban assumed control of Kabul, as Pakistan claimed to use its influence over the Taliban to persuade them for forming an ethnically inclusive government with Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and other communities.\(^{114}\) Despite this consistent support for an inclusive government, Pakistan adopted a cautious approach when the Taliban announced an interim cabinet in September 2021, which composed only of senior Taliban leaders. On the issue of inclusion of women in the future Taliban government, there was little hope. Yet Pakistan leadership held that the world ought to “let the situation evolve.”\(^{115}\)

Meanwhile, from July 2021 till September 2021, Pakistan sent consistent warnings to the world of a possible civil war in Afghanistan, blaming US for abandoning the country. One of the four points in the way forward for the Afghan peace process, as proposed by the former Foreign Minister Qureshi, was to “deepen and sustain economic engagement with Afghanistan for its reconstruction and economic development”.

At various international fora, Pakistan provided a sort of diplomatic conduit to the Taliban. For one, Former prime minister Imran Khan on multiple occasions talked about the threat of Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K) and that only the Taliban

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\(^{115}\) “‘Be more realistic’: FM Qureshi details roadmap for Afghan Taliban’s recognition” *Dawn*, September 23, 2021.
could help the world get rid of the terrorist group.\textsuperscript{116} Pakistan also urged the world community to pay attention to the economic woes of the Afghan people and asked the US government to release Afghan funds and to provide humanitarian assistance so as to avoid an economic collapse of the war-torn country. Pakistan’s calls for a looming economic and humanitarian catastrophe were well-grounded as it understood that managing the post-war economy was a major challenge that required sustained support of the international community. Pakistan also vigorously presented Pakistan’s narrative on Afghanistan to the world, emphasizing the importance of stability in Afghanistan as critical for peace in the region. Pakistani officials criticized the world for its “wait and see approach” as they believed it would “tantamount to abandonment” of Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{117} Two fears dictated Pakistan’s diplomatic lobbying for Afghanistan: the concern for the spillover effect of any instability in Afghanistan and the fear of diplomatic isolation from the West that mostly looks at Pakistan from an Afghan lens.

Pakistan remained active on global and regional diplomatic fronts in keeping Afghanistan’s issue alive. Pakistan abstained from a UN General Assembly resolution that expressed deep concern over the ‘volatility’ in Afghanistan since the Taliban’s takeover in 2021. The UNGA noted the presence of terrorist groups as well as the persistent violence and abuse of human rights, including those of women, girls, and minorities. Pakistan’s representative described the resolution as “unbalanced and unrealistic”.\textsuperscript{118}


With the regime change in Pakistan in April 2022, some important changes were witnessed in country’s approach towards peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. The new political leadership in Islamabad mostly passed statements only on humanitarian aid for Afghanistan, while the official engagements on more critical political and security issues had been through civil and military bureaucracy. With Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as the new Foreign Minister, whose party has been a strong supporter of taking parliamentarians on board on the Afghan issue, some involvement of political actors in the Afghan issue was expected in the subsequent months.

However, in recent times, there has been a significant departure from an “all-is-well” public stance. Pakistan is growingly concerned, along with the international community, about the Taliban unwillingness to form an inclusive government and protect women rights. The late November 2022 visit to Kabul by the minister of the state of foreign affairs, Hina Rabbani Khar\(^{119}\) yielded little in the way of the Taliban’s flexibility on political inclusivity, the rights of women and girls, and the footprints of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. Khar attempted her best to effectively convey Pakistan's views, including those on girls' education, but Taliban ministers only offered customary assurances and made no firm commitments. Experts believed that this was due in part to the fact that the hard-liner leadership in Kandahar made decisions rather than the Kabul cabinet.\(^{120}\)

The Taliban’s adamant behavior viz a viz the TTP and border security issues is not helping Pakistan in sustaining its optimistic approach towards the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. Growing incidence of terrorist violence is making

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Pakistan more worried about the fallout of Afghan situation mainly in terms of militants' cross-border terrorism and incursions. A delegation led by Pakistani Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif visited Kabul on February 22nd. The Foreign Office in a statement issued after a day-long trip said growing TTP and IS-K threat was discussed and “the two sides agreed to collaborate to effectively address the threat of terrorism”. A media report claimed that the Afghan Taliban has promised to cooperate with the Pakistan government on its concerns about the presence of the outlawed TTP fighters and sanctuaries on its soil after Islamabad delivered a stark warning on the issue.121

More recently, Pakistan hosted trilateral talks inviting foreign ministers of China and Afghanistan in May 2023. Both China and Pakistan vowed to continue working for Afghan peace and stability. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Mr Bhutto-Zardari while speaking at a joint stakeout with Mr. Qin after the strategic dialogue stressed that peace and stability in Afghanistan remained vital for the socioeconomic development, connectivity and prosperity of the region.122

The recognition issue

Despite its active diplomatic advocacy for not isolating the Taliban government, Pakistan has been demonstrating cautiousness about recognizing it. Islamabad is apparently following the regional and international response to the Taliban recognition that builds upon protection of human rights, women rights, counterterrorism, and inclusivity as key conditions.

On several occasions, the country's leadership affirmed its support to a representative government in Kabul and ensured the world that the country will

follow other regional and global powers in recognizing the government in Kabul. The government is, this way, following a balanced policy of active engagement with the de-facto rulers of Afghanistan without giving them formal recognition. Some anticipate that Pakistan is using its formal recognition as a bargaining chip to make the Taliban pressurize TTP to give up arms\textsuperscript{123} while others believe that Pakistan would continue with the policy as the cost of recognizing the Taliban government without global initiative is too high.\textsuperscript{124}

In November last year, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said that Islamabad does not want to take a "solo flight" for recognition of the interim Afghan government and that it wants the issue to be resolved with international consensus.\textsuperscript{125} Just a month before that, President Arif Alvi had stated that if the "Islamic Emirate" wants to be recognized, it should reopen girls’ schools, form an inclusive government, and assure foreign countries that they will not be attacked from Afghanistan's soil.\textsuperscript{126}

Some observers hold that although Pakistan has de jure not recognized the Taliban-led interim government, but it has de facto recognized it. Pakistan's embassy works in Kabul and Afghan embassy works in Islamabad. Delegations are

\textsuperscript{123} Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, senior journalist. Interviewed by Arooj Mumtaz, researcher at PIPS, December 7, 2021.

\textsuperscript{124} Tahir Khan, senior journalist. Interviewed by Arooj Mumtaz, researcher at PIPS, December 07, 2021.


\textsuperscript{126}“IEA should address expectations of the world if it seeks legitimacy: Pakistan”, Ariana News, October 02, 2022. <https://www.ariananews.af/iea-should-address-expectations-of-the-world-if-it-seeks-legitimacy-pakistan>
exchanged. People cross the border very easily. So, saying that Pakistan does not recognize Afghan government is not a factful or real discussion.\footnote{Inam-ul-Haque, former foreign secretary of Pakistan and former minister of state for foreign affairs. Comments in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.}

However, different views exist in Pakistan pertaining to the recognition of the Taliban government. Most religious groups and religious-political parties strongly support immediate recognition of the Taliban regime including Jamaat-e-Islami (JI),\footnote{“Siraj urges Pakistan to recognize Afghan government”, Pakistan Observer, November 03, 2021.} JUI- Nazriyati,\footnote{Maulana Abdul Qadir Luni, Head of JUI-Nazaryati, Interview by Fizza Batool, Research Associate at PIPS, December 14, 2021.} JUI-Fazl, and JUI-Sami.\footnote{S. Khan, “Pakistan’s Islamic parties push for Taliban recognition in Afghanistan,” DW, October 08, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-islamic-parties-push-for-taliban-recognition-in-afghanistan/a-59449154>}

In addition to religious political parties, the religious groups such as Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal-Jamaat (previously Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan) also advocate for accepting the Taliban as legitimate rulers of Kabul. On the other hand, the nationalist and liberal political parties are either maintaining silence on the issue of recognition or supporting the official stance; many also call for a more inclusive new Afghan policy. Pakistani intelligentsia and media have, nonetheless, also continued to influence the Taliban for exhibiting behavioral changes to meet the bare minimum standards necessary for international recognition.

**Humanitarian aid and assistance**

Despite its own economic challenges, Pakistan did not limit its call for humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan to only lip service. Pakistan supported the new administration in Kabul to deal with the looming crisis in the country. The former Prime Minister, Imran Khan, established a special cell to synergize various streams of efforts on Afghanistan across government offices. In October 2021, Pakistan announced some PKR 5 billion humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan and also promised to allow duty-free imports of eatables from Afghanistan to facilitate
bilateral trade between the two countries. It also announced several other measures for traders like 24/7 open border, visa-on-arrival policy for traders, and five-year business visa etc.

In February 2022, the government announced medicines worth 50 crores to be sent to the Afghanistan to fulfill a request made by the Afghan government.\textsuperscript{131} Several civil society organizations were also actively sending truckloads of winter clothing, food, medicine, and other relief funds to their Afghan brethren stuck in severe weather condition.\textsuperscript{132} Pak Afghan Cooperation Forum, a consortium of Pakistan NGOs to coordinate humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, had been working since October 2021, and through its contacts with government and non-government bodies in Afghanistan, it sent over 13,322 tons of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{133}

In October 2022, the Pak-Afghan Cooperation Forum in collaboration with the Al-Khidmat Foundation and Afghan Red Crescent handed over six truckloads containing humanitarian goods to the Afghan authorities at the Kharlachi border.\textsuperscript{134} Furthermore, the minister of public health of the "Islamic Emirate" and his accompanying delegation met with his counterpart, the minister of public health of Pakistan, Abdul Qadir Patel in Islamabad. The meeting focused on comprehensive cooperation between the two countries.

\textsuperscript{131} "پاکستان کا افغانستان کو ۵۰ کروڑ کی ادویات فراہم کرنا" Daily Mashriq, February 2, 2022, <https://mashriqtv.pk/story/?story=202202020131>


\textsuperscript{133} <https://www.pacf.pk>

Moreover, the government of Pakistan announced the provision of more than 4,500 scholarships to Afghan students for 2023 and stated that around 6,000 Afghan students were already receiving education from the top universities of Pakistan in different fields including medicine, engineering, and social sciences.135

As the floods and earthquake in Afghanistan brought devastation upon the country, Pakistan accelerated its humanitarian help. Armed personnel and choppers were sent immediately to recover people. Pakistan itself faced torrential floods in the month of August 2022, badly affecting around 60 percent of the country. Thus, the humanitarian help was stopped. The UN’s World Food Program highlighted that “Pakistan [had] provided a vital supply route into Afghanistan.”136

Large amounts of Afghanistan humanitarian aid from several other countries enter via the port of Karachi, as Afghanistan is a land-locked country.

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan made a wider and deeper butterfly impact not only on Pakistan’s adjacent provinces but on the security of the region too. The dollar shortage in Pakistan devalued the rupee to a significant level. According to multiple accounts, the main reason for the depreciation of the rupee was carrying the burden of Afghanistan’s imports. Pakistani foreign exchange reserves were used for all imports of Afghanistan, and this additional burden of around $ 2 billion per month was increasing pressure on the rupee.137 According to another account,

137 Malik Bostan, chairman of the Pakistan Currency Dealers Association, disclosed this while talking to daily Jang. Retrieved from https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/191837
one of the reasons for Pakistan's currency depreciation at the end of July 2022 was due to dollar smuggling to Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{138}  

**Bilateral trade and cooperation**  
Pakistan repeatedly expressed the desire to boost trade with Afghanistan in order to pump up finances in the failing economy. To deal with the absence of a banking system and frozen assets hindering Afghanistan from transaction-based trade, Pakistan tried to establish a barter trade mechanism under which some regulatory measures were already taken.\textsuperscript{139} A delegation of the Taliban government also visited Lahore to discuss method for easing trade between the two countries. In February 2022, Pakistan waived Electronic Import Form (EIF) and exempted regulatory duty on import of pine nuts to facilitate trade. While Dr. Moeed Yusuf held that more than 200 trade issues were resolved between two countries in less than six months,\textsuperscript{140} a report submitted to Parliamentary Committee on Afghanistan revealed a serious decline in trade volume.\textsuperscript{141}  

According to a report, September 2021 saw almost 73 percent decline in the flow of cargo from Pakistan to Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{142} The drop continued with an estimated 60

\textsuperscript{138} “Zawahiri’s killing alters Kabul chessboard”, *The Express Tribune*, August 22, 2022,  

\textsuperscript{139} Ahmed Ahmadani, “ECC approves regulations for barter trade with Afghanistan, Iran,” *Pakistan Today*, February 24, 2022.

\textsuperscript{140} For details, visit: \texttt{<https://www.geo.tv/latest/399237-scholarships-for-afghan-students-to-play-a-vital-role-in-afghanistans-development-pm>}

\textsuperscript{141} Visit the following link for details: \texttt{<https://mmnews.tv/pak-afghan-trade-shrinks-to-1billion-report-reveals>}

\textsuperscript{142} Mubarak Zeb Khan, “Pakistan’s exports to Afghanistan fall sharply since Taliban takeover”, *Dawn*, October 03, 2021, \texttt{<https://www.dawn.com/news/1649838>}
percent decline in trade orders from Afghanistan to local traders in December. While a major factor was quoted to be uncertainty in Afghanistan, some also reported border mismanagement to be a cause. Owing to the security concerns of Pakistan from TTP, Pakistan fenced the border, because of which the flow of border crossing was concentrated at border openings at Torkham and Chaman. By October 2021, there was frequent interruption at Torkham border while the Chaman border remained closed throughout the month. A major point of clash was the Taliban governments’ insistence of allowing border movement on Afghan National Card while the Pakistani authorities demanded proper travel documentation.

In August 2022, Pakistan announced the formation of a joint committee comprising of representatives from various political parties to resume stalled trade activities with neighboring Afghanistan at two border crossings, including the Ghulam Khan area of North Waziristan tribal district. During the same month, Islamabad also signed an agreement with Kabul about the grant of six months reciprocal visas to transporters to facilitate the cross-border movement of goods. However, local traders termed reciprocal visa relaxation to Pakistani and

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Afghan transporters for promotion of bilateral trade between the two neighboring countries as ‘too little and too late’.\textsuperscript{147}

Bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan increased by 22 percent to $213.70 million in September 2022 as compared to August 2022.\textsuperscript{148} Pakistani president Dr. Arif Alvi also noted in September 2022 that Pak-Afghan relations needed enhancement with a focus on bilateral trade. He suggested strengthening networks with the Afghan business community and increasing consignment clearances at border crossings. The president also asserted that peace in Afghanistan would make it possible for the country to develop as a commerce and energy connectivity corridor in the region which could potentially enhance transit trade between Pakistan and the Central Asian nations.\textsuperscript{149}

However, Pakistani exports declined to Afghanistan and experts attributed it to the US sanctions, the absence of banking channels, the unavailability of dollars in Afghanistan, as well as a drop in demand for certain Pakistani goods.\textsuperscript{150}

According to the report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Afghanistan had a $79 million trade surplus with Pakistan from July 2021 to June 2022. The report, which was created for the US Congress, revealed that the Afghani appreciated by 11.6 percent against the Pakistani

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{149} “President for strengthening Pak-Afghan ties through bilateral trade,” \textit{Pakistan Observer}, September 29, 2022, <https://pakobserver.net/president-for-strengthening-pak-afghan-ties-through-bilateral-trade>

\textsuperscript{150} Ms. Amina Khan, Director of the Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA). Comments while speaking in a webinar titled “Pak Afghan economic ties: Opening new vistas” organized by the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad on November 14, 2022, <https://issi.org.pk/34809-2>
rupee. This change materialized the fears of currency dealers who were concerned about Afghanistan’s negative impact on Pakistan’s economy. It should be noted that the data was released by the Customs department to the media in which officials claimed that there had been a record increase in Pak-Afghan trade. Thereafter, higher coal imports notwithstanding, bilateral as well as the Afghan transit trade via Pakistan were hindered, at best.

**Border insecurity and TTP incursions and attacks**

As the border insecurity and incidence of terrorist violence are increasing in Pakistan (*Please see Chapter 5*), mainly because of the groups sheltered in Afghanistan and bordering areas, there are no hints that the Afghan Taliban are heeding to Pakistan’s concerns. Emerging developments, nonetheless, indicate otherwise.

Instead of engaging with Pakistan on issues of managing border security and countering terrorism, the Taliban-led government appears more interested in strengthening its economic and trade relations with the countries in the region including Pakistan. While that is a genuine policy priority of the Taliban but their adamant attitude on the issue of TTP may not help in influencing Pakistan in support of broadening engagement with Afghanistan in other areas.

The Taliban’s growing engagement with India will further add to Pakistan’s mistrust of the Taliban. For one, some experts posted on social media in March 2023 that India has started a training course for the Taliban diplomats in the capital Kabul. “Probably the Taliban will take control of the Afghan embassy in Delhi after this

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In July last year, the Taliban officials had warmly welcomed a batch of 25 Afghan military cadets, who returned to Kabul after completing their training in India; the retuning Afghan cadets were sent to India before the Taliban came to power. A month before this event, Afghanistan’s defence minister Mullah Yaqub (son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar) had expressed his willingness to send Afghan army personnel to India for military training, saying the Taliban did not have any issue with it.

6.3 Pakistan’s Taliban-mediated talks with TTP

Pakistani government remained engaged in negotiations with the TTP, which were doomed from the outset. Despite a possible pressure from Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban were unlikely to take any military action against the TTP and only played an advisory or mediatory role in talks with the TTP. Also, there was a possible divide between the Taliban ranks over TTP negotiation. Some members of the Taliban explicitly criticized the Pakistani state for being non-Islamic, supporting TTP’s agenda of establishing a Taliban-like Shariah based government in Islamabad.

The rumors of the role of Kabul’s de-facto government in bringing Pakistani government and the TTP on negotiating table started soon after the release of TTP prisoners by the Afghan Taliban in August 2021. By late September 2021, the Pakistani government officials were talking of their desire to settle issues with the TTP on table and offered amnesty to the militant group. On 1st October 2021, the former Prime Minister Imran Khan admitted in an interview to TRT that his government had started a “reconciliation process” with “some” factions of the...
However, the TTP leadership rejected Islamabad’s claims of talks, rebuffed amnesty offers and urged its fighters to continue their activities. The ambiguity ended soon as on 08 November 2021, both sides confirmed a month-long ceasefire agreement.\footnote{Islamabad in talks with groups of Pakistani Taliban, PM Khan reveals, TRT World, October 1, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/asia/islamabad-in-talks-with-groups-of-pakistani-taliban-pm-khan-reveals-50395>}

From the first month of the last year, reports again emerged about peace talks with the TTP. A media report in January 2022 claimed that the government had started another process of talks and a local tribal jirga of prominent elders that had met with TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud in eastern Afghanistan’s Paktika province. However, the TTP’s central spokesman Muhammad Khorasani downplayed the talks but claimed “the jirga ha[d] contacted [them] but [they] sent it to the mediator, which is the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. [And] so far, there is no discussion or meeting with the jirga.”\footnote{Pakistan government, banned TTP group reach ceasefire agreement, Al-Jazeera, November 8, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/8/pakistan-government-banned-group-ttp-reach-ceasefire-agreement>}

With relation to talks, the TTP made a ceasefire announcement early May 2022 which it later extended for an indefinite period. On May 31st, it was announced that the government of Pakistan and the TTP have separately met the Acting PM of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and announced an extension of ceasefire.\footnote{Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, “Pakistan turns to tribal jirga to restart peace talks with local Taliban,” The Nation, January 18, 2022, <https://nation.com.pk/18-Jan-2022/pakistan-turns-to-tribal-jirga-to-restart-peace-talks-with-local-taliban>}

hold a Jirga with the TTP leadership. On the 18th of June 2022 the Afghan Taliban confirmed that the Pakistani government and the TTP had reached a mutual agreement regarding an ‘indefinite ceasefire’ during their ongoing negotiations. However, the banned TTP categorically stated it would not back down from its ‘primary’ demand for the reversal of the merger of ex-FATA with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The claim was made by no one else but the TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud in an interview with a YouTuber. The interview made rounds on social media and was apparently conducted somewhere in Kabul, according to Dawn.

Early July (2022), Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah stated that a parliamentary committee had authorized the military leadership to continue talks. But he asserted that the talks would be held only under the Constitution of Pakistan, and nothing over and above the Constitution would be negotiated or agreed upon. In another related development, the Parliamentary Committee on National Security also formally approved the process of negotiations and approved the formation of a ‘Parliamentary Oversight Committee’. The PCNS was also told that there could be no compromise on the merger of erstwhile tribal areas, respect for the Constitution, and disarming of the group. These were described as Pakistan government’s ‘red lines’.

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158 "رکنی جرگہ کابل پہنچ گیا رکنی جرگہ کابل پہنچ گیا،" Daily Mashriq [Urdu], June 2, 2022, <https://mashriqtv.pk/story/?story=202206020102>


A delegation of Pakistani religious leaders, led by Mufti Taqi Usmani, visited Kabul on July 25-26 and met with TTP leadership apart from the Taliban government officials. The TTP reportedly communicated to the delegation the obstacles encountered during their negotiations with Pakistani authorities, and criticized Pakistan, for having been part of US-led war on terror, and also declared the country’s Constitution and system as not in line with Islamic tradition. According to one account, the Pakistani scholars’ delegation urged the TTP leadership to withdraw their demand for the reversal of FATA merger, but they refused to budge.\footnote{The Express Tribune, July 27, 2022, \url{https://tribune.com.pk/story/2367953/pakistani-clerics-fail-to-soften-ttp-in-kabul-meetings}}\footnote{Dawn, July 23, 2022, \url{https://www.dawn.com/news/1701083}}\footnote{“TTP terminates ceasefire agreement with government”, Pakistan Today, November 28, 2022, \url{https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/11/28/ttp-terminates-ceasefire-agreement-with-government}}

Earlier, on July 22, a high-level military huddle, chaired by Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee Gen Nadeem Raza, also discussed ‘peace talks’ with the banned TTP and decided to pursue the matter in accordance with “comprehensive security strategy”. “The forum was given a detailed briefing on review of national security situation specific to Western Border, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan,” the ISPR said about the meeting.\footnote{Dawn, July 23, 2022, \url{https://www.dawn.com/news/1701083}}

In November 2022, the TTP unilaterally annulled the ceasefire after the government denied reversing the FATA merger and fulfilling other demands set forth by the group. However, the TTP claimed it ended the ceasefire because of continuing military operations against its members and commanders.\footnote{“TTP terminates ceasefire agreement with government”, Pakistan Today, November 28, 2022, \url{https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/11/28/ttp-terminates-ceasefire-agreement-with-government}} Pakistan started paying the cost of reconciliation overtures with the TTP as the group continued to strengthen itself and resorted to increased number of terrorist attacks. The decision makers at last realized how the Afghan Taliban affirmation was just a smokescreen that only benefitted the TTP to regroup. For one, the National Counter-Terrorism
Authority (NACTA) revealed that the negotiations between Pakistan and TTP only emboldened the TTP and allowed it to increase the magnitude and footprint of its activities.¹⁶⁶

Most observers criticised the government’s talks with the TTP on multiple grounds. Some said offering amnesty to or entertaining the demands of hardcore militant groups such as TTP, who refuse to abandon their extremist ideologies, could prove dangerous. Using such concessions, they argued, the TTP could relocate to the areas it had once lost, with or without weapons, where its cadres would indeed propagate the group’s ideology. "A little public support and empowerment would be enough for the group to reassert the implementation of its version of Sharia."¹⁶⁷

Secondly, in form of ‘reconciled TTP’ in Pakistan’s tribal areas, the Afghan Taliban would have vocal support inside Pakistan which would always look towards Kabul. Some deliberated that the state did not need to initiated table talks with a ‘defeated phenomenon’, i.e., the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.

Most participants of PIPS-led 8 quarterly consultations on Afghan peace and reconciliation held in Islamabad between July 2021 and May 2023 also disapproved the way of government’s talks with the TTP. Many observers raised concerns about the credibility of the jirga and the delegation that engaged with the TTP in talks, arguing that instead of security forces or jirga it should be the political government, or representatives of the people. In one of these consultations, Mohsin Dawar, member of the National Assembly of Pakistan, stated that talks had been initiated by the security forces and unlike previous negotiations with militants the state did

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not enter into talks from a position of strength. In the same consultation, Lt. General (Retd) Tariq Khan, former Corps Commander and IG Frontier Corps, revealed that it was he who had proposed the idea of jirga, but it was not to select a few for negotiations, but rather to establish a group of advisors from all [former tribal] agencies, in accordance with the code of honor of Pashtuns.\textsuperscript{168}

Others highlighted the secrecy with which the talks were held, and the conditions put forth by the TTP, while revealing that the TTP wanted to gain control of the division of 9 districts of KP, about one-third of KP. "We ha[d] no clarity on what we [we]re negotiating. Did they give any assurances that they want to live peacefully in Pakistan? The answer is no. [Indeed] they wanted to maintain their arms, structures, and take away the authority of the government of Pakistan from KP or part of KP at least, and we [we]re negotiating that."\textsuperscript{169} That also suggests the negotiations with the TTP were mainly based on a sort of ‘give and take’ rather than building on the leverage Pakistan and its people have established on the terrorist group since 2014 military operation.

\section*{6.4 Factors of anti-Pakistan sentiments in Afghanistan}

Pakistan's image has continuously gone down in Afghanistan in the past three decades, at least, albeit there is a variety of opinions from Afghan political parties, Afghan civilians, and Afghan Taliban. External interventions might have played a role in it including US presence and Indian influence, among other things, but only Pakistan and Afghanistan can address this issue together. Otherwise, this trust deficit will keep increasing with each passing day. After the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan...

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{168} Views expressed in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.
\bibitem{169} Inam-ul-Haque, former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, and former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. Comments in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.
\end{thebibliography}
Kabul, Pakistan started to face an additional dilemma: many Afghans generally believed that Pakistan had brought the Taliban into power. There has already been a widespread perception in Afghanistan that the Taliban are a product of Pakistan. As a result, when Pakistan demands something from the Taliban, they are already under this pressure of not being seen as Pakistan’s stooge or product, especially to the Afghan people. This is a very important factor not many people in Pakistan have its understanding or realization.\textsuperscript{170}

There are multiple factors of prevailing anti-Pakistan sentiments in Afghanistan. Some significant ones are narrated below.\textsuperscript{171}

**Absence of an inclusive Afghan policy:** According to political observer Afrasiab Khattak, sadly, Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan never came under the normal domain of state-to-state ties and were instead always driven by Pakistan’s relations with one or another party in Afghanistan, be it Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s party or Taliban’s party. This approach, whose foundation was laid by Zia ul Haq, has never allowed bilateral relations to be established between the two neighboring states.\textsuperscript{172}

**Media:** In recent times, the current affairs talk shows on Afghanistan’s TV channels have played a key role in shaping the common people’s perception of Pakistan. Since 2001, Afghans have gained significant access to television with multiple news channels and newly launched FM radio stations, which are catering to almost every

\textsuperscript{170} Mansoor Ahmad Khan, former Ambassador of Pakistan to Afghanistan. Views expressed in PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad.

\textsuperscript{171} Pak Institute for Peace Studies solicited an analytical paper from senior journalist Zia Ur Rehman that was published in PIPS paper series on Afghanistan. The narration in this section mainly builds upon his findings, unless referred to otherwise. [Source: Zia Ur Rehman, “Afghanistan’s persisting outlook on Pakistan: Lessons for Islamabad’s Afghan policy,” Afghanistan as seen from Pakistan-IV (Pak Institute for Peace Studies), Apr-Jun 2022, <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Report-3.pdf>]

\textsuperscript{172} Afrasiab Khattak, political analyst and rights activist. Comments in PIPS consultation-1 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on September 24, 2021, in Islamabad.
stratum of Afghan society. Most TV talk shows in Afghanistan present Pakistan as an enemy country that increases their rating. It was because of this airing of anti-Pakistani content that since 2013 Pakistan has blocked nearly all Afghan TV channels from being broadcast by cable operators in Pakistan. However, through unregulated social media, Afghans have openly expressed their rage and revulsion for Pakistan. Soon after the Afghan Taliban’s takeover, use of the Twitter hashtag #SanctionPakistan by thousands of Afghans had shown the antipathy among them for the perceived role of Pakistan in bringing the Taliban to power. The logic goes that, without Pakistan’s alleged support for the Taliban, the Taliban would not have had the capability to topple the Ghani government. An Al-Jazeera’ report citing data from the social media insight company, Talkwalker, said that the hashtag #SanctionPakistan was used more than 730,000 times from August 10 to August 12, with at least 37 percent of those tweets tagged as originating from Afghanistan. The tweets under this trend demanded the international community to hold Islamabad accountable for “supporting the Afghan Taliban militants and spreading chaos.”

**Fencing:** Soon after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, several videos surfaced on social media where Afghan Taliban members were seen uprooting the fence along the border and chanting slogans against the fence. In at least two such incidents in late December 2021 and early January 2022, Afghan Taliban officials intervened to block the ongoing Pakistani project to erect fencing on Durand Line. Overall, the security situation at the Pak-Afghan border has been deteriorating since the Taliban took power in Kabul in August 2021. The Taliban have apparently taken a stricter and nationalistic stance in their response to Pakistan’s efforts to fence the border. Political commentators based in Kabul believe that the anti-Pakistan

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sentiments are high in Afghanistan also because of Islamabad’s perceived role as a ‘main driver of instability’. This is one reason that no government has ever formally accepted the Durand Line as a permanent border because it remains a highly emotional issue. Some also assert that the Taliban’s opposition of the fencing is aimed at gaining domestic legitimacy. Though there was never a pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan, the resistance against fencing shown by Ghani’s government was much lesser than the resistance exhibited by the incumbent Taliban government. The Taliban criticize fencing to fan nationalistic sentiments and win public support.174

**Border closure and visa issues:** Frequent closure of borders also adds to Afghans' trouble and anti-Pakistan sentiments. According to one account, while the people living in Qila Abdullah and Chaman areas of Pakistan can cross either with Kandahar-issued or Pakistani ID cards, but Afghans having legal documents have to wait several days.175 Before the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, thousands of Afghans crossed the Pak-Afghan border on daily basis. For instance, a 2014 study had noted "an unprecedented and unmonitored movement of around 56,000 people daily, with more than 90 per cent of the flow originating from Afghanistan into Pakistan."176

According to one account, around 200 Afghan journalists are currently in Rawalpindi and Peshawar and all of them have their visas expired. During Afghanistan’s previous government, Pakistan would issue 2,000-3,000 visas per

174 Rifatullah Orakzai, journalist based in Peshawar. Views expressed in one PIPS consultations on Afghan peace and reconciliation held in Islamabad.
day, but now it is issuing very few visas. There are also reports that visas were sold in the black market for $1,000/$1500.\textsuperscript{177}

**Pakistan’s role in war on terror:** Afghan people and even some within the Taliban ranks have a strong negative view of Pakistan for its perceived role in the US-led war on terror. Others, despite having lived in Pakistan for years after the US offensive against the Taliban, tried hiding their links with Pakistan to dismiss the common perception among Afghans that the Taliban are “Pakistani stooges”. Islamabad also denied the presence of the Taliban on its territory, as NATO forces targeted Taliban cadres in 2001. For Taliban leadership and fighters, fleeing Afghanistan to hide in Pakistan was not an escape but a return home – back to the refugee camps and neighbourhoods where they were brought up in the 1980s and 90s.

Some observers assert that the Taliban would like to reduce their dependence on Pakistan for forging wider alliances with other countries, including India.

**Border trade and movement:** Afghans are extremely categorical about border trade and related cross-border movement of the people. Recent obstacles in trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan have also been causing a negative impact on relationship between the two countries. As Afghanistan is a landlocked country, many Afghans depend on Pak-Afghan trade for their livelihood. There are several impediments like withdrawal of cash-on-counter facility, requirement of advance payments and reluctance of banks to accept third party payment in case of Afghanistan leading to halted trade across the border. These obstacles could cause a widening trade gap, loss of livelihood, increased hardships for people, and unrest in border areas. The non-issuance of Electronic Import Form (EIF) by State Bank of

\textsuperscript{177} Mansoor Ahmad Khan, Pakistan’s former ambassador to Afghanistan. Views expressed in PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad.
Pakistan has also gravely affected transactions, led to halting of consignments, and created sort of congestion at the border.

Former ambassador to Afghanistan Mansoor Ahmad Khan in one of PIPS-led consultations lamented the 'subhuman treatment' of the people at Torkham, Chaman, Kharlachi, and Ghulam Khan border posts. "I will not go into who is doing it and who is not - whether it is civilian or military leadership - but this is a fundamental issue for the Afghans, who want it to be addressed at the earliest," he held.178 In the same consultation, researcher and writer Imtiaz Gul stated there is only one dominant power center which is running everything, including the Torkham border. Pakistan has state of the art scanners at Torkham, but they become dysfunctional, and the computer system hangs up when an expensive cargo is going through for certain people.179

**Border tension and skirmishes:** On April 19, 2022, Pakistan conducted an airstrike on some alleged hideouts of the TTP in Khost and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan. The strikes, according to senior military officials from Pakistan, were carried out following intelligence reports that TTP affiliates were present in the area.180 The Taliban authorities, however, claimed that the attacks targeted residential area causing civilian causalities, including of women and children. The government

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178 Views expressed by Ambassador Mansoor Ahmad Khan at PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad.

179 Imtiaz Gul, Executive Director of Center for Research and Security Studies. Views expressed in PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad.

spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, passed a strong statement against the attack warning that "it is paving way for enmity between Afghanistan and Pakistan".\textsuperscript{181} The attacks led to several public demonstrations in Khost, with people chanting anti-Pakistan slogans.\textsuperscript{182} In 2021, similar public protest was held outside Pakistan’s embassy in Kabul where, mostly women, chanted “freedom” and raised slogans demanding Pakistan to leave Afghan soil. Reportedly, the Taliban dispersed the protestors and prevented some journalists from filming the protests.\textsuperscript{183} This time, the Taliban chose to side with the public, warning Pakistan of a possible war. Islamabad’s open support for the Taliban regime and its history of intervention in the Afghan affairs during Soviet war and war on terror intensified the resistance and hostility towards Pakistan in the Afghan society. Experts believed that due to the geostrategic importance of Afghanistan, the country has faced several foreign invasions and interventions and this negative perception of Pakistan ought to be viewed in light of the general negative view of any foreign intervention.\textsuperscript{184}

\textbf{6.5 The refugee issue}

While Pakistan welcomed all Afghans with valid documents to leave Afghanistan via Pakistan, it repeatedly refused to allow any further resettlement of Afghan refugees in the country, arguing that the country was already hosting 3 million


\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{183} “Calls for “freedom” at anti-Pakistan rally in Kabul,” Tolo News, September 7, 2021, \texttt{https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-174543}

\textsuperscript{184} Dr. Babar Shah, Director at Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies, University of Peshawar. Interview by Hufsa Farooq, PIPS researcher, May 20, 2022.
refugees and could not afford to host anymore. Overall, Pakistan has so far exhibited a restrictive strategy towards refugees since the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Though it is fundamentally an attempt to keep the international community from denying its responsibility towards war ravaged Afghanistan, it is also motivated by Pakistan’s economic fragility and border insecurity. Not only has Pakistan given a cold response to the idea of more refugees pouring into Pakistan, but it has also stopped UNHCR from using the terms “new arrivals” or “new refugees”. However, many believe that Pakistan’s approach towards the refugee problem has not helped the displaced Afghan people and, instead, added to their miseries.

Numerous transiting Afghans including journalists are stranded in Pakistan due to delays in the processing of their emigration papers. Many experts cite the outbreak of the Ukraine war and influx of over 3 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe as the main reasons for this delay. According to UNHCR statistics, by last year more than 300,000 Afghans had fled to Pakistan since the Taliban takeover of Kabul. However, Pakistani authorities claim that about 60,000 to 70,000 Afghans have entered Pakistan since then. Most of these new Afghans have entered Pakistan through valid documents. Similarly, most of the new Afghan refugees are concentrated in Quetta, Peshawar, and Islamabad. Persian speaking Afghans with Tajik and Uzbek ethnic identities are mostly staying in Rawalpindi/Islamabad region, while ethnic Pashtun Afghans are mostly living in Quetta and Peshawar. While about 40 percent of the new Afghan refugees in Pakistan hail from Kabul,

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others are from various regions of northern Afghanistan such as Sheberghan and Sar-e-Pul, as well as southern city of Jalalabad.\(^{187}\)

According to Quetta-based journalist Shahzada Zulfiqar the frequency of migration from Afghanistan to Balochistan has decreased lately. Still, conflicts related to refugees keep happening but rarely. Most Baloch people embrace Afghans, but still, many protest about the occupation of their lands and label them as migrants.\(^{188}\) Senator Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar believes there is a fear that due to the influx of Afghan migrants Baloch people will become a minority and Pashtuns will dominate the society if the migration continues. On the other hand, the economy of the region appears to be threatened by demographic changes.\(^{189}\) Zia Ur Rahman, a journalist based in Karachi, agrees that that Sindh and Balochistan showed relatively greater sensitivity over the identity or nationality issue. Sindh not only has an Afghan population, but it also has Burmese and Bengalese, who have their own political parties and Union Councils. According to Zia, when the national identity is not granted by the government, the immigrants may search for safe heavens including by joining militant groups.\(^{190}\)

Nonetheless, mass operations against illegal Afghan refugees were reported from across the country. This resulted in protests and demonstrations from the refugees mainly in Islamabad. A petition was filed with the Islamabad High Court seeking the shifting of Afghan immigrants from the green belts of F-6 to refugee camps.\(^{191}\)

\(^{187}\) Urooj Jafri, "Afghan refugees and border control: Pakistan’s challenges and policy options."

\(^{188}\) Shahzada Zulfiqar, a Quetta-based senior journalist. Comments in PIPS consultation-5 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on September 3, 2022, in Islamabad.

\(^{189}\) Ibid.

\(^{190}\) Comments in PIPS consultation-5 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on September 3, 2022, in Islamabad.

Court later asked the authorities to get the green belt of Sector F-6 Islamabad cleared by removing Afghan nationals protesting against the USA for a claim which could not be granted under the Constitution of Pakistan. However, in an interview with *Dawn*, a leading English newspaper, one of the refugees stressed that "if developed countries were not ready to accept them, Pakistan should give them asylum."

In response to these demonstrations, the Afghan Taliban accused Pakistan of ill-treatment of refugees. They expressed their concerns with Pakistan’s chargé d’affaires Mr. Ubaid ur Rehman Nizamani regarding the ‘wrong attitude’ of the Pakistani police toward Afghans, describing it as detrimental for both countries.

A parliamentary body formed a subcommittee to examine the plight of refugees, particularly Afghan refugees and other stateless people in the country. Another effort was made by the Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP) and the Women’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry (WCCI), with support from the UNHCR and the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, to encourage collaboration between Afghan refugee women entrepreneurs and local counterparts for long-term development.

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livelihood development. Furthermore, UNHCR, in collaboration with Inspire Pakistan, arranged a colorful event called the “End of Year December Bazaar”, which showcased refugee-made products and Pakistani businesses supporting refugees.

There is no specific law in Pakistan to deal with the refugees or even internally displaced persons (IDPs). The federal cabinet had decided in 2017 that Pakistan could not make the refugees its nationals and suggested passing a domestic resolution related to the management of the refugees. The decision also pressed that considerations of the host communities should also be kept in mind. As Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) is back in power, some observers hope, those recommendation can be presented in Parliament to uphold their previous decision regarding domestic resolution related to refugees. The PTI government, which came into power in 2018 after the PML-N government, had reversed the decision [of not granting citizenship to refugees] and maintained that Pakistan would grant them citizenship. Former senator Farhatullah Babar believes Pakistan needs to move step by step to address the challenges that arise out of cross-border migration.


197 Comments in PIPS consultation-5 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on September 3, 2022, in Islamabad.
7. Afghanistan in the emerging geopolitical dynamics and developments

7.1 International concerns and responses

While the Doha Accord is the key understanding reached between the Taliban and the international community but both sides continue accusing each other of its violation thus delaying the recognition of the Taliban’s de facto government. When the Taliban started capturing provincial capitals in 2021, Norway, Italy, Germany, UK, and France showed grievous concerns towards Taliban’s adherence to Doha peace agreement. After the fall of Kabul in August 2021, Europe again voiced concerns about human rights, form of government, and girls’ education in Afghanistan under the Taliban government. For example, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that “UK will judge this regime based on the choices it makes and by its actions rather than by its words, on its attitude to terrorism, to crime and narcotics, as well as humanitarian access and the rights of girls to receive an education.” 198 However, Russia called Taliban takeover as the ‘revenge of history over modernity and globalism’. 199 It maintained that its prime concern was curbing terrorist activities and ensuring security in Central Asia. Though Russian envoy to Afghanistan Dmitry Zhirnov praised the Taliban forces saying that they initially made a good impression and ensured the safety of the Russian Embassy, Russian

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198 “Taliban will be judged on actions, not words, says UK’s Johnson,” Reuters, August 18, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/taliban-will-be-judged-actions-not-words-says-uk-s-johnson-2021-08-18>

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the “Kremlin was in no hurry to recognize the group.”

The international community has been concerned about the Taliban's reluctance or inaction on forming an inclusive government, respecting human and women rights and freedom of expression, and preventing terrorist groups from using Afghan soil to conduct attacks elsewhere. Meanwhile, the Taliban claim that the West, especially US, has a political agenda in preventing the Taliban recognition. For instance, on October 21st (2022), the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told a Turkish journalist: "The West is behind this; they prevent the recognition of and cooperation with an Islamic government. Although the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has made - and continue to make - great attempts, unfortunately some pressures are applied."

The killing of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2022 in a drone strike near Kabul was also a major setback for the Taliban legitimacy and international recognition. It vindicated the Taliban's violation of the Doha accord terms by providing safe haven to the Al-Qaeda chief. The US spy networks tracked and neutralized Zawahiri in an upscale Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood in a compound belonging to a member of Haqqani network of the Taliban.

Kabul-based journalists see a clear understanding among Taliban leaders regarding risk perceptions of their neighbors including Iran, Pakistan, China, the Central Asian states and Russia. They are also aware of economic benefits


201 “Mujahid says West preventing Islamic Emirate’s recognition,” Pakistan Observer, October 22, 2022.

Afghanistan can draw from projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, and some trade and development projects initiated by Uzbekistan. Some lobbies within the Taliban are pushing for activating these plans in coming months and years. However, internal ideological resistance to act and make political decisions in line with international concerns is only adding to the problems of the Afghan Taliban and people.

For one, after the hasty withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the Biden administration froze Afghanistan’s financial assets leaving the banking system of the country in shambles. It chose to hold the promised resettlement and evacuation means to the Afghans who had helped the US troops.

An official US report presented before Congress towards end of last year expressed doubts about the Taliban’s ability to counter IS-K. “Experts disagree about the potency of the IS-K threat and the Taliban’s self-asserted ability to counter the group without external assistance,” says the report sent to Congress by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). The US State Department also expressed its concerns about Afghanistan once again becoming a haven for terrorists. It warned that it will intervene and act if terrorists continued to regroup in Afghanistan.

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Following a deadly attack on the Kaaj Educational Center in the west of Kabul on September 30, 2022, which resulted in the killing of and injuries to more than 100 students, Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations condemned the attack and asked the Taliban to protect people’s rights to access education. He called the fatal explosion “heinous,” and demanded that Taliban authorities protect the rights of all Afghans without discrimination, regardless of ethnicity and gender.²⁰⁷ Besides this, the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), decided on joint measures by member countries to counter threats posed by international terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan. The meeting was attended by senior officials of all member nations including China and Pakistan.²⁰⁸ In October 2022, Tajikistan’s president Emomali Rahmon also expressed the need to build a security belt around Afghanistan to curb security risks and terrorist expansion to Central Asian states.²⁰⁹ In the same month, Russian president Vladimir Putin reportedly warned of the development of terrorist groups on the Afghan border and their infiltration into the Commonwealth Independent States during a speech at the Commonwealth Council of Heads of Security and Special Services.²¹⁰

Similarly, in conclusion of a 12-day visit to Kabul in October 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights for Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, called the country’s

²⁰⁷ “UN denounces Kabul blast and calls for educational rights for all”, <https://www.afghanistantimes.af/un-denounces-kabul-blast-and-call-for-educational-rights-for-all-citizens>
²⁰⁸ “SCO-RATS decides to counter threats from international terror groups operating from Afghanistan”, The Hindu, October 14, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sco-rats-decides-to-counter-threats-from-international-terror-groups-operating-from-afghanistan/article66009451.ece>
²⁰⁹ Ibid.
human rights situation “alarming.” Bennett highlighted the accounts of representatives of the country’s northern Panjshir province who reported the widespread repression of civilians, including egregious violations of the rights of women and children.

Moreover, EU special envoy to Afghanistan Tomas Niklasson repeatedly called for the reopening of schools for Afghan girls above grade six. In late October 2022, Niklasson also urged for regional countries to advocate for the establishment of an inclusive government in Afghanistan and for the observance of human rights. Similarly, in the wake of reports of women being brutally lashed in the reemergence of public floggings, the special rapporteurs of the UN demanded an investigation into the suppression of women’s rights in Afghanistan. Likewise, in response to the Taliban’s harsh measures against female education and deliberate repression of women and girls, the United States imposed further sanctions against the nation in the form of visa restrictions in October 2022. The sanctions prohibited US visas for current and former Taliban officials, members of non-state armed groups, and other individuals who were directly or indirectly associated with violence and repression against women and girls in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, China demonstrated mixed views on the Taliban coming to power. Over the years Beijing has smartly continued to engage diplomatically with the Taliban; the Taliban delegation’s visit to China after capturing Kabul in August

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2021 was one demonstration of that engagement. While China wants to engage in economic and trade connectivity projects, it is equally concerned about the security of such projects in Afghanistan and region as well as the terrorist threat emanating from anti-China groups based in Afghanistan such as ETIM and Uyghurs.

In a recent trilateral meeting held in Islamabad on May 7, 2023, the foreign ministers of Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen trilateral cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and jointly extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan. They emphasized the significance of ongoing projects such as CASA-1000, TAPI, and Trans-Afghan Railways, highlighting their potential to boost regional connectivity and promote economic development and prosperity in the region. However, at the same time the three sides also stressed the significance of preventing militant groups such as TTP and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), from using their territories to harm or threaten regional security and interests or carry out terrorist activities.⁵⁻¹⁴

Moreover, the Central Asian states as well as India have shown their willingness to work with the Taliban despite their concerns similar to those expressed by international community mainly related to terrorism and rights violations.

### 7.2 Multilateral events and developments and engagement with Taliban

The Tehran conference held in 2021 was attended by foreign ministers of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, China and Russia who called for

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cooperation to prevent the economic collapse of Afghanistan. Though the participants emphasized the formation of an inclusive government, they also recognized the Taliban's eagerness to engage and cooperate with the world community. Hence, the policy of engagement was proposed to prevent civil war in Afghanistan and to provide relief to Afghans.

In addition, the October 2021 Moscow meeting attended by Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Iran, Pakistan, China, Turkmenistan, India, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan mirrored a significant transformation in countries' perception of the Taliban. The participants not only identified the Taliban as new Afghan authorities, but also pledged to respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Afghanistan. However, a consensus decision could not be reached when the topic of frozen assets arose. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov endorsed the Taliban’s call to unfreeze assets, however Deputy US Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo asserted that sanctions needed to be maintained.

The Oslo talks held in January 2022 marked the first diplomatic engagement of the European and US officials with the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”. While the Taliban leadership sensed that these talks would transform the two-decade long


atmosphere of war,\textsuperscript{218} the world governments hoped that formal engagement of this format would further push the Taliban to comply with the conditions posed by them for recognizing the Taliban government. During the talks, the United States and Europe reiterated that humanitarian aid was directly linked to the status of human rights in Afghanistan, thereby suggesting that the Taliban must focus on incidents of extrajudicial killing, freedom of movement, education of girls and freedom of media. The meeting that spanned over three days might have been a diplomatic success, but it failed to build a consensus on a significant matter of “formation of government”; immediately after the Oslo visit the Taliban administration argued that “the international community’s call to form an inclusive government in Afghanistan is nothing more than a political excuse.”\textsuperscript{219}

The OIC summit hosted by Islamabad on March 23, 2022, was vehemently commended by the global community and Afghanistan. To provide a clear direction to the OIC delegates, Pakistan gave a six-point framework in the beginning of the session. This framework proposed an increased investment in education, health and technical sectors, creation of a forum under OIC, UN and Financial Institutions to facilitate financial support and a mechanism to combat terrorism and illicit trade in narcotics.\textsuperscript{220} The delegates asserted that if the financial

\textsuperscript{219} “Intl Community Yet to Define 'Inclusive Govt': Islamic Emirate”, \textit{Tolo News}, January 27, 2022, \<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176481> \\
crunch continued, Afghanistan would become the biggest man-made crisis.²²¹ Therefore, the OIC pledged establishment of a “trust fund” for Afghanistan under Islamic Development Bank and urged the international community to unfreeze Afghanistan’s assets.²²² A major development that took place post this summit was a shift in US stance on Afghan assets as indicated by US State department’s statement that “United Nations will show greater flexibility on financial sanctions imposed by Afghanistan.”²²³ Meanwhile, an extended Troika meeting of the special Afghan representatives of US, China, Pakistan and Russia gave a benefit of doubt to the Taliban government and reiterated support for the Afghan people. The participants adopted a balanced approach by urging the Taliban to form an inclusive government and calling the international community to provide assistance to Afghans.

The International Conference on Afghanistan in Tashkent on July 26, 2022, was hosted by Uzbekistan’s President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. It provided an opportunity to the Taliban regime to engage with its neighboring countries and regional organizations, despite its de-facto status. More than 100 delegations from nearly 30 countries attended the event.²²⁴ Interestingly, the main pre-condition for the recognition, i.e., establishment of an inclusive government, was not emphasized much during this engagement. Instead, the prime focus of the conference was the reconstruction and economic development of Afghanistan. Some participants also

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²²² Ibid.


shared concerns about the use of Afghan territory for terrorist activities. Similarly, the SCO meeting was held in Tashkent after the International Conference and was attended by foreign delegations of member states of SCO – Afghanistan contact group, a delegation from the foreign ministry of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under Amir Khan Muttaqi, and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. In the meeting Chinese FM Wang Yi held that the situation in Afghanistan was much stable despite multiple challenges, a notable departure from his statement in 2021 when he shared concern over the situation in Afghanistan that could impact the “overall security and development of the region.”

Moreover, India like China employed a pragmatic stance towards maintaining relations with the Taliban regime. In October 2022, the head of the country’s central bank, Abdul Qadir Idris, met with Bharat Kumar, head of the Indian government’s technical team, to discuss Afghanistan’s economic situation, banking issues and joint cooperation between the two states. Officials of Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) said that the Indian government agreed to offer technical assistance to the bank. Shortly after a trade agreement, was also signed the reopening of the air corridor between India and Afghanistan. Based on the agreement, Afghan traders could continue their trade with India via the air corridor.

In an attempt to contain the spread of terrorism, the December 2022 regional summit chaired by India’s National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval and attended by his counterparts from Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan focused on terrorism, radicalization and extremism. However, the

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227 “India to provide technical support to Afghanistan’s Central Bank”, Ariana News, October 26, 2022, <https://www.ariananews.af/india-to-provide-technical-support-to-afghanistans-central-bank>
attendees of the summit somehow failed to reach a common interpretation of the Afghan crisis as India and Russia in particular expressed diverging conclusions after the summit. While Indian declaration after the summit suggested that it would be ensured that Afghanistan never becomes haven for terrorism, no such statement was mentioned in Russian declaration.228

In addition, the Taliban representatives were invited to represent Afghanistan on multilateral forums; invitation to the Antalya Forum named “Recoding Democracy” was one example of this development. According to Washington Institute for Near East Policy, since their taking power on August 15, 2021, the Taliban publicly announced, using the website and Twitter account of the previous government, 378 diplomatic meetings with 35 countries, majority of which were with Gulf states.229

7.3 International responses to the refugee issue

Europe was more apprehensive of the mass exodus from Afghanistan as it feared that situation will be no different than the Syrian refugee crisis. Be it the United Kingdom’s push for a border bill, Greece’s extension of the wall or Austria’s demand to set deportation centers in third countries, all of it largely linked to Europe’s fear of refugees amid the Afghan crisis. Similarly, the Turkish foreign minister had stressed that if migration from Afghanistan transformed into a crisis, it will take no time to adversely impact Europe and the regional countries.230


further put pressure on the Taliban, France, Germany and the United Kingdom held talks with the United Nations to establish a safe zone in Kabul to allow safe passage for people trying to leave Afghanistan. Consequently, the United Nations took a moderate stance by adopting a resolution which called the Taliban to stick to their commitment of allowing people to leave Afghanistan freely.

Moreover, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, urged Pakistan in a press conference on September 17th to accept new refugees from Afghanistan. He stressed that abandoning the Taliban would be disastrous for Afghanistan and for the region. However, After the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, some states were reluctant to give refuge to migrants from Afghanistan; even those evacuated by the United States and other countries faced unfavorable conditions. While Turkey was accused of violent pushback of Afghan refugees, Iran deported 103,1357 refugees. In contrast, Germany announced that it will admit 1,000 Afghans per month according to a new refugee policy program. Canada also stated that it will be resettling at least 40,000 Afghan refugees by the end of 2023.

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233 Gaiti Raheemi, “Iran has deported over 1m Afghans this year: IOM”, Tolo News, November 15, 2021, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-175467>

7.4 World's humanitarian aid & economic support

Expressing distrust for the Afghan Taliban, the United States’ National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said after few months of the Taliban takeover that the "US is not ready to provide money directly through the current leadership in Afghanistan until the leadership fulfils their pledges including forming an inclusive government". While the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution to facilitate humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, the US Treasury Department also started issuing new licenses and guidance for organizations looking to provide support to Afghanistan.

However, the international community greatly extended a hand of help towards the war-torn Afghanistan. The US not only pledged to give an extra $303 billion in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, but it also eased some of the sanctions for humanitarian work in Afghanistan; exemptions allowed international banks to process transactions related to humanitarian operations. Moreover, Japan pledged to donate 5.5 million dollars in aid to Afghanistan’s health sector. Japan also announced an additional $106.7 million for humanitarian assistance to the cash-strapped country. Russia delivered a humanitarian aid shipment of over 65 tonnes of essential goods to Kabul. The United Kingdom, Norway, Denmark and South Korea also donated millions in aid. Similarly, the European Union passed exemptions in sanctions that allowed frozen assets to be used for humanitarian

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work in Afghanistan. Likewise, the European Union launched €268.3 million worth projects in Afghanistan targeting education, health and livelihood of the Afghan populace\textsuperscript{239}, while the United Nations launched a transitional Engagement Network which was aimed to strategize direction for timely aid to reach Afghanistan\textsuperscript{240}.

In 2022, the United Nations had launched the largest ever singly-country aid appeal of USD 4.4 billion for Afghanistan, which the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator announced as “an absolutely essential stop-gap measure.”\textsuperscript{241} Delhi also signed an MoU with the World Food Program under which it started sending overland shipments of wheat to Afghanistan through Pakistan. In September 2022, the Taliban signed a deal with Russia for trade of petroleum products and wheat.\textsuperscript{242} While economic trade with neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, continued, this was the first such international deal signed by the Taliban regime. Moreover, in July 2022, China lifted tariff from ninety eight percent of imported goods from Afghanistan to boost bilateral trade.\textsuperscript{243} Besides this, in November 2022 China pledged to grant zero-tariff treatment on 98 percent of the taxable products from

Afghanistan starting from the 1st of December 2022. In 2022, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) provided aid to more than 4.6 million people in Afghanistan. The UN agency provided cash assistance, and household items through community-based programs for vulnerable communities. The World Food Program also planned to provide more than 15 million Afghan people with food assistance each month until March 2023.

7.5 The Taliban's recognition plea and world response

Though the Taliban repeatedly called the Muslim world to take the lead in recognizing their government, no request and engagement translated into formal recognition. Taliban representatives time and again demonstrated commitment to uphold legitimate rights of the society and to revisit terms of education for women. The group also answered the world wary of insecurity in Afghanistan by rejecting the United Nations’ report claiming that the Taliban killed 100 former government officials and by passing a humanitarian declaration. Rejecting the UN report, the Taliban reminded the world of the “forgiveness decree” adopted by the group and their commitment to outrightly discourage humanitarian atrocities on Afghan land.

246 Ibid.
In another attempt to win recognition, in October 2022 the Afghan Taliban called upon the member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to officially recognize and interact with it on a political and economic basis. However, in December 2022, the OIC condemned the Afghan Taliban’s announcement prohibiting female NGO workers from working.

Moreover, while Europe has not yet declared any intention to recognize the new regime, the EU said it will have to talk with the Taliban. EU’s Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell said after the Taliban takeover of Kabul that "[they] have to get in touch with authorities in Kabul. The Taliban have won the war, so [they] will have to talk to them."  

### 7.6 Emerging geopolitical dynamics and positions

All the countries in the region and beyond have been stating time and again that they wanted peace and stability in Afghanistan. Unlike past, no external interferences including in terms of proxy war in Afghanistan have been reported so far. But that does not mean that different countries in the region and beyond don’t have their geopolitical and geo-economic standpoints and interests linked to the emerging Afghan situation and its interface with the regional alliances and dynamics.

Among the countries in the region, China has been gradually asserting itself in Afghanistan and regional geopolitics and geoeconomics. As far as China’s Afghan

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249 "Bringing Afghan news to the world", Ariana News, October 25, 2022,


250 Foo Yun Chee and John Chalmers, Sabine Siebold, “EU says it will work with Taliban only if human rights respected,” Reuters, August 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-says-will-work-with-taliban-only-if-rights-are-respected-2021-08-17>
policy is concerned, the Taliban see it fairly neutral as it has been keeping contacts with different Afghan governments and factions. The Taliban are aware they could use China’s advances in technology, poverty alleviation and infrastructure development to improve living conditions at home and reduce dependence on the West. But there are also reservations over China’s traditionally careful approach to investing in projects abroad. China signed a BRI deal with Kabul in 2016 but there are no projects on the ground yet, mainly due to insecurity. China’s interest in exploiting Afghanistan’s massive mineral resources may help fill Taliban’s coffers, but the Chinese are unlikely to jump in until the Taliban have proven that they are in control of the law-and-order situation and can fulfill Chinese conditions for investment. Analysts have been underlining that Beijing “is unlikely to throw in everything (in Afghanistan) like the US did and got burnt.”

One of China’s main aims in reaching out to the Taliban has been to protect its western Xinjiang region from anti-Beijing East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) militants. However, China feared that instability in Afghanistan might once again make it a hub of extremism, which could directly be exported to China’s Xinjiang region. After the Taliban takeover, China crafted a five-dimensional policy towards Afghanistan. While the first and foremost dimension of this policy was China’s acceptance of the Taliban as the ruling force in Afghanistan, the second dimension was China’s cautious efforts to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a terrorist hub, and the third was facilitation of formation of inclusive government in Afghanistan. The fourth and fifth dimensions were China’s efforts to address the

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Afghan humanitarian emergency and to remind the West that the humanitarian emergency was the result of their irresponsible actions respectively. So, contrary to the common notion that China’s engagement with Afghanistan is guided by its mineral extractive policy, it is in fact directed by China’s regional diplomacy and its pursuit of peace in its neighboring state. Espousing this policy, China worked to establish three working groups on political and diplomatic, economic and humanitarian, and security and stability affairs. However, after the armed attacks on the Pakistani and Russian embassies in Kabul by Daesh, China’s ambassador Wang Yu met with Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the deputy foreign minister, where he expressed concern about the security of his country’s embassy. He expressed his satisfaction with the security “all over Afghanistan” but requested that more attention should be paid to the security of diplomatic missions in Kabul. Shortly after that the IS-K targeted a hotel in Kabul housing Chinese in which 3 assailants were killed and 21 people were injured including foreign nationals. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin called the incident “an extremely outrageous terrorist attack” and urged the Afghan side “to look

253 Feng Zhang, “China’s New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal.”
thoroughly into the attack” and “take strong and resolute measures to ensure the security” of Chinese people and property.\textsuperscript{257}

Hamayun Khan, an expert on Pak-China relations and CPEC, believes that China’s diplomatic sailing in Afghanistan is a recent phenomenon. The uptick in China-Afghanistan bilateral ties may well be on the way to acquiring some substantial shape in the future. He asserts that while Islamabad may seek to reap the gains out of this emerging rapprochement between Afghanistan and China, yet it shall require bureaucratic proactivity, coupled with greater political efforts to achieve the desired ends. For China, Pakistan and Afghanistan to achieve tangible outcomes of trilateral engagement, they need to practically ascertain the parameters of their partnerships in political, strategic and economic domains.\textsuperscript{258}

For geoeconomics, the Makran coast in Pakistan’s Balochistan province is very important. An evolving policy shift from geostrategic to geoeconomics has a greater context in the Makran coast and the development of Gwadar. The reason is Afghanistan’s transit importance, which is connecting the Central Asian states to Makran coast and Gwadar. There are two important things to be considered. First is the tumultuous situation in Afghanistan itself and second is the base of Baloch militancy. It is believed that through the Gwadar there will be a strong connection of the Central Asian states to the Arabian sea, however, that depends more on the Makran coast than the Gwadar. Moreover, the new dimension in militancy in Makran has ruptured the whole process. Many believe that the Chinese are now shifting their focus from making the CPEC a kind of connection from Gwadar to


Central Asia and the Western China to making it a transhipment port. This means that the connectivity angle has been completely cropped out from the CPEC and that everything will now be done there.\textsuperscript{259}

Meanwhile, according to former ambassador Asif Durrani, \textbf{Iran} is hopeful that the emerging geopolitical landscape will provide it an opportunity to enhance its relations with China and Russia by presenting itself as the Middle East’s indispensable power. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan could provide it a more successful "Eastern" anchoring in line with Iran’s 'Look East' approach. However, a lot depends on how the Taliban will react to Iranian ambitions.\textsuperscript{260} Iran fears attacks from the anti-Shia Islamic State or Daesh fighters having sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Iran also voiced reservations on the Taliban’s offensive in Panjshir. An Iranian foreign office official was reportedly critical of Pakistan amid unverified reports of Pakistan carrying out air raids in Panjshir in support of the Taliban.\textsuperscript{261} Iran reportedly also arranged a meeting between Taliban and the Panjshir group in Tehran in January 2022, which contributed little in resolving the stalemate.\textsuperscript{262} Iran’s official language, Persian, is also the language of nearly the entire non-Pashtun population of Afghanistan, including Tajiks. Besides, Iran adheres to the Shia sect of Islam and has expressed concerns about the safety and rights of Afghanistan’s Shia population, mostly based in north and west of the country.

\textsuperscript{259} Dr. Manzoor Ahmed, Professor of Political Economy and Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Gwadar. Views expressed in PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad.


\textsuperscript{262} BBC Pashto, January 11, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/pashto/afghanistan-59948786>
Historically, Iran has had ties with both the US-installed national government and the Taliban and provided cheap oil to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover.\textsuperscript{263}

The \textbf{United States} had signed a deal with the Taliban and managed to withdraw finally realizing that the war in Afghanistan was leading it nowhere; indeed, President Joe Biden reinforced his predecessor Trump’s plan of complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. While America was busy sketching the withdrawal plan and the Afghan government was busy denying the possibility of withdrawal, the Taliban placed their focus on strengthening their political image and making territorial advancements in the country.

To some political observers, the US and allies appeared to be motivated predominantly by a desire to end an ‘endless war’, and also "create threats for China and Russia."\textsuperscript{264} As cited earlier, China is pushing its Belt and Road Initiative across South and Central Asia and has economic assets there, while Russia has a huge military presence in Central Asian states and looks after the defence of the region. On the other hand, China, Russia and Iran wanted an American exit from the region, even at the cost of having to live with the Taliban. They were opposed to President Ashraf Ghani’s government, which they saw as pro-US. These countries' diplomatic moves after the fall of Kabul suggested they "considered[d] the Taliban a lesser evil, hoping that they might reform themselves and prevent militant incursions in the neighborhood."\textsuperscript{265}


\textsuperscript{264} Afrasiab Khattak, political analyst and human rights activist, was quoted in M. Ilyas Khan, "Evolving mindset of Afghan Taliban and implications for Pakistan."

Tajikistan is the only neighboring country in Central Asia to have fallen out with the Taliban, mainly over the latter’s action against an Afghan rebel group based in the Panjshir region. Ethnic affinity with the rebels appears to be Tajikistan’s more immediate motive. Once led by the legendary Ahmad Shah Masood, a powerful commander and former defence minister during the Mujahideen era, the group is largely manned by ethnic Tajiks, Afghanistan’s second largest minority that constitutes just under 30% of the national population. Tajikistan also apprehends that Taliban may use militants to carry out attacks inside its territory. Some hostile optics have been in evidence with Russian and Tajik forces holding military exercises on Tajikistan’s border with Afghanistan and the Taliban holding an armed parade by militants from Tajikistan on their side of the border.

With the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, India did not only see renewed threat in Kashmir but was also concerned about the growing role and influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan. However, since the Taliban aimed at broadening their diplomatic and economic clout in the region it seemed highly unlikely for them to have maintained a hardline approach towards India, which has invested in development projects in almost each province of Afghanistan. India’s first formal meeting with the Taliban in Qatar where a Taliban representative assured the Indian envoy that India’s concerns regarding Afghan soil to be used against India would be positively addressed was a glaring example of this approach.

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While most official and public responses from Pakistan welcomed the Taliban takeover of Kabul, some described it as victory for Pakistan and defeat of India. Pakistani government and military establishment apparently also seemed content with the Taliban takeover thinking it would give Pakistan long-sought strategic depth in Afghanistan against India and alleviate the fears of Indian use of Afghan soil to create trouble in bordering provinces of Pakistan. However, as things later unfolded, Pakistan's expectations of the Taliban did not come true. Apart from their indifference to and repeated denial of growing TTP threat to Pakistan and border insecurity, the Taliban have gradually become more pragmatic in establishing relations with India, thus invalidating Pakistan's fledgling jubilation.

Indeed, India has a history of creating a strategic space and capital in Afghanistan, including through assistance and engagement in economic and social development projects. And it continues to follow the previous tradition in the Taliban-led Afghanistan, creating warmer conditions of bilateral engagement. In June 2022, India reopened its embassy in Kabul, after security guarantees from the Taliban, to coordinate humanitarian assistance and restart engaging with the Afghan people. On February 1 (2022), New Delhi had allocated around US$ 27 million for assistance to Afghanistan in its 2022–23 fiscal budget. The amount was earmarked to pay for existing Indian projects in the country, scholarships for Afghan students, and aid for the Afghan people. According to Afghan ambassador to India, the assistance was a signal that India was not switching off.  

India also sees Afghanistan as an important country due to its proximity with Central Asian states; India has strengthened its relations with these states over the past few decades in the areas ranging from military technology, defence,
counterterrorism, and economy to culture. Many Indian foreign policy analysts have been highlighting following the Taliban’s return to power that India must further consolidate its ties with Central Asia due to emerging security, geostrategic, and geo-economic challenges. For one observer, it was due to Pakistan's resistance to facilitating any Indian connectivity through its territory that New Delhi established connectivity with Central Asia and contracted with Iran to develop the Chabahar port; India has invested US$150 million in the 218-km Zaranj-Delaram Highway, which connects Afghanistan to the Chabahar port via Milak in Iran, and links further to Tajikistan.270

Pakistan believes that through its engagements in Afghanistan, India has been playing a role of ‘spoiler’ with a key objective of restricting Pakistan's influence there. For one, Pakistan decided not to attend an Afghan moot hosted by India in November 2021 on the same pretext.271 After Pakistan's refusal to join, China cited ‘schedule clash' as the reason for its absence, which many saw as a covert geopolitical message to the world. Pakistan also skipped an Afghan moot held in Moscow in February 2023 where it was invited alongside China and India. The two-day conference was attended by national security advisers of regional countries from India, China and Iran along with Central Asian countries. Experts agree that the main reason Pakistan opted to stay out of it was because it was the Indian initiative, and according to foreign office statement, Pakistan believes "(it) can make a better contribution in formats and forums which can contribute constructively to peace in Afghanistan".272

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8. Pakistan's policy challenges and options

A key factor that is limiting Pakistan’s policy choices is the enhanced threats to Pakistan’s internal security as well as its western borders since the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Cross-border movements of militants have increased, leading to a spike in attacks on Pakistan security personnel. Apparently, the Taliban have reneged on their promises made in Doha as well as earlier that they would prevent Afghan soil from becoming a staging point for attacks inside Pakistan. This inaction is fundamentally due to the Afghan Taliban’s long affiliation with the TTP which fought side by side with them against foreign forces. Against this backdrop, the Afghan Taliban are averse to the idea of cracking down on the TTP in a meaningful way.

Many observers highlight inherent flaws in policymaking and implementation processes. Ideally, decision making takes places at government institutions taking input from stakeholders including civil society, political figures, think tanks and security agencies. But in Pakistan, most participants of PIPS-organized expert consultations agreed, the decision-making process, mainly related to foreign and internal security policies, is not inclusive and largely dominated by the military. Secondly, as argued by Lt. General (Retd) Tariq Khan, decision makers rarely carry out field research, and rather prefer to use secondary data provided by different sources including intelligence agencies, which is the prime problem of our state. He argued that the civilian decision makers need to enhance the level of competence and own their responsibilities.  

Another question is how should Pakistan articulate its foreign policy? According to former diplomat Inam-ul-Haque, it is unfortunate that in Pakistan everyone considers itself a foreign policy expert, be it interior minister, minister of

273 Comments in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.
railways or any special assistant, and feels that he/she ought to say something about Afghanistan. However, the reality is that the substance of the foreign policy is as important as its articulation. So, "unlike recently when Pakistan’s premier declared that ‘Afghanistan has broken shackles of slavery,’ or that ‘we have not seen a man more ignorant that Antony Blinken’, Pakistan’s representatives should weigh their choices of words before making statements." In fact, there should be only one source of information on foreign policy issues and preferably that should be the official spokesperson of the foreign ministry. Similarly, Pakistan need not to act vulnerable, but rather lay forward Pakistan's stance pragmatically and firmly.

Pakistan’s foreign policy may be shaped by a combination of national interests and regional players’ inclination; Pakistan does not need to unilaterally take actions without consulting China, Russia, Iran and Central Asian powers such as recognizing the Taliban regime. If the Taliban are being careful about the promises they made to the world community, there is nothing to worry about, however if the Taliban are going against the global players, then Pakistan would need to sit with other countries and collectively sketch an approach towards Afghanistan. However, Pakistan does not need to become the voice of international community. If the world has concerns regarding the Taliban, they also have means to register those concerns with the Taliban. Hence, Pakistan should neither intervene in Afghanistan’s internal affairs, nor try to be the message carriers of the international community. This message needs to be clearly sent out to the world.

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274 Inam-ul-Haque, former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, and former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. Comments in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.

275 Aziz Ahmed Khan, former ambassador of Pakistan. Comments in PIPS consultation-4 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.
Pakistan needs to **refrain from over optimism regarding the Taliban regime.** Firstly, so because the Taliban’s power in Kabul does not indicate zero Indian presence in Afghanistan; Taliban seem pragmatic and are seeking good relations with India. Secondly, the Taliban is struggling with governance issues and in dealing with international community. As far as the recognition [of the Taliban government] is concerned, there already is de facto recognition which is why they participated on Antalya and Oslo platforms. Hence, Pakistan must also not be worried about raising the issue of recognition repeatedly, and instead place focus on evolving joint counter-terrorism efforts involving its neighbors.

At the same time, Pakistan needs to **devise a balance** between the onerous task of encouraging the Taliban to acquiesce to international conditions and the mission of rallying for the removal of western sanctions. This approach will not only epitomise Pakistan’s diplomatic grit, but it will also help shatter the sentiment that Pakistan is a mouthpiece of the Taliban.

Pakistan needs to recalibrate its Afghan policy making it **all-encompassing and inclusive** by taking more input from parliament, civil society, and other stakeholders. Afghans also have had a very clear demand and desire that there should be a state-to-state bilateral relationship, a civilian relationship, and a civilized relationship. Most of the participants believed Pakistan needed to revisit its ideological standpoint in its foreign policy determinants and rather look for national interests.

Pakistan needs to deal with Afghanistan as its **independent, sovereign neighbor.** According to Mansoor Ahmad Khan, former ambassador to Afghanistan, Afghans demand absolute sovereignty [in their relationship with Pakistan], and there is nothing wrong with this demand. "When we deal with other states in the world, we deal with them as sovereign states but when it comes to Afghanistan, we become reluctant to do the same. That is despite our stated policy narrative that
Afghanistan is a sovereign state, an independent state, and that we believe in the territorial integrity," he observed while further noting that our dealings with the Afghans in the past 50 years have remained in a certain way and perhaps that also controls our way of looking at them.\textsuperscript{276} Experts underscore that Pakistan should clearly define its fundamental strategic objective that is we do not want to bring any change in Afghanistan, and we would allow the people of Afghanistan to determine their system of government. Muzhgan Feraji, journalist and educationist from Afghanistan, underlined in one of the PIPS consultations held on Afghan peace and reconciliation that even if Pakistan prefers to discuss the rights and freedom of Afghans, these need to be in accordance with Afghans' preferences.

Similarly, some political observers believe that an \textit{aggressive posture towards the Taliban may not work} for similar reasons. According to Afghan journalist Sami Yousafzai, Pakistan may think that it helped the Afghan Taliban in attaining power in Afghanistan and now [instead of returning favours] they are not listening to it. But the Taliban think that as they are now the rulers of Afghanistan [and have to reflect the sentiments of Afghans], they should be treated as such.\textsuperscript{277} Pakistan also needs to understand the Afghans' thinking and their psyche rather than judging it from its own current situation and background.

Pakistan needs an insightful \textit{policy framework to deal with refugees}; fencing alone is not enough. Such a framework must carefully tackle the refugee problem to mitigate its ramifications for local demography. For one, Pakistan should formulate a refugee law to give a positive message to Afghan civil society that Pakistan stands with them. Formulating relevant laws will also help in removing

\textsuperscript{276} Mansoor Ahmad Khan, former ambassador to Afghanistan. Views expressed in PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad

\textsuperscript{277} Sami Yousafzai, journalist and expert on Afghan affairs. Views expressed in PIPS consultation-7 on Afghan peace and reconciliation held on March 7, 2023, in Islamabad
uncertainty on the refugees’ status in Pakistan and will open up more avenues of international support for Pakistan's refugee management. Former ambassador Mansoor Ahmad Khan believes that while Afghans are investing all over the world, including in Turkey and Europe, in Pakistan we have kept them out of investment policies. What message are we giving to the world by withholding Afghan refugees from business and investment? Legal status would also help the country integrate refugees into the taxation system. Few participants of PIPS consultations on Afghanistan also suggested awarding citizenships with limited rights of access to basic public services such as education and health for the Afghans and their offspring who have been living in Pakistan for several generations now. They also noted that without legal status and formal records, the Afghans who indulge in crimes or acts of terrorism on Pakistani soil remain beyond the radar of the law enforcement.

As far as the role of ulema or Islamic scholars is concerned, religious diplomacy to enhance Pakistani-Afghan bilateral and people to people ties is needed more than ever today, but it shall be in a slightly different form. This means that now those ulema should be included in such initiatives as 'connectors' who have an influence in Pakistan and on the Taliban. Some however also warn that religious actors can act as spoilers also.

The Afghan Taliban, who form the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, are divided into two major factions: the pragmatist Haqqani faction; and the southern ideologues led Kandahari faction. Haqqanis have been relatively friendly with Pakistan, while the Kandaharis espouse more puritanical views while dealing with Pakistan. Kandahari faction is formed by the Taliban ideologues, led by Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, the spiritual leader of the IEA. Maj. Gen Inam Ul Haque (Retd),
defence and strategic affairs analyst, stated in one of PIPS consultations on Afghan peace and reconciliation that to make any headway in talks with the TTP, Pakistan should **influence the Kandahari faction and make inroads into Mullah Akhundzada’s inner circles.**

Some participants of PIPS-led expert consultations lamented that terrorist attacks have increased in Pakistan since the Afghan Taliban came into power in August 2021 putting stress on bilateral relations between the two countries. While the TTP and IS-K, largely operating from Afghanistan, have stepped up their terrorist activities in Pakistan, mainly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Taliban have been failing to help Pakistan in countering the threats of militancy and cross-border terrorism. Others, however, underlined that **Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan is larger than counterterrorism and security, and therefore should be seen broadly.** Pakistan needed to focus on trade, economy, enhancing infrastructure and people to people contacts, thus moving beyond a security-centric Afghan policy. The challenges are piling up for Pakistan because of its 'flawed understanding of the Afghan Taliban', who may never launch a crackdown on the TTP for Pakistan as they have both remained and struggled together for past few decades. The solution to deal with the TTP also lies in broader engagement with Afghanistan that would lead to mutual economic and security interdependence.

**Pakistan’s state and private media houses and television channels have least presence or in Kabul,** the capital of Afghanistan where media offices are present from all over the world. Pakistan needs to encourage media personnel both from the public and private sectors to bring forward things besides the official statements we get from the government. Interactions should be made with the local people to hear their voices so ultimately Pakistan can make better policies for Afghanistan.
It is also desirable that Pakistan continue taking lead in ensuring the reach of humanitarian assistance to poverty-ridden Afghanistan. The primary pathway to achieve this is by keeping its humanitarian air and road corridors open, along with the land routes for UN agencies, NGOs and other donors. Moreover, Pakistan shall be on the front foot with regards to implementation of OIC’s commitments pertaining to the Afghan situation.

Pakistan may devise a policy that facilitates trade with Afghanistan include doing so in Pakistan’s national currency and enabling barter mechanism until Afghanistan gains financial stability. This will be a practical implementation of Pakistan’s National Security Policy that asserts that Pakistan’s security-oriented outlook has shifted to economic one. Some political observers hold that despite its repeated claims Pakistan has yet not shifted to geo-economics from the traditional geo-strategic calculus, at least in case of Afghanistan. For instance, in the last two decades, Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have set up train connectivity with Afghanistan, however we have not established even one meter connectivity with the latter. Improved bilateral trade could contribute significantly to resolution of social, political, and economic issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Trade is mutually beneficial, and it would help stabilize the two countries over time.

Pakistan requires a comprehensive policy framework to check smuggling on the Pak-Afghan border because illegal trade has been harming national economies in both countries for decades. Some participants of PIPS-led expert consultations claimed that certain government agencies were also involved in the booming cross border illegal trade. Unless the problem is addressed effectively, the instability on western borders will linger on indefinitely, participants warned. They also suggested the establishment of trade zones on the border to counter smuggling.
Pakistan’s Afghan policy has largely remained centered upon the groups, warlords, and politicians, instead of citizens of Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan may work on developing a policy that focuses on **winning hearts and minds of the Afghan people**. Reaching out to different factions of Afghan society and polity will help in removing misperceptions held by many Afghans about Pakistan.

In the last two decades, Pakistan used to offer **scholarships to Afghans**. However, these scholarships have also been stopped now. Pakistan should increase the number of scholarships to Afghan students including girls as they are in need of them. Similarly, within the field of **health**, Pakistan has marked leverage to win Afghan people's hearts. Many Afghans come here for treatment. If along the border, Pakistan establishes small hospitals every 50km or so it will prove highly beneficial for the Afghans as well as for Pakistan's image.

Pakistan needs to bilaterally **engage and talk with Afghanistan** on the issues of countering terrorism, enhancing trade, and evolving mechanism on border and water securities, etc. Pakistan can formulate such agreements under the table, and once the Taliban government is recognized, these can be made formal. It seems strange that despite their proximity, Afghanistan and Pakistan share no formal agreement regarding refugees, trade, or border.

At home, Pakistan needs to **upgrade the merged districts of ex-FATA** to the status of a full-fledged province and promote democratic culture to discourage militarism and bring stability to the country. Furthermore, there is no reason for the merged FATA areas to still remain ‘cantonments’ where even the parliamentarians find hard to go.