



# *Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover: Assessment of Regional Powers and Indian Interests*

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## *Executive Summary*

This report argues that the Taliban victory in Afghanistan will impact the regional geopolitical dynamics and the interests of major regional powers. During the insurgency phase, most regional powers had maintained differential support to the Taliban to facilitate a common objective of the US withdrawal. However, the factional rivalries in a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan make it likely that the interests of regional powers would start diverging significantly. This report also examines India's interests in the region – the impact of Taliban victory on the Islamist insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir and New Delhi's access and influence in Central Asia – which are likely to face challenges in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

Keeping this in mind, this paper argues the following:

1. India should cultivate a working relationship with the nationalist sections of the Taliban to take advantage of Islamabad's growing inability to dominate Afghanistan.
2. India must continue to invest in counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation capabilities to offset the Jihadi threat to Jammu and Kashmir.
3. A close partnership with Tehran would allow New Delhi to utilise the Iranian influence in the Taliban to contain the influence of pro-ISI Taliban groups and regain its trade access to Afghanistan.
4. New Delhi must use all the tools available to encourage China to ensure political stability in Afghanistan.
5. India must act to strengthen and expand its role of being a maritime security provider in the northern Indo-Pacific.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Taliban Victory and the Aftermath	2
1.1 Nature of the Taliban Victory	2
1.2 Prospects of Intra-Taliban Struggle	3
2. Interests of the Regional Powers	7
2.1 China	7
2.1.1 Security Interest	7
2.1.2 Potential for BRI Expansion	9
2.2 Iran	9
2.2.1 Strategic Partnership with Taliban	9
2.2.2 Connection with Helmand and Herat– Dam, Drugs and Trade	10
2.3 Pakistan	11
2.3.1 Destabilising Pashtunistan	11
2.3.2 Threat from TTP	12
2.3.3 Access to Central Asia	13
2.4 Russia	13
2.4.1 Regional Stability	14
2.4.2 Curbing the Drug Menace	14
3. Indian Interests in Afghanistan	15
3.1 Terrorist Threat in Jammu and Kashmir	15
3.2 Investment and Influence in Afghanistan	15
3.3 Connectivity with Central Asia	16
4. Recommendations for Indian Policy Makers	17
4.1 Engagement and Working Relationship with Taliban	17
4.2 Containing the Jihadi Threat: Investing in Counter-Terrorism & Counter-Radicalisation	18
4.3 Working with Iran	18
4.4 Making China stabilise Afghanistan	19
4.5 Focus on the Indo-Pacific	19

## *List of abbreviations:*

- ANDSF – Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
- BRI – Belt and Road Initiative
- CNPC – China National Petroleum Corporation
- CPEC – China–Pakistan Economic Corridor
- EAM – External Affairs Minister
- ETIM – East Turkestan Islamic Movement
- FATA – Federally Administered Tribal Areas
- IMU – Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
- IRGC – Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
- ISAF – International Security Assistance Force
- ISI – Inter-Services Intelligence
- IS-K – Islamic State – Khorasan Province
- JeM – Jaish-e-Mohammed
- LeT – Lashkar-e-Taiba
- MJC – Military Jihadi Complex
- PLA – People's Liberation Army
- PoK – Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir
- PTM – Pashtun Tahafuz Movement
- R&AW – Research and Analysis Wing
- SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
- TTP – Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
- UNSC – United Nations Security Council

# *1. Taliban Victory and the Aftermath<sup>1</sup>*

## 1.1 Nature of the Taliban Victory

On August 15, the Taliban entered Kabul and took de-facto control of the city, which is home to more than 4.4 million people. The Taliban had made spectacular gains outside of Kabul since the start of its military offensive on May 1, 2021. Preliminary assessments suggest that the failure of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to counter the Taliban offensive was made possible due to the absence of active US intelligence, combat troop support, airpower, and contractors, on which the ANDSF had relied upon since the ISAF withdrawal in 2014<sup>1</sup>. The Afghan Special Forces' reliance on airpower to support ground operations started impacting their operations once the Taliban began a targeted campaign to assassinate ANDSF pilots<sup>2</sup>. Notably, the false military balance that existed on paper could not change the ground reality, which is that the Taliban had been increasing the areas under its control since 2015.

In this regard, the Doha Deal signed in February 2020 hurt the already dwindling legitimacy of the Kabul government and boosted the narrative of an eventual Taliban victory. Further, the Taliban employed a “carrot or kill” strategy coupled with a sophisticated social media campaign that used pictures and videos of surrendered Afghan soldiers to weaken the will of the Afghan soldiers to fight. For the ANDSF, it became prudent to choose the carrots offered by the Taliban. This, in turn, produced a cascading effect on the force's morale, particularly once their leaders started disembarking the sinking ship<sup>3</sup>.

The Islamic Republic, which was institutionalised in 2004, could not bridge the Pashtun versus non-Pashtun divide<sup>4</sup>. Since 2009, three successive presidential elections were marred by vote-rigging, voter fraud and disputed outcomes. This had a tremendous impact on governance as the Republic's politicians and the warlords consistently fought over resources, governorships and ministerial berths, leading to large-scale corruption in government-held areas. The last Presidential election held in September 2019 also produced a disputed outcome, following which both Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah established their separate governments. The dispute could only be resolved in May 2020, three months after the US signed the Doha Deal with the Taliban. However, the settlement remained unwieldy as President Ghani's attempts to impose his choice of

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<sup>1</sup> This document is prepared for the purpose of discussion and debate and does not necessarily constitute Takshashila's policy recommendations. To contact us about the research, write to [research@takshashila.org.in](mailto:research@takshashila.org.in).

officials in the provinces were opposed by Abdullah. The dysfunctional nature of the centralised Republic, which lacked the resources to impose its writ outside of Kabul, created a void in which the Taliban gradually consolidated its share of power.

## 1.2 Prospects of Intra-Taliban Struggle

During the insurgency phase, the presence of an external enemy had kept the Taliban infighting in check. However, a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan could likely witness a struggle between the different factions, especially as the ISI prioritises Pakistan's interests and those of its allies over those of the other Taliban factions. In this regard, the political investments made by Iran, Russia and China in the Taliban movement over the years make it unlikely that the ISI-imposed interim government can repeat its 1996 performance.

Following his release from a Pakistani jail in 2018, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar has emerged as one of the most publicly-recognized faces of the Taliban movement. As the founding member of the Taliban, he was chosen by Mullah Omar as his deputy and was in line to become the group leader after Omar's death. However, he was arrested by the ISI in 2010 for entertaining "too much [of an] independent and Afghan-centric" vision for the insurgency<sup>5</sup>.

Further, Baradar was attempting conciliation with then Afghan President Hamid Karzai and was a roadblock to integrating Miran Shah and Peshawar Shura within the Quetta power system on the terms demanded by the ISI<sup>6</sup>. Ultimately, American willingness to secure a negotiated withdrawal paved the way for his release in 2018. Thereafter, he became the head of the Political Commission and led the negotiations with the US in Doha, eventually signing the deal in February 2020.

Baradar's success in securing the US troop withdrawal and the release of Taliban prisoners solidified his claim to the leadership. The ISI's opposition to him, however, has deprived him of the post of the prime minister. Nevertheless, known as a pragmatist, he is likely to remain an important player in Quetta Shura leadership if the Taliban desires to gain international recognition and funding.



## Important Taliban Actors

### Hibatullah Akhundzada

After the death of Akhtar Mansour in 2016, Hibatullah emerged as the compromise candidate to become the Supreme Leader of the Taliban. He belongs to the Loy Kandahar and is a leading authority on the Taliban's justice system. Following the Taliban victory, his absence from the public eyes has circulated the rumours of his death.



### Hasan Akhund

In the Interim Taliban government, he has been selected as the head of the government. He belonged to the Loy Kandahar, led the Taliban's leadership council during the insurgency, and was a deputy prime minister during the previous Taliban regime (1996–2001).

### Sirajuddin Haqqani

Led by Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Haqqani network controls the Loya Paktia; however, the group has also maintained training camps and safe havens in North Waziristan for the foreign jihadis since the Afghan Jihad. The Haqqani's ability to maintain a stronghold in the areas traversing Durand Line, with support from Pakistan, makes their network of tribal militia different from the other factions of the Taliban, who are primarily based in Afghanistan.



### Abdul Ghani Baradar

One of the founders of the Taliban movement, he is a leader of the Loy Kandahar. Baradar had consistently disregarded the ISI's directives during the Insurgency phase and was jailed in Pakistan in 2010. After the US ordered his release in 2018, he became the head of the political office in Doha and negotiated the US withdrawal. In the Interim government announced by the Taliban, he has been side-lined.

### Mohammad Yaqoob

He is Mullah Omar's son, who came to the limelight in 2015 with the announcement of Omar's death. Yaqoob tried to organise opposition to Mansour in August 2015 after the ISI had opposed the Shura leadership's endorsement in his favour. In the interim Taliban government, he has been able to secure the position of Defence Minister.



### Abdul Qayum Zakir

A former Guantánamo detainee, Zakir emerged as a charismatic commander in the Loy Kandahar after his release from an Afghan jail in 2008. He was appointed as the head of the Central Military Commission in 2009 and competed with Mullah Mansoor and Sirajuddin Haqqani for the influence in the Taliban Movement. Temporarily removed as the head of Military Commission in April 2014, he grew closer to the Iranian Intelligence Services – the IRGC.

### Qari Baryal

A Pashtun from Kapisa province, Baryal was instrumental in recruiting non-Pashtuns in the Taliban as the head of Peshawar Military Commission in 2009. Baryal was sacked from the Peshawar Military Commission in 2013, reportedly on Pakistan's behest, and now leads the Shura of the North, which operates in the northern and northeastern Afghanistan. In the interim Taliban government, he has been unable to secure any position.



Nonetheless, the changes that came about in Quetta Shura leadership in his absence would significantly complicate matters for him. Hibatullah Akhundzada was chosen as a compromise candidate to lead the Taliban in 2016 to keep the different factions together following Mullah Mansour's death<sup>7</sup>. In the eventual settlement, Sirajuddin Haqqani became the first deputy while Mullah Yaqoob, son of Mullah Omar, became the Military Commission's head. So far, Hibatullah has supported the pragmatist position of Baradar against the more militant factions. However, the rise of Sirajuddin in Quetta Shura, made possible by the support from ISI and al Qaida, will pose the greatest threat to Baradar. Although the Haqqani network has primarily been involved in *Jihad*<sup>2</sup> in the Af-Pak region, Sirajuddin has included foreign fighters like Arabs, Chechens and Central Asians in its fighting force<sup>8</sup>. For the ISI, Sirajuddin, who leads the Miranshah Shura, would be the most important actor to constrict the consolidation of a nationalist Taliban in Afghanistan.

The ambitious son of Mullah Omar, Yaqoob, who has an axe to grind with Pakistan, is likely to emerge as a challenge to Rawalpindi. In the leadership struggle that followed the public announcement of Mullah Omar's death in 2015, the ISI opposed Yaqoob's candidature in favour of Mullah Mansour. Even though Yaqoob had a majority in the Shura elections held on August 15, 2015, the ISI threatened to crack down on the opposition and effectively installed Mullah Mansour as the leader<sup>9</sup>. Yaqoob had also, reportedly, supported a peace settlement with the US<sup>10</sup>. Since social prestige plays an essential role in the Taliban's leadership, Mullah Yaqoob is likely to emerge as a key balancer in future Afghan politics.

On the other hand, Baradar's pragmatic political stance may also face opposition from the Guantánamo-returnee, Abdul Qayum Zakir. He was once the favourite of the ISI, and became the head of the Central Military Commission in 2009. However, since Zakir hails from the Loy Kandahar and has fought deadly clashes over territory and resources with Sirajuddin Haqqani between 2012-14<sup>11</sup>, it can be expected that he would be in favour of limiting Haqqani's role in the future government and prefer an alignment with Baradar. Also, during the August 2015 Shura elections, it was Zakir's share of votes that had handed the majority to Yaqoob, despite significant opposition from the ISI<sup>12</sup>. Further, the heavy influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) among the Taliban factions associated with Abdul Zakir and Ibrahim Sadar, is likely to complicate matters<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, the Shura of the North, led by Qari Baryal, is hostile to Pakistan and has received support from Iran and Russia<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In this research, the term *Jihad* has been used to refer to the terrorist acts caused by the radical Islamist groups.

The rise of Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) in Afghanistan, to which many Taliban militants have defected over the years on reconciliation with the US, will also emerge as an important factor in Afghanistan politics. Since 2017, to counter Hibatullah, Sirajuddin has made agreements with IS-K<sup>15</sup>, which has begun to target the Taliban's political leadership, describing the Taliban as a *Mullah Bradley project*, a reference to jihadists recruited by the US<sup>16</sup>.

Ultimately, the willingness of the Taliban's political leadership to expel global jihadis will become a significant factor in post-war consolidation in Afghanistan. Lastly, the Taliban's lack of legitimacy in cities is also likely to impede its political consolidation. This is significant given that about 63% of the population is below 25 years of age and has enjoyed considerable political liberties during the last twenty years.

Marred by factional infighting, the Taliban struggled to set up a government after its August 15 victory. In the temporary arrangement announced on September 7, it appears that the ISI has succeeded in imposing its writ by securing the interior and intelligence ministries for its allies and containing the nationalist faction led by Baradar with the appointment of Hasan Akhund as Prime Minister. Also, senior anti-Pakistan commanders like Mullah Zakir, Mullah Ibrahim Sadar and Qari Baryal were excluded from government positions. Nevertheless, as intra-Taliban infighting intensifies in future, Islamabad will likely struggle to contain the factions that are hostile to its interests.



**Zones of Influence under different Taliban Factions in Afghanistan<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>3</sup> This map is a visual aid to understand zones of influence under different Taliban factions and not a clear demarcation of territorial control.



## *2. Interests of the Regional Powers*

### *2.1 China*

*Following the US invasion of Afghanistan, China developed grave suspicions about the repercussions of long-term US presence near its border. Initially, Beijing adopted a hedged policy, which led it to support both the government and Taliban. However, after the US announced its withdrawal plans in 2011, a potential security threat emerged, forcing it to play the role of mediator between the two sides. If a negotiated settlement is achieved in Afghanistan, China would look to secure its interests related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia. Nonetheless, the release of foreign Islamists from their obligations in Afghanistan will likely continue to challenge Beijing's strategic interests in the region.*

#### *2.1.1 Security Interest*

China shares a 92-kilometre-long border with Afghanistan at the Wakhjir pass, through Wakhan Corridor, which forms part of the sparsely populated Badakhshan province. Ever since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, China has remained concerned about the implications of long-term American presence near its border<sup>17</sup>. This required Beijing to implement a hedged policy in which it maintained cooperation with both the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban. The desire of the Karzai government to secure non-western sources of funding helped China gain influence in Kabul. In January 2002, Chinese President Jiang Zemin met with Karzai and committed to play an active part in rebuilding Afghanistan, providing \$150 million for this purpose<sup>18</sup>. Soon thereafter, China began setting up digital telephone services and a national fibre-optic cable network. Beijing also secured a \$2.7-billion project on Mes Aynak copper mine near Kabul in 2007 and a \$360-million deal for the China National Petroleum Corporation on the Amu Darya basin in 2011<sup>19</sup>. However, due to the security situation, both the projects have remained non-starters.

The Chinese remained concerned with US presence which led to a joint statement from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) calling for a timetable to close US bases in Central Asia<sup>20</sup>. As the Taliban regrouped in 2006, Beijing started providing funding to some factions of the group. According to the figures reported by prominent Taliban researcher Antonio Giustozzi, China remained the biggest funder of the ISI-backed

Peshawar Shura based in northeast Afghanistan in the 2005-2011 period<sup>21</sup>. It also supplied HN-5 anti-aircraft missiles, landmines, rocket-propelled grenades and armour-piercing ammunition to the Taliban<sup>22</sup>.

Chinese funding to Peshawar Shura-linked factions likely served two purposes: first, it helped the anti-US insurgency in the places where some of the fiercest resistance outside of southern Afghanistan was taking place, such as Kunar and Nuristan provinces<sup>23</sup>; second, it could have been offered as “protection money” to the Taliban operating in and near the Badakhshan province, while also buying political influence for the future.

For China, the announcement by President Barack Obama in 2011 to withdraw ISAF forces by 2014 removed the geopolitical threat of “encirclement” by US bases, even as it gave rise to a security threat with the fallout of a post-US withdrawal situation. Thus, in 2012, Beijing started a number of consultative mechanisms with Pakistan and Afghanistan while also hosting secret talks between the Kabul government and three officials from the old Taliban government in Urumqi in May 2015<sup>24</sup>. The Chinese hedged policy culminated in the visit of the Taliban delegation led by Mullah Baradar in July 2021 to meet with Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Tianjin<sup>25</sup>.

Chinese efforts towards a negotiated settlement are aimed at minimising the threat emanating from political instability in Afghanistan. The reports of Uighur fighters from Xinjiang fighting in northern Afghanistan have troubled Beijing. Moreover, the success of China's hedged policy has rested on the hostility of regional and global groups being directed against states like the US and India. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan will eliminate a major target for Islamic extremists in the region, which, coupled with the ongoing repression of Uighurs, automatically degrades China's security environment in the region. Chinese strategists like Major Li Dong have identified the Central Asian frontier as one of three top flashpoints along with the Korean Peninsula and the East and South China seas<sup>26</sup>. To counter this threat, China has maintained a security outpost of about two dozen buildings and lookout towers on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border manned by PLA troops from Xinjiang<sup>27</sup>. Since Oct 2016<sup>28</sup>, there have been reports of the PLA entering the Afghanistan border through Tajikistan. Beijing has referred to these activities as “joint counter-terrorism operations” with Kabul<sup>29</sup>.

The Taliban and Pakistan have given assurances to Beijing. However, since Pakistan had offered similar commitments to the US during the War on Terror, the value of these assurances is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, the ISI retains the capability to control anti-China activity through Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Haqqani Network and will potentially use it as leverage against China. Interestingly, Badakhshan province was among the earliest to fall to the Taliban when the group captured 26 out of 28 districts in July 2021<sup>30</sup>.

The reports about the presence of LeT militants in northeast Afghanistan indicates that ISI may have used the Punjabi Taliban to ensure the security of the Chinese border<sup>31</sup>.

### *2.1.2 Potential for BRI Expansion*

In 2016, China signed an MoU on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with Afghanistan. However, due to the security situation, very few projects could be carried out<sup>32</sup>. If the security situation stabilises in the region, Beijing will look to fulfil its BRI ambitions in Central and South Asia. Notably, the desire of the Taliban-dominated government to gain no-strings-attached infrastructure funding would make Beijing an attractive partner. This would allow China to extract resources from the projects it had previously targeted during the rule of the Kabul government. However, as Yun Sun puts it, “China has been burned badly in its previous investments in Afghanistan and will tread carefully in the future.”<sup>33</sup>

The Taliban victory will likely release foreign Islamists from al Qaida, IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), and ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) from Afghanistan into Central and South Asia. According to the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team Report on the Afghan Taliban, the ETIM has several hundred members in Badakhshan and has established corridors to move its fighters between Syria and Afghanistan<sup>34</sup>. Further, the narrative around the Taliban’s victory could provide fuel for the transnational terrorist groups. This has direct implications for not only the security of Xinjiang but also the BRI projects in the region, including CPEC.

## *2.2 Iran*

*Despite their past hostility, Iran has collaborated closely with the Taliban, especially since 2005. Iran’s primary motive to support the Taliban was to ensure the defeat of the US and that no training mission is left behind after the US withdrawal. Countering the pro-Saudi and pro-ISI factions of the Taliban as well as containing the IS-K have been important elements of Tehran’s engagement. Further, Iran’s strategic dependence on the Helmand River influenced it to develop friendly relations with the Taliban.*

### *2.2.1 Strategic Partnership with Taliban*

After the ISI established the new Peshawar Shura in 2005 to counter the Quetta Shura’s domination and establish an alternative power centre for the Taliban in the eastern Afghanistan, Iran strengthened its interactions with the disenfranchised Taliban of Helmand province.<sup>35</sup> It then started hosting a liaison office between the Taliban and IRGC in Mashhad in 2007, which eventually became the regional command centre for

the Taliban in Western Afghanistan in 2011 and declared its autonomy from Quetta Shura in 2014<sup>36</sup>.

Until 2011, Iran had provided relatively modest funding to the Taliban. However, following Obama's withdrawal announcement, the funding was increased, reaching up to around \$160-190 million per year by 2012. In 2012, Iran started providing remote control technology for mines to the Taliban and allowed the Taliban to open two new bases in Zahedan and Sistan for staying and training<sup>37</sup>.

Tehran also reportedly provided funding and military equipment for the four new mobile fronts that were created in March 2015 under Mulla Yaqoob's leadership<sup>38</sup>. The IRGC has funded and trained the Jundullah faction of the Taliban, which was established exclusively to recruit non-Pashtuns in north and northeast Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>. Iran has also supported a splinter group of the Afghan Taliban, Hezb-e-Walayati-e Islami, which had opposed the peace deal with the US<sup>39</sup>.

The close collaboration between the IRGC and the Taliban also gave Tehran the influence to soften the group's anti-Shia propaganda<sup>40</sup>. Notably, the rise of IS-K in Afghanistan mandated a close relationship with the Taliban to counter the more extremist organisation known to target Shias. The Taliban has reportedly participated in joint Iranian raids against IS-K<sup>41</sup>. Notably, after the Taliban took Kabul, Iran was one of the few states not to close its embassy in the city<sup>42</sup>.

### *2.2.2 Connection with Helmand and Herat– Dam, Drugs and Trade*

Iran has a strategic interest in the Kajaki dam built upon the Helmand River, essential for the Iranian Sistani region. The Taliban's decision to reduce the flow through the Kajaki dam after the drought of 2000 had caused significant tension between the two countries. Thus, when the ISAF made plans to upgrade the Kajaki Dam to provide electricity to southern Afghanistan, it started causing serious concerns in Iran. This led Iran to sponsor the Helmand Taliban groups to fight the ISAF to prevent the reconstruction of the dam<sup>43</sup>. The drug trade has been an important source of the Taliban's revenue. Helmand produces approximately 90% of Afghanistan's opium, for which the Helmandi Taliban needs to ensure safe passage of drugs westward to Iran<sup>44</sup>.

Herat was considered an "integral part" of Iran, until 1857<sup>45</sup>. Over the years, Iran has made considerable investments in infrastructure projects in Herat, and the Islam Qala and Torghundi border crossings in the province are important trade routes with Afghanistan.

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<sup>4</sup> The Jundullah group created by the Taliban is different from the Pakistani Jundullah which functions as an anti-Shia terror outfit in Iran. See, Giustozzi, A. (2019). *The Taliban at War, 2001-2018*. London: Hurst & Co., pp. 98.

Iran-Afghanistan trade, amounting to more than \$2 billion per year, is of significant economic interest for Tehran as it faces the heat of US sanctions<sup>46</sup>.

## 2.3 Pakistan

*The Taliban owes its victory to Pakistan, which is going to be an important factor in Islamabad-Kabul relations. The recent ISI-imposed settlement in Afghanistan highlights this fact. However, the consolidation of Loy Kandahar in Afghanistan could lead to a revival of Islamabad's Pashtunistan problem. Thus, if the current "honeymoon" phase gives way to the rise of Pashtun nationalism, the relationship might deteriorate. As the confrontation between the nationalist and pro-Pakistani factions of the Taliban intensifies, Islamabad's unpopularity in Afghanistan is bound to hurt the interests of its allies in the Taliban. The Afghan Taliban's consolidation over the government could also lead to the re-emergence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan.*

### 2.3.1 Destabilising Pashtunistan

Islamabad has euphemised its efforts to unsettle Afghanistan by seeking strategic depth in case of war with India. The concept of strategic depth has been defined as a way of securing 'Islamic Depth' in the west and counterbalancing the conventionally superior 'Hindu India'<sup>47</sup>.

In reality, however, tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan can be traced back to policies adopted in the 1970s. The Pakistani government under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto worked to destabilise Afghanistan soon after Mohammed Daoud Khan became the President following the 1973 coup in that country. Daoud had rejected the Durand line as a Prime Minister in 1953. Being a champion of a unified Pashtunistan, he had enlisted the support of the Soviet Union for the cause and twice attempted the invasion of Bajaur Agency in FATA<sup>48</sup>.

The return of Daoud in 1973 brought the issue of Pashtunistan to the forefront. The resulting anxieties in Islamabad gave way to the start of a covert campaign to train Mujahideen to undermine Daoud's rule and extinguish the emerging threat of Pashtun nationalism, which had started to take root in Pakistan. As the former Pakistan army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani confirmed in 2010, "strategic depth isn't about 'controlling' Afghanistan but about ensuring Pakistan doesn't have a long-term security problem on its western border"<sup>49</sup>.

After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Islamabad's security environment deteriorated sharply. The Islamic Republic, which came to power in Kabul in 2004, upended decades of jihadi investments that Pakistan had made to acquire "strategic



depth” in Afghanistan. Importantly, US presence had created a favourable environment in Kabul for Indian investments in building much-needed infrastructure projects and boosted New Delhi’s soft power in Afghanistan. For Islamabad, the increasing Indian presence was a front to make Afghanistan the centre of operations of the Research and Analysis Wing, or R&AW, India’s external intelligence agency, inside Pakistan. Further, as the Indo-US strategic partnership developed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were fears of the US denuclearising Pakistan in a crisis with India<sup>50</sup>. In this sense, the departure of US forces was greatly desired by Pakistan.

The re-emergence of the Afghan Taliban to power in Kabul, however, is unlikely to solve Islamabad’s Pashtunistan problem. The consolidation of Loy Kandahar could reignite the fire of Pashtun nationalism in the region. The nationalist faction of the Taliban has faced consistent repression in Pakistan during the insurgency phase. For example, in 2004-2016, 12 senior Taliban leaders died due to protracted confinement in Pakistan<sup>51</sup>. At least two current Taliban leaders, Mullah Baradar and Mullah Ibrahim Sadar, have served years in Pakistani jails. Over the years, Pakistan has succeeded in quashing the desire of its 4.3 crore Pashtuns to support the cause of Pashtunistan. The same, however, cannot be said about the 1.5 crore Pashtuns of Afghanistan who have refused to recognise the Pakistan-Afghanistan boundary.

Therefore, while Pakistan may believe that it has gained its desired strategic depth in Afghanistan, the rise of anti-Pakistan Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan will likely complicate the situation for Islamabad. Already, Pakistan is facing a domestic Pashtun nationalist movement in the form of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), which is fighting against the atrocities of the Punjabi state on Pashtuns<sup>52</sup>.

### *2.3.2 Threat from TTP*

The consolidation of the Taliban government is likely to aid the ongoing revival of the TTP in Pakistan. Since June 2018, under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud, the TTP has reabsorbed a number of splinter groups which had previously defected to IS-K. In order to gain popular support, the TTP has also issued restrictions on targeting of civilians and supported the grievances of the PTM<sup>53</sup>. One of the biggest reasons for the Afghan Taliban to eschew support to the TTP during the insurgency phase was the domination of the ISI in the policy-making of Quetta Shura. An independent Taliban in Afghanistan can be expected to support the TTP.

During their recent march to Kabul, the Taliban freed thousands of captives from Afghanistan’s jails<sup>54</sup>. Hundreds of them included TTP militants, whose homecoming was celebrated in Pakistan’s tribal areas<sup>55</sup>. The most prominent among such returnees is Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, the former deputy chief of the TTP. He has given a call for

unification of all Mujahideen factions to realise the formation of the Emirate in Pakistan<sup>56</sup>. This is certain to provoke anxieties in Islamabad, as evident from the recent statement of Foreign Office spokesman Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri, asking the Afghan Taliban to “ensure that the TTP is not provided any space in Afghanistan to operate against Pakistan”<sup>57</sup>.

While Islamabad would likely rely on the Haqqani Network to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan, it is known that Sirajuddin has employed hundreds of TTP militants during the fighting seasons in Afghanistan over the years<sup>58</sup>. Further, the consolidation of the Loy Kandahar in Afghanistan could limit the ability of the ISI's allies to safeguard Islamabad's interests. Particularly, the revival of the TTP's legitimacy in Pakistan will make it possible for Pakistan's Military-Jihadi complex (MJC)<sup>59</sup> to facilitate the re-growth of TTP in Pakistan, against the wishes of the Army Chief. If the security situation deteriorates in Pakistan, General Qamar Javed Bajwa could potentially be forced to support the ongoing efforts for rapprochement with the TTP. The recent uptick in TTP attacks on Chinese personnel working on CPEC projects points towards this direction <sup>60</sup>.

### *2.3.3 Access to Central Asia*

One of the primary rationales for the Benazir Bhutto government to support the Taliban movement in 1994 was to end the war in Afghanistan in order to create a conducive environment to extend Islamabad's influence in Central Asia<sup>61</sup>. While the desired stability never materialised, Islamabad would like to take advantage of the current situation to pursue its geo-economic objectives. From Pakistan's perspective, several key projects are in the pipeline: Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000), Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan electricity project. If political stability emerges in Afghanistan, many of these would undoubtedly become feasible.

## *2.4 Russia*

*Afghanistan has been part of Russia's traditional sphere of influence. The Kremlin's primary interest in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is to ensure the security of Central Asian states. Further, the region is also a transit route for energy exports from Central Asia to Europe. This requires Russia to project stability in the region and stop the potential advance of the Tajik, Uzbek, and IS-K jihadis. The Taliban's re-emergence to power in Afghanistan will likely increase the security dependence of Central Asian states on Russia.*

### *2.4.1 Regional Stability*

Since 2016, Russia has supported the Shura of the North and the Mashhad Shura in close coordination with the Iranians<sup>62</sup>. The Supreme Leader Hibatullah's close connection with Iran also facilitated Russia's advances to the Taliban. The close Russia-Iran coordination resulted from the rise of the IS-K, which both saw as a Saudi-Pakistan Project designed to undermine the influence of their allies in the region<sup>63</sup>.

Nonetheless, concerns with regard to security threats in Central Asia have also led to Russia undertaking joint military exercises with Uzbekistan and a trilateral exercise with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan at the Harb-Maidon training ground, located around 20 kilometres from the Afghan-Tajik border in August 2021<sup>64</sup>. In this regard, Russia is also set to benefit from the current situation in Afghanistan, with Central Asian states likely to seek closer security cooperation with Russia. This could also allow Moscow to counter Beijing's influence in the region.

Some Russian analysts believe that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan would likely allow Russia to restore its position in Central Asia by placing "its security umbrella up in place of the disappearing American umbrella<sup>65</sup>."

### *2.4.2 Curbing the Drug menace*

Another concern for Moscow is the scale of the influx of Afghan heroin and hashish into Russia. In official documents, drug addiction has been identified as a security threat rather than a health problem or a law-enforcement issue<sup>66</sup>. In 2005, Putin had accused the ISAF of "sitting back and watching caravans haul drugs across Afghanistan to the former Soviet Union and Europe"<sup>67</sup>. Thus, ensuring that the Taliban fulfils its promise of cracking down upon drug production would be a vital Russian interest in Afghanistan.

## *3. Indian Interests in Afghanistan*

### *3.1 Terrorist Threat in Jammu and Kashmir*

The insurgency in Kashmir, especially since 1989, has been a serious internal security threat to India. Backed by Pakistan, the massive influx of war-trained mujahideen in the valley, following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, was instrumental in consolidating the dissident energies after the electoral fracas of 1988. This infusion of trained fighters from Afghanistan and the militant strain of the Deobandi doctrine changed the very nature and composition of the insurgency.

The jihadi rhetoric of the Deobandis and the 'Partition Principle' backed by Pakistan significantly transformed the nature of the insurgency along religious lines amplifying the war cry of Nizam-e-Mustafa. A similar threat looms potentially on the horizon for India with the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul. However, the willingness of the MJC to push foreign fighters across the LoC could likely be checked by the re-emergence of TTP on Pakistan's western border. Further, India's counter-terrorism capabilities, which require consistent investment, have evolved and strengthened significantly since 1989, when New Delhi was caught off-guard by the developments.

Nonetheless, it is highly likely that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan could fuel the fundamentalist narrative in Kashmir. This could, in turn, lead to the rise in militancy in the valley, reversing its falling trend and threatening stability.

### *3.2 Investment and Influence in Afghanistan*

Under the Karzai and Ghani administrations, India had emerged as one of the biggest regional donors to Afghanistan, providing over \$3 billion in assistance<sup>68</sup>. India has also assisted in critical infrastructure development: around 4000 km of roadways in Afghanistan, most notably, the Zaranj-Delaram highway, the India-Afghan Friendship Dam, electricity transmission lines, and the Afghan Parliament building. As Indian EAM S. Jaishankar claimed in 2020, "No part of Afghanistan today is untouched by the 400-plus projects that India has undertaken in all 34 of the country's provinces"<sup>69</sup>.

With its investments in infrastructure development and an active role in the nation-rebuilding process, India has built its soft power in Afghanistan. All of India's investments are now under the control of the Afghan Taliban, with which it lacks a working relationship. Countering Indian influence in Afghanistan has been an essential component of Islamabad's security objectives in the region<sup>70</sup>. Therefore, Pakistan will continue to push for a government that is hostile to New Delhi to contain India's influence in Afghanistan. If Islamabad succeeds, India would also lose access to Afghanistan's markets, to which it exports goods worth approximately \$900 million<sup>71</sup>.

### *3.3 Connectivity with Central Asia*

The Taliban return to power in Afghanistan would impact India's strategic interests in Central Asia. The Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) signed between India and Afghanistan in October 2011 helped New Delhi acquire access to Central Asian countries. However, the Taliban's control of the Zaranj-Delaram highway — a 218-km road built by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) at a cost of \$150 million, to facilitate trade with Afghanistan through Chabahar port in Iran — would undoubtedly impact New Delhi's desire to establish a trade route to Central Asia, if a working relationship with Afghan Taliban is not devised<sup>72</sup>. Conversely, in case a negotiated settlement creates political stability, then a conducive environment could be created for the development of long-pending projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline.



## *4. Recommendations for Indian Policy Makers*

### *4.1 Engagement and Working Relationship with Taliban*

India should not underestimate Pashtun solidarity and anti-Pakistan nationalism among Afghanistan's population, including those tribal elders who have supported the Taliban in Pashtun-dominated regions. Seeing the Taliban only as an anti-India group supporting *jihad* in Kashmir would certainly constrict India's strategic choices. While the ISI has succeeded in imposing an interim government in Kabul, the resentment of different Taliban factions makes it unlikely that the government will achieve durable political stability. Thus, India's pragmatic engagement with the nationalist section of the Taliban can help New Delhi take advantage of future political scenarios in Afghanistan. Establishing a working relationship with the Taliban would allow New Delhi to cultivate the resources to counter the threat of anti-India outfits like JeM and LeT in Afghanistan. To support its case, India can provide humanitarian aid to the Taliban political leadership to strengthen the group's resolve against ISI domination.

The prospect of a Taliban-dominated government has given rise to the threats of human rights violations in Afghanistan. While the human rights concerns are genuine, the situation is vastly different from the Taliban rule of 1996-2001. Most demands of Taliban from the international community, such as ending the UN sanctions regime or modifying the list of designated Taliban terrorists, require consensus in the UNSC. Further, the Taliban's quest for international recognition and financial support from the international community are important levers for producing a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan and ensuring that at least certain basic rights of people are safeguarded<sup>73</sup>.

Therefore, India should consider granting recognition to the Taliban only on the acceptance of the minimum conditions set by the international community. Importantly, the issue of recognition must be decided based on a close examination of national interests, and not within an ideological framework.

## *4.2 Containing the Jihadi Threat: Investing in Counter-Terrorism & Counter-Radicalisation*

Through its engagement with the Taliban, India can extract guarantees that they “will not allow the soil of Afghanistan to be used for anti-India activities.” This assurance can be achieved publicly from the Taliban and is akin to the guarantee that the Taliban has accorded to China. In any case, since India does not share a border with Afghanistan, the threat of violence is most likely to come through PoK. In this regard, India would have to convey to the ISI that an attack by JeM from its base either in Afghanistan or PoK would be dealt with harshly and similarly.

In other words, although India's engagement with the Taliban political leadership could help New Delhi safeguard some of its strategic interests, it will have to upgrade its counter-terrorism capabilities in the region. India can also utilise its tools of influence to balance Pakistan on its western border. Similarly, India must remain steadfast in adopting counter-radicalisation methods to constrict the charm of the jihadist narrative in Jammu and Kashmir. Notably, the issues of disaffection and alienation among Kashmiri youth must be quickly addressed in a democratic set up, because alienation is a prerequisite for the radicalisation propaganda.

## *4.3 Working with Iran*

Iran has the potential to emerge as India's most crucial partner in Afghanistan. In fact, New Delhi must deeply analyse how Iran has discreetly strengthened its relationship with the Taliban. Due to the ideological hostility between Deobandi Taliban and Shia Iran, their relations had suffered during the Taliban's first government in 1996.

After the Taliban massacred eight IRGC operatives and a reporter at the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e Sharif in 1998, Tehran sought to launch a retaliatory military incursion<sup>74</sup>. However, soon after the American invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban-IRGC relationship took off in 2005 to counter the common threat from the US. In this regard, Iran's hold over Taliban factions, which dominate western Afghanistan, would help New Delhi's advances to the nationalist Taliban and enable India to regain its trade access to Afghanistan.

Both Iran and India have a shared interest in containing the influence of pro-ISI Taliban groups in the post-war settlement. Also, since Iran remains wary of Saudi influence upon Islamabad, it has a strategic interest in cooperating with New Delhi on Afghanistan. However, India's cooperation with Iran would have to be balanced against the pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the recent visit of EAM S Jaishankar to

Tehran, to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on August 5, indicates that New Delhi is moving in this direction<sup>75</sup>.

#### *4.4 Making China stabilise Afghanistan*

India and China share a common interest in the political stability of Afghanistan. To realise this imperative, New Delhi should urge Beijing to secure political stability in Kabul. Chinese influence among the Taliban leadership, including the ability to keep warring factions in check, in coordination with the ISI, is likely to emerge as an important factor in post-Taliban Afghanistan. So far, Beijing has been parasitic in taking advantage of the US-imposed stability in Afghanistan to extend its influence in Central Asia.

China's rise as a superpower – with a desire to create a sphere of influence in Central Asia, a need to safeguard its BRI investments in the region and the imperative to mitigate the threat from the influx of terrorists in Xinjiang – is likely to generate a strategic necessity for a favourable balance in the region. Therefore, New Delhi must use all the tools available to encourage China to adopt a broader role in Afghanistan.

#### *4.5 Focus on the Indo-Pacific*

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan should serve as a sobering reminder to New Delhi about the limits of its “great power” capabilities. Although it aspires to be a continental power in Asia, a hostile Pakistan in the west will continue to block its march into Central Asia. On the other hand, it is in the Indo-Pacific where opportunities exist for India's emergence as a great power. As opposed to the emerging Taliban-Taiwan debate<sup>76</sup>, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the development of strategic competition between the US and China should be seen as America's attempt to focus greater resources on its primary strategic adversary in the Indo-Pacific.

For quite a long time, India has been preoccupied with the strategic threat emanating from its western borders while ignoring the long-term implications of the growth of China's influence and ambitions in the region. India's dyadic competition in its neighbourhood with China requires it to make a political investment in the strategic stability of the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, rather than worrying about the loss of its influence in Afghanistan, New Delhi must act to strengthen and expand its role of being a maritime security provider in the northern Indo-Pacific.

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