

AFGHANISTAN UNDER TALIBAN 2.0: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA AND THE REGION

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Abstract. With *Taliban* ousting the Ghani government and taking control of Afghanistan in August 2021, the country plunged into deep security, economic and humanitarian crisis. The uncertainties prevailing in Afghanistan is a concern for India and the regional countries. The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan has always made it a centre of great power politics. The hardliner approach of the first phase of the *Taliban* rule made the regime unpopular that led to its international isolation. In August 2021 when *Taliban* reclaimed Afghanistan, the fear of the common people was evident with thousands fleeing the country. Closeness between *Taliban* and the *Al-Qaida*, dominance of the *Haqqani* Network in the present regime and refugee crisis make the security situation in the region precarious. India-Afghanistan ties disrupted during the first *Taliban* regime in the mid-nineties. However, with the fall of the *Taliban* regime in 2001, the bilateral ties strengthened. India was the largest regional donor and one of the leading donor countries after 2001. India was also the first strategic partner of Afghanistan. With *Taliban* back in power, India's ties with Afghanistan received a major setback. An unstable Afghanistan jeopardises India's security and economic interests. Since the *Taliban* take over in 2021, India has been cautiously dealing with the group. India like other countries has not recognized the *Taliban* government but is engaged with the group. Given the complex geo-political and security challenges, India needs to move cautiously. Cooperation among regional countries is critical to address the ongoing crisis. Silence on the part of the regional countries will have severe ramifications for the long term-security and economic interests of the region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a regional group needs to play a proactive role in the crisis in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Taliban, Security, Trade, Connectivity.

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1. Introduction

The takeover of Kabul by the *Taliban* on 15 August 2021 resulted in massive security challenges and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. With *Taliban* back in power, the gains made since 2001 were shattered. The pace with which Kabul fell in 2021 was disturbing. The chronic instability and uncertainties in Afghanistan have serious ramifications for the region, which cannot afford an unstable Afghanistan.

Landlocked Afghanistan because of its geo-strategic location with Pakistan in the east and south, Central Asia in north and north-east, Iran in the west and China at the eastern-most top of the *Wakhan* Corridor has always been a centre of great power politics. From 1920s – 1940s, Afghanistan remained a buffer state between the British Empire and the Russian Empire. During the Cold War, Afghanistan again became the focus of power rivalry between the two power blocs- the erstwhile Soviet Union and the USA. After the Soviet intervention in 1979, Afghanistan saw the rise of *mujahideen* groups supported by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

Afghanistan witnessed civil war among the various *mujahideen* groups after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The *Taliban* for the first time came to power in Afghanistan in 1996. *Taliban*, a predominantly *Pashtun* hard-line group formed in northern Pakistan in the early 1990s were known for their strict adherence to *Sharia* laws. The *Taliban* giving sanctuary to Osama-Bin-Laden and his *Al-Qaida* group post-9/11 worsened its relations with the US and on 7 October 2001, a US-led military coalition attacked Afghanistan. The ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ forced the *Taliban* to relinquish power and many of its top leaders took refuge in Pakistan.

The ‘Bonn Agreement’ of 2001 established an Interim Administration with Hamid Karzai as the chairman and the UN Security Council Resolution 1386 created the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The US led coalition forces ousted the *Taliban* from power in 2001 but was unable to wipe out its presence completely. *Taliban* inflicted violence in Afghanistan intensified since 2005, posing dire security challenges for the region. In 2013, NATO gave the control of the remaining ninety-five districts and in 2014 President Barack Obama announced that most of the US forces will leave Afghanistan by the end of 2016.

Domestically, Afghanistan was witnessing many changes around this time. With resurgence of *Taliban* attacks, security remained precarious. The national election of 2016 saw a bitter rivalry between the two main candidates – Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, both claiming to have won the election. The political uncertainty ended with the signing of the power-sharing agreement between the two leaders.

President Donald Trump in 2017 outlined that the US withdrawal would be based on “conditions on the ground” and not on arbitrary timelines [1]. The US and the *Taliban* signed an agreement in February 2020 paving the way for a significant drawdown of the US troops in Afghanistan. However, the deal did not mention of an immediate cease-fire. In September 2020, nearly after twenty years, representatives of the *Taliban*, the Afghan government and civil society met at Doha. Subsequently, in November 2020, the US announced that by mid-January 2021 it would reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan to 2,500. In April 2021, President Biden announced that the United States will withdraw all US forces by 11 September 2021. Intra-Afghan peace talks or *Taliban* halting attacks in Afghanistan was no longer prerequisite for the US withdrawal. *Taliban* on the other hand insisted that they will not participate in any conferences until all foreign troops leave the Afghan soil. Amidst these developments, *Taliban* took over the Presidential palace and forced President Ghani to leave the country on 15 August 2021, adding yet another era of instability in Afghanistan.

2. Present Taliban Regime in Afghanistan

The first phase of the *Taliban* rule (1996-2001) marked by oppressive social rules, orthodox ideas, strict adherence to *Sharia* laws and hardliner approach made the regime unpopular that led to its international isolation. The fear of the *Taliban* regime was evident as several thousand Afghans fled the country after the *Taliban* reclaimed power in August 2021.

Afghanistan is under severe economic and social crisis since *Taliban* came to power in 2021. Despite assurances from the *Taliban* of a moderate approach, the present regime has continued with its hardliner approach. Like the past, the *Taliban* continues with gender-based oppression. *Taliban* has imposed severe restrictions on women and girls, denying them of their basic rights. *Taliban* has barred women from public spaces and many jobs, banned education of girls beyond sixth grade. Afghanistan ranked 170th out of 170 countries on the Women, Peace, and Security Index in 2023 [2]. The international community has denounced *Taliban*’s treatment towards women as “gender apartheid” [3].

The economy of Afghanistan has plummeted since August 2021. According to the UNDP, the economy shrunk by 27 percent, unemployment doubled and only 40 percent of the population has access to electricity [4]. There is complete collapse of the financial sector, major sources of economic activity such as exports or public expenditure is halted and the only available livelihood options for the people is in the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and farming [5]. With international aid reduced, its central bank assets frozen and isolation from the international banking system, Afghanistan’s economic woos

have increased manifold. Also, several highly skilled Afghans fled the country fearing *Taliban* backlash. The proportion of households unable to meet its basic food requirement more than doubled from 16 percent to 36 percent since *Taliban* reclaiming power [6]. The economy was in dire condition even before August 2021, which had further plunged after August 2021. In 2020, about 19 million Afghans lived below poverty line, which increased to around 34 million by the end of 2022 [7]. The country is reeling under severe food crisis. As in April 2023, more than 17 million Afghans did not have enough food to eat and 3.4 million of them were close to famine [8]. According to the UNHCR, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in early 2021 was around 18.4 million, which in 2023 increased to 28 million [9].

3. Afghan Imbroglio: What It Means for the Region?

The worsening security landscape in Afghanistan is worrisome, especially for the regional countries. Despite *Taliban*'s assurance that the Afghan soil will not be used by any terrorist outfit or individual against any other country, the real picture is different. According to the UN sanctions monitors report "the high concentration of terrorist groups in Afghanistan undermines the security situation in the region" [10]. Further, the closeness between *Taliban* and the *Al-Qaida* remains a source of tension. The *Al-Qaida* sympathisers celebrated *Taliban*'s ascendance to power in August 2021.

There are, however, reports also on the weakened capability of the *Al-Qaida*. A UN sanction monitors report of January 2024 indicates that *Al-Qaida* operates training camps, *madrasas* and safe havens in Afghanistan but the "group cannot at present project sophisticated attacks at long range" [11]. Despite the weakened position, the threat posed by the group cannot be ignored.

The *Haqqani* Network, a semi-autonomous component of the Afghan *Taliban* and a strong ally of the *Al-Qaida* with a close connection with Pakistan's Intelligence Agency is now an important part of the new regime. The *Haqqani* Network is the "primary liaison" between the *Taliban* and *Al-Qaida* [12]. Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of the group's present leader Jalaluddin is the acting Interior Minister since September 2021. The June 2023 report of the UN sanctions monitors highlight that the *Haqqanis* are "increasingly involved in the production and trafficking of methamphetamine and synthetic drugs" [13].

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani *Taliban* has considerably increased its attack on Pakistan since 2021. The gruesome January 2023 attack at a police compound in Pakistan instigated Pakistan to carry out airstrikes in Afghanistan and forced Afghan refugees to leave Pakistan. The TTP gets support from *Al-Qaida* and *Taliban* and is increasingly recruiting Afghans [14]. Since 2020, TTP has 4,000-6,000

fighters in Afghanistan [15]. Lack of trust between TTP and *Taliban* creates further complexities. Many TTP members believe that the targeted assassinations of TTP members are a handiwork of Pakistan Intelligence and the *Taliban* [16]. Further, *Al-Qaida* in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) established in 2014 has links with local actors particularly the TTP [17]. Asim Umar, the former AQIS leader with Pakistan connection was sheltered by the *Taliban* and was killed in the US-Afghan operation of 2019.

The *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU), once a close ally of the *Al-Qaida* along with other Central Asian terrorist groups has “greater freedom of movement” in Afghanistan under the *Taliban* government [18]. The *Easter Turkistan Islamic Movement* (ETIM), also known as the *Turkistan Islamic Party* is now based in north-western Afghanistan. However, recent reports suggest that ETIM militants have shifted from the Afghan-Chinese border after China objected to its presence in the borders [19].

Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Afghan affiliate of the *Islamic State* (IS) was formed in 2015. After August 2021, the ISKP has attacked *Taliban* targets and was responsible for killing several officials including provincial governors in March and June 2023 [20]. Also, the ISKP had launched attacks against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, at Russian and Pakistan Embassies in Kabul, on a hotel at Kabul that is frequently visited by Chinese nationals [21]. The *Taliban* has launched several offensives to dismantle the ISKP. There are chances that the TTP *jihadists* might join or ally with ISKP like the *jihadists* of IMU and ETIM, which might strengthen ISKP position again in eastern Afghanistan [22].

ISKP presence has been expanding in the region, especially in the Central Asian region. It has increased the circulation of various propaganda materials for the Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz in the region [23]. To expand its base in the Central Asian region, the *Al-Azim*, the ISKP’s media outlet is now publishing in Central Asian languages. The *Voice of Khorasan* (*Xuroson Ovozi*), the Uzbek language group on *Telegram* is now translating and publishing official statements from senior ISKP operatives [24].

Refugee crisis is yet another concern for the region. In 2023, the number of Afghan refugees increased by 741,400 to reach 6.4 million [25]. Afghan refugees are the third-largest displaced population in the world after Syrian and Ukrainian refugees [26]. Afghan refugees have often been used as a pawn by the neighbouring countries. Pakistan and Iran have forcibly deported over 400,000 refugees, 75 percent of which are from Pakistan since the beginning of 2024 [27]. Pakistan is using Afghan refugees to force *Taliban* to act against the TTP. At the 3rd Trans-Himalaya Forum for International Cooperation at China in October 2023, the issue of Afghan refugees dominated the discussions between *Taliban* and Pakistan.

The Central Asian countries also fear the influx of Afghan refugees after August 2021. Turkmenistan and *Taliban* have been in good terms. However, after *Taliban* seized a border checkpoint in southern *Mary* region and killed 18 servicemen in July 2021, Turkmenistan stationed heavy artillery along the borders [28]. After August 2021, Tajikistan stationed 100,000 soldiers and 130,000 reservists and Russian soldiers at the border that stretches about 1400 kilometres [29]. There are also reports that Tajikistan is also forcibly sending back Afghan refugees.

4. India and the Afghanistan Crisis

The bilateral ties disrupted during the first *Taliban* regime in the mid-nineties. The ties gradually improved after the fall of the *Taliban* regime in 2001. India post-2001 invested in infrastructure projects, capacity building, health and education and played a crucial role in the reconstruction process. Among many other projects built with Indian assistance, the inauguration of the *Salma* Dam in June 2016 and the Afghan Parliament building in December 2015 are the hallmark of the constructive role India played in the reconstruction process post-2001. India's assistance led to the completion of some of the major infrastructure projects like the *Zaranj-Delaram* road connecting Iran to Afghanistan, transmission line from *Pule-Khumri* to Kabul, substation at *Chimtala*. India also gifted three *Cheetal* helicopters in 2015 and four Mi25 Attack helicopters in 2016.

India was the largest regional donor and one of the leading donor countries after 2001. India was also the first strategic partner of Afghanistan with the two countries signing the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) in 2011. Economic relations remain a weak link in the relationship. During President Ghani's visit to India in 2016, the two countries intended to enhance the bilateral trade to US\$ 10 billion in the next five years. However, with *Taliban* back in power, India's ties with Afghanistan received a major setback. An unstable Afghanistan jeopardises India's security and economic interests.

4.1. Security Implications. India is worried about the security threats emanating from Afghanistan. India fears that a *Taliban* controlled Afghanistan will fuel militancy in Kashmir and anti-India groups based in Pakistan would gain assistance from *Taliban* and pose threat to India [30]. The presence of the ISKP and the *Al-Qaida* in the Indian Subcontinent further complicates the security landscape for India. In early 2021, the *Al-Qaida* in the Indian subcontinent changed the name of their magazine from *Nawai Afghan Jihad* (Voice of the Afghan Jihad) to *Nawai Ghazwat ul Hind* (Voice of the Conquest of India), indicating their new focus [31]. Earlier in 2017, the main foreign fighters contingent of 21 people who have joined the *Islamic State* (IS) from India went to Afghanistan and not to

Iraq or Syria, demonstrating the role of geographic proximity in the shaping the decisions of the *jihadists* [32]. In October 2021, the group released two videos through their media channels and on platforms like *Telegram* calling for armed conflict in India, especially in Kashmir [33].

The June 2022 deadly terror attack on the *Gurudwara Karte Parwan* in Kabul by ISKP is a grim reminder of the deteriorating security situation. The attack took place after a few days of a video message of ISKP warning an attack against Hindus to avenge the remarks against Prophet Mohammad by two former BJP functionaries [34]. Further, the ISKP had Indian Prime Minister on the cover of one of the editions of its mouthpiece and the cover page of the magazine *Voice of Khorasan*, which is *Khorasan* centric, mentioned that India is “between pain and hope” [35].

4.2. Economic Consequences. India-Afghanistan economic ties were evolving under the democratic government in Afghanistan post-2001. A key obstacle had been the absence of direct access. Pakistan denying Indian exports through the *Wagah* border and delay at *Karachi* port made trade cumbersome. Trade primarily took place through the *Karachi* port, Iranian port of *Bander Abbas* and Dubai. Today, trade takes place along these routes and through the *Chabahar* port in Iran.

The major Indian exports to Afghanistan include man-made filaments, apparels and clothing accessories, pharmaceutical products, cereals, man-made staple fibres, tobacco products, dairy and poultry products, coffee, tea, meat, and spices. Afghan exports to India primarily comprises of dry and fresh fruits, nuts, raisins, vegetables, oil seeds, precious, semi-precious stones, *etc.* During the period 2018-19 to 2023-24, the bilateral trade was US\$ 1,150.89 million, US\$ 1,527.42 million, US\$ 1,335.27 million, US\$ 1,065.40 million, US\$ 889.85 million and US\$ 997.74 million, respectively [36]. Back in March 2003, the two countries signed the ‘Preferential Trade Agreement’ that allowed 50-100 percent duty concessions to some categories of Afghan dry fruits. Indian tea, sugar, cement and pharmaceutical enjoyed similar concessions from Afghanistan. India was the main export market for Afghan goods after Pakistan.

However, the growing ties halted with the developments in the country since August 2021. About 85 percent of India’s dry fruits and most of the piquant spices are imported from Afghanistan [37]. Also, around 60 percent of India’s *hing* (*asafoetida*) supply comes from Afghanistan and in 2020-2021, Indian traders had to spend US\$ 100 million on supplies from Afghanistan [38]. Afghanistan also needs market for its products and cannot afford to lose the huge Indian market for dry fruits and spices like *hing*. From US\$ 1.5 billion trade in 2019-20, trade plummeted to US\$ 997.74 million in 2023-24.

Afghanistan has huge deposits of gold, copper, iron, barite, molybdenum, zinc, lead, chromite, *etc.* The three known hydrocarbon basins are: Afghan-Tajik, *Amu Darya* and *Tirpul*. There are two possible hydrocarbon basins: *Katawaz* and *Helmand*. The consortium led by SAIL won the bid for the *Hajigak* iron ore mine in Afghanistan in 2011. However, no agreement was inked between the two countries. Presently, in the given situation, investments and cooperation in the mining sector seems difficult.

Trade and connectivity are imperative for the war-torn economy of Afghanistan. Dependence on *Karachi* port for markets has always made Afghanistan vulnerable to pressures from Pakistan. For India, direct access to Afghanistan not only facilitates India's trade with Afghanistan but also gives India access to Central Asia. The tripartite agreement among India, Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016 to make the *Chabahar* port a transit hub bypassing Pakistan was significant initiative to boost trade and connectivity. The present conundrum in Afghanistan has questioned the feasibility of several regional and global connectivity projects traversing *via* Afghanistan.

Though *Taliban* has shown interest in the connectivity projects, however, the ongoing uncertainties raises doubts about the feasibility of the projects. One important example is the uncertain future of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which was once termed as the 'Peace Pipeline'. The TAPI project has been under discussion since the mid-1990s and it had the support of the *Taliban* regime then. However, the then situation had put the project on the backburner. The fall of the *Taliban* regime in 2001 rekindled the hope for the pipeline and some progress was made.

The present *Taliban* regime has again shown interest in building the pipeline. The *Taliban* Foreign Minister Amir Khan Mutaqqi visited Turkmenistan in February 2024 and expressed Afghanistan's willingness to start the pipeline. The pipeline is an opportunity for the *Taliban* to improve its image domestically and internationally. Earlier, in December 2021, the *Taliban* Ministry of Internal Affairs shared a plan for the security of the project with the Embassy of Turkmenistan in Kabul [39]. However, security threats make the project challenging. Also, non-recognition of the *Taliban* regime makes financing a difficult task.

Taliban had endorsed the May 2024 *Chabahar* Agreement between India and Iran. Back in 2016, India, Iran and Afghanistan signed the trilateral agreement to create the transport and transit corridor linking the three countries. The uncertainties in Afghanistan had slowed down the progress of the connectivity project. *Taliban* sees the port as an alternative to the *Karachi* port of Pakistan. *Taliban* spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid had

said that “*Chabahar* Port represents a transformative opportunity for Afghanistan, offering enhanced trade connectivity, economic diversification, and regional integration,” [40] reflecting *Taliban*’s intent to engage in improving regional connectivity.

4.3. India and Taliban 2.0. Immediately after the fall of the Ghani government, India closed its embassy in Afghanistan and carried out rescue operation for stranded Indians under ‘Operation Devi Shakti’. An Indian technical team was stationed at Kabul to disburse aid since June 2022. India has shipped humanitarian assistance consisting of 50,000 MTs of wheat, 250 tons of medical aid and 28 tons of earthquake relief aid [41]. India has supplied 11,000 units of hygiene kits, baby food, blankets, clothing, medical aid, and other items to United Nations Office of Drug Control in Kabul [42]. Since the *Taliban* take over in 2021, India has been cautiously dealing with the group. India like other countries has not recognized the *Taliban* government but is engaged with the group. Today, the *Taliban* as a political force is a reality that cannot be ignored. India has limited engagement with the *de-facto* regime in Afghanistan. Unlike the past, Indian diplomats are now directly interacting with the *Taliban* administration under ‘various format’ despite not formally recognizing the government. An Indian delegation participated in the Regional Cooperation Initiative meeting organized by *Taliban* at Kabul on 29 January 2024. The meeting attended by Turkey, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Indonesia aimed at greater regional engagement and cooperation. India is among the 25 countries that participated in the UN led conference on Afghanistan at Doha on 30 June 2024. It is the first time that *Taliban* attended the talk, which aimed at finding a way to improve the lives of the Afghans under the *Taliban* regime. A senior Indian diplomat met the *Taliban* Foreign Minister in March 2024 at Kabul for the first time. An Indian delegation led by J. P. Singh, Joint Secretary, Government of India met the acting Defence Minister of Afghanistan Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob in November 2024.

India’s interaction with the *Taliban*, though a practical move in the current geo-political spectre has not gone down well with the Afghan people, especially the women. Cancellation of visas for the Afghan students forced many students who had gone for their break being stranded in *Taliban* controlled Afghanistan. Security concerns forced India to take such steps. India cannot afford to lose the goodwill of the Afghan people and thus need to regain the confidence of the people by addressing the present humanitarian concerns. At the given juncture, it is pragmatic for India to remain engaged with the *Taliban*. However, India’s ties with the *Taliban* will be dependent on the assurance from the *Taliban* that India’s security shall not be compromised. Given the complex geo-political and security challenges, India needs to move cautiously.

5. Conclusion

The regional countries as major stakeholders are bearing the brunt of the mounting uncertainties in Afghanistan. Engaging with the *Taliban* is a necessity for the regional countries. Cooperation among regional countries is critical to address the ongoing crisis. Regional countries can push for a concerted pressure on *Taliban* to address their poor human rights records, particularly the condition of women and children. Silence on the part of the regional countries will be detrimental to their long term-security and economic interests.

Also, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a regional group needs to play a proactive role. However, there are strong differences among the member countries' approach to deal with the *Taliban*. For example, Tajikistan has been vocal against the *Taliban* regime, while China and Russia have taken a more pragmatic approach of engaging with *Taliban*. India-Pakistan conflict and their equation with the *Taliban* impedes regional consensus. Despite these differences, it is of utmost importance that the SCO comes out with a clear strategy to deal with the Afghan crisis. The 'Astana Declaration' of 2024 had proposed setting up of a UN Regional Centre for Sustainable Development for Central Asia and Afghanistan in Almaty and for developing a security belt around Afghanistan. Speedy implementation of these initiatives and continuous interaction among the stakeholders is vital at this critical juncture of Afghan history.

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