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# Analysis: The Current State of Affairs in Afghanistan

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HEART OF ASIA SOCIETY

## About HAS

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The Heart of Asia Society works through research, dialogue, and policy analysis and remains dedicated to a vision of Afghanistan that safeguards the rights of men and women of all ethnicities and religions, respects and values diversity, and promotes inclusivity and agency for its citizens. HAS also works with partners in Canada, the US, Europe, and the Pacific, urging them to remain engaged and advance peace, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan and the region.

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Jawed Ludin is the founder and president of the Heart of Asia Society and has a diverse career spanning government, the private sector, and academia. In 2003, he entered politics and served in various high-level positions in the Afghan government until 2013, including as Presidential Spokesman, Chief of Staff to President Karzai, and Deputy Foreign Minister. He also served as Afghanistan's Ambassador to the Nordic Countries and Ambassador to Canada.

## Overview

As millions of Afghans open their hearts to a much-awaited spring season, the optimism is dampened by continued hardship, as well as anxiety about the future. Accounts of the true level of suffering caused by extreme poverty and hunger during the winter months are varied and inconclusive – the lack of reliable statistics being a major problem. Nonetheless, there is a shared sense of relief that the winter may have gone by without leaving behind a massive trail of death and displacement as was predicted last autumn.

Despite the enormous complexity of dealing with an unrecognised, heavily sanctioned Taliban government, the UN and the wider humanitarian community have been able to mobilise a largescale relief and life-saving operation. Donor response to last autumn's UN appeal, coupled with a great deal of pragmatism from all actors involved and, above all, the Afghan society's inherent strengths and coping mechanisms, are key reasons why the worst disaster may have been avoided. The continued inflow of remittances from Afghans abroad, despite the failure of the banking system, has also played a major role. In the months ahead, the humanitarian crisis will deepen further due to continued economic decline, unless a significant change of circumstances, such as a healthy agricultural yield in the coming harvest or a relative easing of economic conditions generally, occurs.

The Taliban's recent imposition of restrictions on rights and freedoms comes after a period of relative calm. For weeks, the dominant narrative by the Taliban suggested a tendency to reform and engage, creating the impression that certain aspects of life in Afghanistan under the Taliban might be returning to some degree of normalcy. Then, in a sudden and baffling change of heart, the month of March saw the Taliban shunning international engagement and abrogating certain unspoken understandings about their approach to governing Afghanistan. Most notably, on March 23, the Taliban announced<sup>1</sup> that girl students above grade 6 would not be allowed to return to school as had been promised earlier. In what appeared as an utter disregard for the aspirations of an entire nation or the negative consequences of their action, the Taliban went further. They introduced a host of other draconian rules<sup>2</sup>, for instance, banning women's unaccompanied travel, men's shaving facial hair, and many instructions on the separation of the sexes in the public and academic spheres<sup>3</sup>. This radical move has been accompanied by a further crackdown on media outlets<sup>4, 5</sup>, including the BBC and DW's

local language outlets<sup>6</sup> – although it is believed that the international media corps in Kabul is treated more cautiously.

Many observers connect the unexpected change in the Taliban stance on key issues of policy and governance with a special meeting in Kandahar of the Taliban’s cabinet from March 20-22. The meeting, supposedly presided over by the Supreme Leader, Mullah Hebatullah Akhundzada, attended by other major Taliban ideologues, is believed to have come up with some major decisions, including a shake-up of the government structure in Kabul, as well as a hardening stance on girls’ education and women’s role in society among others. Shrouded in mystery and secrecy, not much is known about the Kandahar meeting. Given its timing, the sudden shift in the Taliban’s position on domestic governance and engagement with the international community can be traced back to that meeting.

Under the circumstances, the prospects of sustained international engagement and support, while critical for Afghanistan’s economic survival, remain highly uncertain. In particular, the role of the United States, Europe and the Western bloc in general – already reduced in scale to a sliver of what it had been over the past two decades – is expected to diminish significantly. On the one hand, the pressure of other competing demands, notably the war in Ukraine, will continue to drive down Western engagement in Afghanistan. More critically, Western engagement will be predicated on the Taliban’s choices as they continue to exercise their rule over Afghanistan. The modest outcome of the recent pledging conference in Geneva<sup>7</sup> (March 31<sup>st</sup>) proves that Afghanistan cannot take continued donor commitment for granted.

At the regional level, the picture is more nuanced. Yet a clear emerging trend shows a widening rift between the regional and the Western-led international approaches to Afghanistan. While the Western bloc maybe pausing to contemplate a response to the recent setback in Taliban engagement, the regional countries appear to be intensifying engagement. Judging by statements from China and other countries at the recent meeting of regional foreign ministers in the Chinese city of Tunxi<sup>8</sup>, which incidentally happened on the same day as the UK-sponsored donor’s meeting in Geneva, the prospects for recognition of the Taliban government by certain regional powers may be more imminent than previously thought. However, given the continued differences in vision and approaches at the regional level about Afghanistan’s future, it is unlikely that any recognition will come as a collective decision or happen soon.

## The Political Situation

Thanks to how the Afghan Republic fell in August 2021, the Taliban received a clean slate in power. They could have used the opportunity to craft a new, inclusive and stable political dispensation for Afghanistan. The remnants of the defeated *ancien regime* were neither able nor expected to be part of a future political setup with the Taliban. However, Afghanistan's political community is much more extensive and very diverse and has every right to participate in the country's political future. The Taliban have always enjoyed only a narrow base in the Afghan society, so its ability to acquire legitimacy and assume the role of a responsible government at a time of unprecedented hardship depended critically on becoming inclusive.

For months now, rumours have abounded about a country-wide consultation process taking place with a view to convening a major assembly of mullahs and religious scholars to decide on significant national matters and serve as a legitimising mechanism for the Taliban government. While emphatically not a Loya Jirga, such an assembly was rumoured to take the shape of a National Ulema Council (council of Islamic scholars) but it would also include some technocratic elements, such as university professors. Months have gone by and decisions on national matters continue to be made by the Taliban's mysterious, exclusionary political leadership, and no signs of broad consultations or a national assembly have materialized yet.

More recently, rumours also circulated about the Taliban's intention to appoint a new cabinet in the spring, a cabinet that would be inclusive and more technically qualified. There was an expectation that significant leadership changes might be introduced. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the key figure behind the Taliban's engagement with the international community, was expected to replace the reclusive and rigidly conservative Mullah Hassan Akhund as the Taliban's Prime Minister. More broadly, having come under pressure for failure to handle matters of governance in an effective manner, notably the crisis in the Central Bank but also other priorities, there was the expectation that the Taliban would see the inclusion of non-Taliban, technocratic figures not as a matter of choice but a necessity. So, when the Taliban convened their special cabinet meeting in Kandahar on March 21-22, many saw this as the place and time where the widely expected changes would be announced. However, other than the

decision to continue the ban on girls' education, the Kandahar meeting appears to have gone without any notable outcome.

In February, a special, high-level commission was appointed and tasked to convince and facilitate the return of Afghans who had had to flee after the Taliban takeover<sup>9</sup>. This initiative was interpreted as a step to formalise an outreach process by the Taliban which had been going on ever since their rise to power in August. Weeks have passed since this announcement was made but, with the exception of a small number of mid-ranking former officials associated with Ghani's government, who are believed to have returned to Kabul, ostensibly for the pursuit of business agendas, no step has been taken to invite influential Afghans to return to the country. On the contrary, there are confirmed reports that the Taliban have rejected requests by some high-ranking former officials to return home. There is also evidence that the handful of mid-ranking technocrats who had remained in the government after the Taliban takeover is increasingly coming under pressure to leave.

Overall, the evidence shows that despite their rhetoric, the Taliban made no serious attempt to enhance their political legitimacy at home. Their position on the inclusivity agenda appears to have become increasingly harder over time. The expectation that the Taliban's relative success in consolidating their power across Afghanistan would translate into a growing sense of confidence, making them more amenable to inclusivity, has not materialised as the Taliban continue to show characteristics of insecurity, anxiety and intolerance. When faced with occasional attacks and resistance from communities in the north of Kabul, a more confident government would have engaged those communities in dialogue, offering a path to reconciliation and inclusion. The Taliban did the opposite: launching a heavy-handed campaign of house searches, largely targeting the Tajik communities in the north of Kabul<sup>10</sup>. The operation was subsequently extended to other parts of Kabul and dubbed a regular measure to collect illegal weapons. However, the initial desperate and ethnically motivated character of the step betrayed the Taliban's deep-seated sense of insecurity.

However, despite the utter lack of progress on the inclusivity agenda, many observers inside Afghanistan and outside have remained optimistic about the gradual opening of the Taliban through a process of engagement and dialogue. This optimism took a serious blow on March 23 – the day the Taliban had promised all schools across Afghanistan would open to both boys and girls of all ages but abruptly reversed its decision. In badly timing this radical policy shift to coincide with the donor conference

in Switzerland and another critically important regional meeting in China, the Taliban appeared to shoot themselves in the foot. Every responsible government in the region and internationally would see this move either as a sign of total disregard for international engagement, or lacking the minimum rationality as a state actor, or both.

The Taliban's inexplicable hardening of position on all important issues to the Afghan people presages a dangerous future for the regime. So far, militarily the Taliban rule has gone fairly unchallenged in Afghanistan and the notion of resistance has failed to gain traction. However, it is only a matter of time when those dynamics change and the small and sporadic armed opposition, feeding on the massive undercurrent of resentment, erupts into a violent opposition. When and how such a resistance in the future will materialise, and under the purview of which group, is unknown.

Currently, the NRF (National Resistance Front) is small and too heavily focused on a military solution to claim the role of an overarching political umbrella for opposition to the Taliban. There are reports that Ahmad Masoud is increasingly becoming conscious of the need to broaden the NRF's political base and beginning to do so by reaching out to other, mainly non-Tajik, leaders for support. Meanwhile, several other groups are also slowly taking shape. Among them is expected to be a newly formed alliance of the major Jihadi leaders, often pejoratively referred to as the "warlords." A key challenge that has prevented the emergence of such a group is the absence of a geographical base. While former President Hamid Karzai and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, both of whom might serve as key figures and catalysts for forming such an opposition group, are under de facto house arrest in Kabul. Other leaders are spread in different parts of the region, including India, Turkey, Uzbekistan, the UAE, and Europe. So far, none of the regional countries is willing to offer space, let alone facilitation, to help establish such an opposition umbrella. Therefore, it is likely that a European country, perhaps Germany or Italy, might emerge as a possible geographical base for an Afghan political group led by the diaspora.

Finally, the real opposition so far to the Taliban's rule and policies has come not from any organised political or resistance group but a loosely connected, hitherto unknown groups of activists from among Afghanistan's younger generation in the civil society, particularly women. Staging peaceful protests on the streets of Kabul and other cities, and acts of civil disobedience have been the most potent exercises of opposition to the Taliban rule that we have seen. In recognition of this potential threat, the Taliban has increasingly adopted a harsher approach to suppressing civil society opposition.



Imprisoning and killing activists, notably women, and cracking down on media may appear excessive and unnecessary, but the Taliban see them as appropriate measures against what they rightly perceive as the biggest threat they face to their rule in Afghanistan.

## **The Security Situation**

Since coming to power, the Taliban has tried to promote a narrative about ending the war and bringing security to the country to claim legitimacy. Undoubtedly, there is some truth to the Taliban's claim about security. Overall, the level of violence in the country has gone down. Travel has become safe across the country. The UN has recently acknowledged that the level of security and accessibility enjoyed by aid and humanitarian actors throughout Afghanistan is unprecedented and certainly greater than at any time during the past twenty years.

However, despite some positive changes in security, there is a deeply unsettling dimension to the notion of security established by the Taliban. The war has indeed ended, at least in the shape and format it was fought for many years, but the Taliban's victory has not engendered a sense of real security and peace among people. Fewer lives may be lost to violent conflict today, but widespread criminality, desperate poverty, and arbitrary and coercive use of power by the de facto government itself continue to take a heavy toll in terms of death, displacement, and suffering of the Afghan people.

Part of the challenge of gauging the security climate comes from the absence of reliable reporting of security incidents. The Taliban's crackdown on independent media has significantly diminished access to information. Social media outlets remain almost the only source of information. However, the access and accuracy of social media reporting is also seriously hampered by the fact that most Afghans enjoying credibility as social media operators now live outside the country.

Overall, despite the Taliban's claims about ending the war and bringing security, in reality, there is a deep and widespread sense of apprehension among Afghans about the present juncture being a potential turning to a new chapter of the war. The Taliban's

failure to win international recognition has only increased this apprehension about the inevitability of conflict.

What is unknown, however, is where a possible challenge to the Taliban's military control might come from. It is small and limited in scope, but it has shown signs of resilience and, in recent weeks, has claimed credit for an increased number of attacks against Taliban forces in several parts of Afghanistan, including Badakhshan, Kapisa, Panjshir, Parwan, Baghlan, Herat, Jalalabad, and Kabul. Some of these attacks may well be carried out by localised resistance in areas without connection to the NRF. With the onset of warm weather this spring, it is possible to expect attacks, larger in number and scale, against the Taliban forces in different parts of the country.

Another major security threat that the Taliban face – one that is more potent than the NRF – comes from the ISKP (Islamic State – Khorasan Province), which is gaining ground in Afghanistan at an alarming rate. Unable or unwilling to confront the Taliban in a military face-off, ISKP has instead focused on mounting sectarian terrorist attacks against Afghanistan's Shia and Hazara communities. Most ISKP attacks may not be targeting the Taliban forces directly. Still, they fundamentally undermine the Taliban's narrative about ending the war and bringing peace to Afghanistan, which lies at the heart of the Taliban's claim to legitimacy as a government.

Looking ahead, the threat from ISKP is only likely to increase over time. It is currently the only militant group in Afghanistan growing in strength, enjoying a high recruitment rate among the youth, notably in the urban centres. In particular, the ISKP is also believed to be gaining ground rapidly among Afghanistan's ethnic Tajik and Uzbek communities, creating a potential space for convergence with other ethnically motivated resistance groups, such as the NRF. While there is no evidence suggesting possible cooperation between the NRF and ISKP, it would be unwise to dismiss it as a potential trend and a convenient option for both outfits. There are also suggestions that the Taliban's ruthless persecution of certain contingents of the former ANDSF (Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces), notably the special forces, the commandos, and the air force, has driven former members of these groups to join the ISKP and NRF. These contingents will not only bring highly valued military expertise but will also serve as magnets for wider recruitment by their new patrons.

A further security threat to the Taliban's government comes from the potential eruption of the deeply rooted divisions within the group itself. The current Taliban

government is believed to be founded on a shaky alliance between the Taliban's traditional southern heartland and the so-called Haqqani Network. In February, Sarajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban's Interior Minister and leader of the Haqqani Network appeared in public for the first time, dubbed by some as a sign of growing Taliban confidence. However, the appearance also took place at a time of heightened political rivalry among Taliban factions. It is possible that Mr. Haqqani's decision to appear in public was more linked to those dynamics rather than anything else. Given that the division between these groups is not just limited to the political level but runs deep down the ranks, it can be expected that a serious political fallout could potentially lead to a full-scale military conflict. For the time being, however, the potential for such division and possible conflict within the Taliban ranks must not be exaggerated, given the history of constructive co-existence and collaboration among the various factions under the single ideological rubric of the Taliban movement.

## Regional Security Dynamics

Beyond the domestic factors for instability and conflict, there are also external factors. Given regional security dynamics and the Taliban's failure to provide dependable guarantees to its neighbours and regional powers, there is a growing sense of inevitability about a military crisis in the not-too-distant future. A case to watch would be Pakistan, a country at the forefront of support and advocacy for the Taliban government. While Pakistan remains the most critical regional player with influence over the Taliban, a significant wedge has now developed between that country and the Taliban, primarily over the latter's relationship with the TTP (Tehreek e Taliban e Pakistan). The Taliban shares deep tribal, ideological, and political ties with the Pakistani militant outfit and, as a result, has found it impractical to move, at the behest of the Pakistani government, against TTP's leadership and sanctuaries, some of which are allegedly inside Afghanistan. While presumably angry and annoyed by what they see as Taliban intransigence, the Pakistani military establishment considers the rift as a minor tactical glitch rather than a strategic rupture with the Taliban. However, given the Taliban's history and the evidence of a growing anti-Pakistani sentiment among the Taliban, it is only a matter of time when Pakistan might be drawn into a military intervention to safeguard its security interest in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

A similar trend may be expected in the case of other neighbours of Afghanistan whose security may be threatened by potential risks emanating from the presence of their outlaw, radical outfits inside Afghanistan. However, unlike the TTP, which is joined in the hip with the Taliban, other regional outfits, while ideologically aligned, do not share kinship bonds with the Taliban and, therefore, are less likely to receive a comparable level of support in Afghanistan. In fact, over the past six months, the Taliban government is believed to have cooperated quite effectively with China, Russia, and the Central Asian States on the issue of counter-terrorism, including the summary extradition of prisoners and wanted persons belonging to those countries. This explains the largely hopeful attitude that Afghanistan's northern neighbours, even including Tajikistan, have adopted towards the Taliban in recent months.

Finally, perhaps an important unresolved security question in today's Afghanistan is the role of the United States and the NATO alliance. Currently, the only guarantee that the US has managed to obtain that Afghanistan would not be used to stage a threat to the US and its interests and allies in the future comes from the Doha Agreement of February 2020. In the absence of another instrument, the US will continue to hold the Taliban accountable for its commitments under the Doha Agreement. However, the Taliban will likely subject their continued adherence to the question of formal recognition, which, in turn, has become a complicated matter. This 'catch 22' scenario bodes ill for both the US and the Taliban, as the stakes are high, but there is insufficient clarity about each party's obligation and any potential consequence in case of failure to comply. The question that remains is what options and assets will the US have and utilise if it perceives a threat from Afghanistan, but the Taliban refuse to cooperate? It is widely believed that American unmanned aircraft continuously operate inside Afghanistan, presumably without the Taliban's express consent. It is yet to be seen to what extent, and until what time, will those assets be able to operate and be effective when that action is required.

## **The Economy and Humanitarian Situation**

With a heavily sanctioned government and an economy practically severed from the international market, Afghanistan today faces the real prospect of profound isolation, similar to the situation in the 1990s. Even before the Taliban took power and

effectively cut off Afghanistan from the outside world, the country's economy was in crisis. Poverty was rife; over half of the population faced the risk of hunger and malnutrition; the Afghan economy was heavily dependent on foreign aid – almost half of the GDP<sup>11</sup> and over 75% of public spending<sup>12</sup>, including 90% of security spending and 50% of the government's civilian ordinary budget, came from foreign aid.

One can only imagine the devastating impact when the plug is pulled on any country so heavily reliant on only one source of income. Predictably, the impact on the Afghan economy has been devastating. The entire public sector grounded to a halt, and hundreds of thousands lost their jobs. The banking sector collapsed while the traditional Hawala system saw a significant resurgence<sup>13</sup>. Private sector investment, already under deep strain due to rampant corruption and mismanagement under the Ghani era, disappeared and has only recently started trickling back in small measures.

After months of pressure about unfreezing the seven billion dollars in foreign currency reserves belonging to Afghanistan's Central Bank deposited in several American banks, US President Joe Biden finally issued an executive order on February 11<sup>14</sup>, splitting the money into two equal tranches. One tranche was set aside for humanitarian aid. The other half was set aside for potential expropriation by US courts that have been engaged for months in civil litigation cases by some of the 9/11 victims' families<sup>15</sup>. Subsequently, the Biden administration attempted to explain the rationale for the executive order and that the decision was made in the best interest of the Afghan people. However, all Afghans, not least the Taliban, expressed outrage at the arbitrary and heavy-handed way the US was seen handling a sovereign country's deposits in American banks<sup>16</sup>.

With the American announcement concerning the Central Bank assets, the financial market in Afghanistan was expected to fall into further turmoil. However, the continued relative stability of commodity prices and the currency exchange market in Afghanistan, and the surprisingly slow rise in the inflation rate, have defied such predictions. However, in economists' views, these elusive signs of relative stability in the financial sector result from unusual factors, such as the limited supply of the Afghani currency and a shortage generally of fluidity in the market. To observe the real, tangible impact of these changes, one has to look closer at Afghan consumers whose access to money and consequently the ability to buy commodities has drastically reduced, further inflaming the humanitarian emergency in the country.

Speaking of the humanitarian situation, over the past winter, a humanitarian disaster may have been averted, thanks to a forcefully driven humanitarian campaign led by the United Nations and funded predominantly by Western donors. However, the future of continued international commitment remains deeply doubtful. Last week's UK-sponsored donor conference in Geneva, convened to raise \$4.4 billion<sup>7</sup> for the United Nations humanitarian appeal, fell short of meeting its target by almost half, raising only \$2.44 billion<sup>8</sup> in pledges. Clearly, in addition to the war in Ukraine, the Taliban's flawed and misguided policy pronouncements have had a significant impact on this shortfall in donor pledges.

Crucially, this also happens when the humanitarian situation remains dire. Afghanistan continues to have one of the largest populations at risk of starvation (9 million) and chronic hunger (23 million) globally, and it will need large-scale humanitarian aid over the foreseeable future<sup>9</sup>. In the coming months, the humanitarian crisis is likely to bite deeper as the country's economy continues to decline. There is a glimmer of hope that the relatively heavy snowfall in the winter would ensure a healthy harvest this coming season, but even that is expected to have a limited impact given the sheer scale of economic deprivation.

Over the medium to long term, humanitarian aid will have to be augmented by real growth measures in the country's economy. Hard to say where such growth will come from when the country remains poor, bankrupt, and isolated. Trade with the region and exploitation of the country's minerals and natural resources are two candidates for potential growth. Trade has recently recovered after initially dropping by half in the early weeks of the Taliban government, mainly due to the closure of borders. However, trade remains highly reliant on imports. In contrast, the export market is largely limited to the shadow economy, involving the drug industry and illegal exports of legal commodities, such as mining products and natural resources.

Ultimately, the surest path to economic recovery for Afghanistan lies in the prospect of integration with the region. Despite much unfounded rhetoric and cliched promises for 20 years, Afghanistan's connectivity and integration with the region have remained a chimera – a set of lofty ideas and projects, such as energy pipelines and railway corridors, which have failed to materialise and will likely never do. Indeed, at a realistic level, it is hard to imagine any of such transformative infrastructure projects being implemented now that the world's biggest funding powers from the West are no longer invested in Afghanistan. While Western engagement is likely to remain solely focused

on immediate humanitarian assistance and heavily sensitive to the Taliban's social policies, Afghanistan's best hope of economic connectivity today would be to attract regional investors who might be lured by the potential benefits of Afghanistan's mines and natural resources. Reports indicate that Turkish, Pakistani, Chinese, and Central Asia companies may already be on the ground exploring such opportunities.

## **Regional and International Dimension**

Today, Afghanistan is the only country with a de facto government that is not recognised by any other country. However, this state of de jure isolation has not prevented the rather extensive level of de facto interaction that the Taliban have had with the outside world since it came to power seven months ago. While consistently shunning any meaningful engagement with fellow Afghans, the Taliban have invested significant energy and time in engaging with the international community, primarily driven by the goal of achieving recognition but also to engaging international backing and support, including from the United States and Europe, for their government. Taliban's leaders have shown considerable diplomatic tenacity, carefully tailoring messages to respective audiences and playing to the hopes and fears of each interlocutor.

As a result, a significant level of engagement exists, despite occasional strains and setbacks on the diplomatic front. While formal recognition has not been achieved, many regional countries have accorded the de facto government the requisite treatment of formal diplomatic relations. Some regional countries, including China<sup>20</sup>, Pakistan<sup>21</sup>, Turkmenistan, and Russia, have already accepted and granted visas to Taliban-appointed diplomats. Beyond the region, too, the EU has established a presence on the ground, and the OIC has opened its office in Kabul, although rumours of the potential reopening of major European embassies, such as Germany, appeared to have been exaggerated.

Despite the massive decline in its leverage over Afghan affairs, the United States remains the biggest diplomatic player. The level of official engagement in Washington D.C. has declined significantly, especially after the Ukraine crisis, but the US government still has a strong team that continues to engage the Taliban, regional interlocutors, and

international allies. America's European allies have also maintained a relatively good level of engagement.

It is important to note that, even before the recent fallout over girls' education, the West's engagement with the Taliban was fraught with issues and challenges. To begin with, there is the challenge of logistics. With practically all Western embassies closed in Kabul, countries have relied on somewhat limited opportunities, offered by official trips to Kabul or meetings organized in Doha, thanks to Qatar's continued good offices, or occasional meetings elsewhere in the region, to conduct business with the Taliban.

Then there is the question of agenda and the goal of engagement. Besides the humanitarian crisis, which has provided a coherent agenda for engagement, there has not been sufficient clarity or visibility about other issues. For the US, slow progress on fundamental issues, such as counter-terrorism assurances (Taliban are yet to distance themselves from Al Qaida, for instance), political inclusivity, human rights, and so on, has been a constant source of frustration. For many Europeans, the problem is even bigger – as most of them find it challenging to meaningfully engage with a government, a significant part of whose leaders are currently under international sanctions. European countries also believe they have existential reasons than the US to fear a complete collapse in Afghanistan – terrorism, migration, and the drugs menace being obvious examples, which is why Europe has generally shown more consistency in the engagement agenda.

Another major factor in the West's dealing with the Taliban is the absence of veritable leverage they could bring to bear on the Taliban to achieve their policy goals. The Taliban typically do not respond well to pressure, threats, or promises of aid. Over the past seven months, they keenly pursued two or three priorities in their diplomacy with the West – achieving recognition, the release of the frozen Central Bank assets, and, perhaps, lifting sanctions. Consequently, we might be seeing the Taliban beginning to play hardball more than hitherto observed. The recent retreat on girls' education and media freedom, central to Western engagement, may begin such a trend. Western countries, in their turn, are beginning to realise that their months-long, cautious to the point of appeasing engagement of the Taliban have also produced not much result. We might well see a stiffening of diplomatic language from Western capitals, the likes of which were heard at the donors' conference in Geneva. This will reinforce the eventual breakdown of a relationship that has no realistic prospects of succeeding anyway.



On the other hand, the regional engagement has been somewhat more productive, thanks in part to the significant on-the-ground diplomatic presence of most regional countries, notably Pakistan, Iran, Russia, Qatar, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and China. In recent months, in what appears to be a strategy to counterbalance a potential rupture in relations with the US and Europe, the Taliban have focused more on cultivating good, positive, cooperative relations with the region. The recent ban on poppy cultivation and drug production, a consistent crackdown on regional militant outfits, facilitation of several connectivity initiatives, including trade links between Central Asia and Pakistan and India, and finally, high-level exchanges taking place in Kabul (note the visit to Kabul by China's foreign minister on March 24<sup>2</sup>) and various regional capitals (Ankara, Doha, Islamabad, Tehran, Tunxi), all these are examples of Taliban's attempt to prepare for the worst outcome in terms of relations with the West and the decline of Western aid money.

In recent days, China has been most vocal in support of the need for the international community's recognition of the Taliban government, arguing that the Taliban's promise to deliver stability should not be made subservient to the demands for inclusivity. Russia also supports recognition but attaches importance to inclusivity, as does Iran. Central Asians have close engagement but will not be the first to recognise the Taliban. An interesting country to watch would be Turkey – a medium size player with extensive reach and a bold foreign policy tradition and currently engaged on so many fronts in the region.

This is not to say that there are no frictions among regional countries regarding engaging the Taliban. Pakistan, crucially, appears to be pausing to re-evaluate its position on the Taliban. The Taliban's problematic relationship with the TTP and its inability to deliver on Pakistan's security demands appear to have angered the Pakistani establishment. However, it is not clear whether this irritation has the potential to cause a serious rupture in what is undoubtedly the most strategic relationship the Taliban has with any country in the world. India and Tajikistan are countries generally considered irreconcilable with the Taliban, although both are believed to have sent signals for reproachment in recent months. In a surprise move in late December 2021, Tajikistan formally signed an extension to a contract to sell electricity to the Taliban government<sup>3</sup>. India has recently supplemented its desire to establish contact with the Taliban for wheat donation to Afghanistan and sending trade consignments to Central Asia via Afghanistan. Among the Arab world, Qatar is the only country that is intensely engaged in Afghanistan's developments. Saudi Arabia, the UAE,

and Egypt are the more powerful Arab players with a tradition of major influence in Afghanistan. However, these players are currently on the fringes of ongoing diplomatic efforts.

Today, Afghanistan's foreign policy can be summarised as shifting from global engagement to regional geopolitics to inevitable isolation. After an initial period of playing a difficult balancing game involving global powers and regional actors, the Taliban's pendulum appears now to rest on the region. It is even possible that there is a calculated strategy behind the seemingly irrational Taliban behaviour in recent weeks to squeeze out all vestiges of Western interest in Afghanistan, paving the way for regional interests that are arguably less intrusive to Taliban rule. The next step would be isolation, like in the 1990s.

## Endnotes

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