



A Reciprocal Relation: How Taliban and the World See Each Other

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Abstract: On August 15, 2021, the 20-year war against the Taliban, led by the US/NATO alliance and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, ended with a dramatic Taliban takeover of power in Afghanistan. For the second time, they announced an acting government in Kabul. The re-emergence of the Taliban in the political arena of Afghanistan necessitates an analysis of how the Taliban and the countries involved in the Afghanistan conflict view each other. What will be the nature of reciprocal relations between the Taliban and other concerned states? How does the Taliban view the different regions that have engaged in Afghanistan over the past 20 years? Moreover, how do various capitals perceive the Taliban, a question frequently asked by media and think tanks? While global actors have viewed the Taliban with different attitudes, how will they perceive them in the future? This article attempts to answer most of these questions.

Keywords: tribalism, politicized religion, linguistic nationalism, foreign relations.

Introduction

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban marked a turning point in the history of Afghanistan by seizing power for the second time and announcing an interim government in Kabul. Their first victory and the capture of Kabul led to a regime that lasted for five years (1996-2001). The dramatic overthrow of the US-backed government and the surprising takeover of power by the Taliban in 2021 has confronted all regional and international players with ambiguity as to whether they will recognize this acting regime in Kabul or oppose it. Even long-term supporters

of the Taliban, like Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, do not know what to do.

Traditionally, neither the Taliban nor the international players would have thought that power politics inside Afghanistan could shift so quickly. The Taliban leadership was perplexed about how a fully equipped and NATO/US-backed army could crumble without much effort. In just a few weeks, the Taliban emerged from hiding, attacked significant cities, and established themselves in Kabul. International NGOs, embassy staff, and US troops were still in Kabul, and even the so-called advanced intelligence was caught off guard. As a result, Kabul descended into a “state of nature,” with the sounds of gunshots from robbers echoing throughout the city – a result of the total collapse that occurred within a few hours.

The scenario in Afghanistan has left those engaged in the conflict from outside in a similar situation. Presidents, foreign ministers, representatives, parliaments, and opposition parties of countries involved in the Afghan conflict found themselves caught in an unprecedented crisis. Over three months have passed since the Taliban seized power, yet no one has been able to decide or dared to lead an initiative to define diplomatic relations towards the Taliban. The Taliban, still unclear about their security strategies, replaced the comparatively democratic government in Afghanistan overnight. Although the Taliban talked about granting national amnesty and defining a peaceful engagement with the world, it is hard to trust their words. What will happen to democratic values, likely to perish under the Taliban? Would they support an Islamist group, or will they insist on an inclusive government? What will happen to the ordinary people of Afghanistan facing a humanitarian disaster? These are the pressing questions that need to be addressed.

All the players involved in the Afghan conflict are analyzing the Taliban regime, both individually and collectively, to formulate their foreign policy outlines. Many expect the United States to take a lead role and provide a strategic roadmap to ease the ambiguity. However, the US role will likely be minimal.

Therefore, it is necessary to review the analyses of a variety of national and international experts. These analyses are expected to complement each other and provide insights from both insiders and outsiders, depending on how the world perceives Afghanistan. Implementing this approach, in the article, we will analyze the reciprocal relations between the Taliban and international players.

Who Are the Taliban?

The term “Taliban” comes from the plural Arabic/Persian word for “students,” which refers to religious madrasa students. The group is made up of rural youths living in remote areas of Afghanistan who lack modern education, skills, and interactions. They represent a conservative, radicalized, and tribal group that is unable to compete in the modern labor market. Due to their opposition to modernism and dissatisfaction with the Afghan government, as well as the sup-

port of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and other regional intelligence agencies, they have gained power. The Taliban are used as strategic assets to maintain influence or counter hostile forces in Afghanistan, creating a reciprocal relationship between the group and these intelligence agencies. Therefore, it is essential to study the Taliban in the context of Afghanistan's ethnic politics and regional interventionism.

The emergence of the Taliban is one of the most significant events in Afghanistan's history, with their formation dating back to the Soviet military invasion of Afghanistan and the eventual defeat by the Mujahideen. When the Mujahideen leaders arrived in Kabul and formed the Islamic State of Afghanistan, presided over by Burhanuddin Rabbani, they dealt with regional allies and Pakistan when it came to state-to-state relations. This was not acceptable to the Pakistani military, who hoped for a weak puppet regime in Kabul to preserve Pakistan's supremacy in Afghanistan and provide the Pakistani government with open access to Central Asia. This expectation arose due to the power vacuum following the disintegration of the Soviet rule in Afghanistan. Taking advantage of the uncertain situation of ethnic clashes and power distribution problems in Kabul, Pakistan fueled its internal allies against the government in Kabul.

The Pakistanis were unable to establish a pro-Islamabad government in post-Soviet era Afghanistan and did not want to be involved in a prolonged war there. As a result, Pakistan did not receive international funds for legitimate fighting in Afghanistan. Therefore, they developed a new strategy to confront the Mujahideen regime in Kabul, aiming to replace the new leadership and seek more international support. They supported the deprived Pashtun leaders in southern Afghanistan, and in 1994, a small group called the Taliban, made up of students from religious schools (*Madrassas*), declared themselves to be in opposition to the government in Kabul and requested all civil war parties in Afghanistan to surrender to them.

However, some analysts believe that the Taliban emerged as an autonomous but small group in Kandahar in 1994, opposing the acts of the Mujahideen leaders. The Taliban argued that the Mujahideen fought for power and misused Islam to justify their actions. Feeling insulted and disrespected, they decided to end this corrupt cohort. But one might ask how this small group turned into such a large force. Did they benefit from the support of foreign actors and the involvement of countries such as Pakistan, the United States, and Saudi Arabia?¹ Despite being an Islamic movement, the group has frequently committed violent, felonious acts, including drug dealing and indiscriminate, brutal murder.

On the other hand, since the Taliban claimed to be Islamist, it has presented an illogical and violent picture of Islam to the world. Are these acts the outcome of the fundamentalists' religious teachings, or should the reason be searched in

¹ Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 169.

the country's social, cultural, and ethnic context? The social circumstances of Afghanistan have paved the way for reactionary views coming from the Indian sub-continent and Saudi Arabia. The Taliban announced themselves to the nation with "the campaign against the problems caused by the Afghan Mujahideen for people" as their motto. They declared their aims to disarm the Mujahideen groups fighting in civil wars, stop the production, dealing, and trafficking of drugs, combat administrative corruption, and reduce social crimes. However, their ultimate aim has been to establish an Islamic government based on definite inflexible perceptions and interpretations of Islam.²

The Taliban's Three-Pillars Objectives

In international relations, it is commonly understood that a player's actions are influenced by their internal politics. Without comprehending the Taliban's significance and nature as a regional player, analyzing their relations with other countries will be challenging.

It should be noted that "the Taliban has no foreign policy," despite the common belief. Rather, one can examine the "foreign relations" of a movement based on their "set of beliefs." By using the concept of foreign policy, we may inadvertently overlook important facts. Foreign policy is a road for a state to follow its interests, and, unfortunately, in the case of Afghanistan, the Taliban emerged as a non-state actor with territorial ambitions.

The Taliban's attitude towards foreign relations and strategies has differed before and after they seized power in Afghanistan. Prior to taking power, their efforts were focused on finding regional and global supporters in their war against the US-led forces and their ally in Kabul. However, after seizing power, they shifted their focus to strengthening their position nationally and gaining support from their regional partners.

The nature of the Taliban movement comprises a combination of tribalism, language, and politicized religion, which form its three main pillars. With this in mind, it is possible to better understand the Taliban's relations with countries in the region and the world. Anyone who supports these three goals is considered a friend of the Taliban, while anyone who opposes them is viewed as an enemy. Therefore, the Taliban's actions within Afghanistan, based on the three pillars of Pashtunwali³ tribal codes, linguistic nationalism (primarily using the Pashtu language), and a politicized Deobandi interpretation of Islam influenced by a rejectionist understanding of anti-imperialism during the early 20th century and the

² Rohullah Shaikhzada, "An Assessment of the Security Challenges between 2001-2010," MA Dissertation (Isfahan, Iran: University of Isfahan, 2011), 71-76.

³ Pashtunwali refers to the traditional lifestyle and code of honor followed by the Pashtun people. It is commonly referred to as "the way of the Afghans" and is practiced by Pashtuns in the Pashtunistan regions of Afghanistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Northern Balochistan, as defined by scholars. See Erinn Banting, *Afghanistan: The Land (Lands, Peoples & Cultures)* (Canada: Crabtree Publishing, 2003).

later Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, can reflect their actions towards the region and the world.

Therefore, countries such as Pakistan and Iran are unlikely to have a friendly relationship with the Taliban. While Iran may have been an ally of the Taliban in their pre-power days and during the US-led invasion, it cannot be considered a friend of the Taliban in all three dimensions. Iran's opposition to the Taliban's primary objectives has led to clashes of interest. First, Iran opposes the generalization of Pashtunwali. Second, the Iranian claims for a "cultural Iran," which covers Afghanistan and Central Asia in its eastern borders, oppose the Taliban's expansionist strategy to rule Afghanistan. Third, there is a clash of historical memories between the Taliban and Tehran, as the Hotaki dynasty, which ruled Isfahan (modern Iran) from 1722 to 1738, is the most anti-Iranian historical symbol.

Linguistically, Iran is also seen as a hindrance to the Taliban's linguistic nationalism. Pashtun nationalism, which is reflected more in language than race and sectarianism (as they share the same race and religious sect "Hanifi'te" with Tajiks/Parsiwans), views Iran as the primary supporter of the Persian language in Afghanistan. Pashtuns believe that if Iran had not imported Persian books into Afghanistan, the Pashtu language would have had a wider prevalence in the country. Thus, the Taliban's policy towards Tehran would be to prevent Iran from supporting Persianate literature and to attract Tehran to support and enrich cultural programs in the Pashtu language.

The Taliban's sectarian and politicized Deobandi-based religious interpretations see Iran as a "*Rafidi*"⁴ state, with anti-Shi'ism being an institutionalized memory among those with a radicalized understanding of Islam. The Taliban have attacked Shia gatherings and beheaded Shia minorities in different central towns and provinces. The so-called Islamic State of Khurasan, ISK, shares the same mentality against Shi'as. Therefore, the Taliban sees Iran as a threat to Islam since they consider it a Shia state. Since they took power, the Taliban has expressed their views on the Sunni minority's rights several times.

The same applies to the relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan. The Taliban's honeymoon with Pakistan will not last long either. The Taliban's "Pashtun nationalism" will soon be pitted against Pakistan, tied to the Pashtuns behind the Durand Line. Pakistan had supported the Taliban as a strategic asset to debunk Pashtun nationalists in Kabul who did not raise or support secessionism in Pakistan led by the Baluchi and Pashtuns of Pakistan. However, the tribal memory of Pakistan's phobia will turn the Taliban against Islamabad soon. This scenario was repeated during the rule of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, who had the full support of Islamabad in fighting against the Moscow-backed government in Kabul. Yet, upon arriving in Kabul, they attacked Pakistan's interventionism and expansionist policies.

⁴ Radida or Rafidi refers to Shi'i Muslims who reject (*rafid*) the caliphates of the first two successors of the Islamic prophet Muhammad: Abū Bakr and 'Umar (Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 July 1998), who are the Rightly Guided Caliphs for Sunnis.

The Taliban believe that there is no actual Islamic state in Pakistan; therefore, Jihad should be extended and continued in Pakistan. Several commentaries by second-rank leadership of the Taliban have criticized Pakistan's un-Islamic government. This institutionalized mentality is shared among all the Islamists in the Af-Pak region. The symbiotic relationship between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban over a decade has influenced the views of the Afghan Taliban. While the top leadership may have a diplomatic and conservative position against Pakistan, the ground realities show the opposite. If the *Pakistani Tahreki Taliban* (PTT) initiates military operations against the Pakistani regime, thousands of Afghan Taliban will join them. Many Afghan Taliban fighters have made such claims through videos and interviews.⁵

The relations between the Taliban and Central Asia are more predictable, as states like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are politically driven and exhibit linguistic nationalism and tribalism. They share common ethnic and linguistic relations with Afghanistan but reject the politicized Deobandi interpretation of Islam espoused by the Taliban, favoring instead a Balkh-Bukharan theological interpretation prevalent throughout Central Asia. Therefore, the Taliban views these three countries, and the rest of Central Asia, as a threat to their survival.

Although Moscow's accommodating policy towards the Taliban, accepting them as a ground reality and anti-US asset, resulted in conservative policies towards the Taliban in Central Asia, the Taliban would not see Central Asian countries as allies. Despite the three pillars of Taliban objectives, thousands of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other Central Asian citizens have fought alongside the Taliban against NATO allies and Afghanistan's National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). They have been stationed in Kabul, awaiting an opportunity to conduct their operations in Central Asia by crossing the Amu River. Previously, we have seen Tajik terrorist groups enter remote areas of Tajikistan through Badakhshan and behead some of Tajikistan's security forces.

The Taliban are also wary of these intolerant and radical Central Asian fighters. If the Taliban try to deport or banish them from Kabul and other major cities under their control, these fighters may join ISK and turn against the Taliban. The Taliban leadership understands that their Central Asian allies have carried out many attacks against international forces and the ANDSF. Therefore, there is a symbiotic relationship between the Taliban and the Central Asian radical groups, which could damage the Taliban's efforts to maintain cordial relations with Dushanbe, Tashkent, and Ashgabat.

⁵ Makhdoom Shahab-ud-Din, "Video | Taliban Chief Announcement After Cutting Fence Wire Erected by Pak Army at Durand line Border," *Youtube.com*, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9mz8IliiOg.

The Taliban do not consider the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia a natural ally. According to the Taliban's ideology, Saudi Arabia is an ally of the US and has a corrupt leadership that supports the suppression of Muslims worldwide.⁶ This view has been prevalent among Taliban fighters, particularly under the supervision of Afghan-Arab jihadists who joined the jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. One of these ideologues was Abdullah Azam, a top Afghan-Arab leader. Thousands of Arab fugitives later joined the Taliban from 1994 to 2001 and then from 2003 to 2021 to fight NATO-allied forces. These fighters have further solidified the Taliban's anti-Saudi stance through writings, preaching, and orations.

The Pakistani and Saudi finances and military did initially support the formation of the Taliban and their earlier victories. However, soon after the Taliban seized power in Kabul in 1996 and kept their hospitality towards Osama bin Laden, Saudi Arabia turned against the Taliban. This contributed to the Taliban's loss of power at the turn of the century. Therefore, the Taliban still do not have cordial relations with Riyadh.⁷

India, China, and Russia also oppose the third pillar of the Taliban ideology, its radical interpretation of Islam (not including the linguistic and Pashtunwali aspects). Many Taliban leaders and commanders have formed alliances with Indian Kashmiri fighters, Chinese Uyghur separatists, and Russian jihadists in the Caucasus. They believe that in all three countries, minority Muslims are oppressed and support the independence movements of Kashmir, Xinjiang, and the Caucasus nations, which they have idealized since the Afghan Jihad (1979-1992). During their previous rule (1996-2001), the Taliban even allowed the Chechen embassy to operate in Kabul's Wazir Akbar Khan area.⁸ Many Taliban fighters have also joined the insurgency in Kashmir and fought against Indian security forces.⁹ The Taliban has close ties with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in the bordering areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and there are reports that Al Qaeda was training both Taliban and ETIM fighters in the same camps. Therefore, it is unlikely that their allies who have fought alongside them or joined their jihad will not respect or sympathize with the Taliban regime after it seizes power.

⁶ Nawaf E. Obaid, "The Power of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Leaders," *Middle East Quarterly* (September 1999): 51-58, <https://www.meforum.org/482/the-power-of-saudi-arabias-islamic-leaders>.

⁷ Mirwais Balkhi, *Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Towards Afghanistan; 1991-2014* (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Institute of Higher Education, University of Afghanistan, 2014), 113. – in Persian/Farsi.

⁸ Thomas D. Grant, "Current Development: Afghanistan Recognizes Chechnya," *American University International Law Review* 15, no. 4 (2000): 869-894, 869, <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1276&context=auilr>.

⁹ Ijaz Khalid, "Sino-Russian Stance on Kashmir Issue," *Global Strategic and Security Studies Review* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 47-56, https://gsssrjournal.com/papers/GVFULSI_XTQ.pdf.

The linguistic pillar does not inform the Taliban's policy towards the West; instead, their respective policies are defined by Pashtunwali and a radical interpretation of Islam. According to the Taliban's ideology, the US, NATO, and the European Union are viewed as imperialistic and colonial powers that invaded Afghanistan with the aim of westernizing the country. Although they may change their diplomatic stance towards the West to seek recognition and humanitarian support for the Afghan people under their control, ideologically, the Taliban still reject the West and adhere to a jihadi approach. The memory of their worst defeat by the US-led forces in 2001, in which they lost their power and thousands of fighters were killed or imprisoned, remains bitter in their minds. The Taliban will continue to fight against Western domination by providing shelter and training to global terrorists and engaging in drug smuggling. They do not believe that the Emirate is capable of fighting a conventional war against NATO forces and would prefer a non-conventional approach using terrorist tactics and drugs.

Regional Approaches towards the Taliban

This section of the article examines how involved countries such as Pakistan, Iran, neighboring Central Asian states, India, China, and, Western nations perceive the Taliban and their interests in the region.

Pakistan

Pakistan holds a unique position among all other countries involved in the Afghanistan dispute. The Pakistani armed forces have developed military approaches and strategies, and the leadership in Islamabad has persistently attempted to stabilize and extend the Taliban's military power, and legitimize them after the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1997. These are considered prominent examples of Pakistan's active policy and diplomatic efforts towards the developments in Afghanistan. Pakistan's diplomacy has been successful in Afghanistan due to various internal and external reasons. Islamabad's foreign policy includes attempts to influence Afghanistan and achieve some of its national goals.¹⁰

Pakistan played a crucial role in the creation and support of the Taliban, using them as a political, economic, and military tool. With the assistance of intelligence agencies from the US and UK, as well as financial support from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan was able to improve its trade route with Central Asia and address the issue of Pashtunistan by leveraging Afghanistan's strategic location. Pakistan has consistently opposed a strong government in Kabul that could threaten its

¹⁰ Sayyid Abdul Qayoom Sajjadi, "Taliban, Iran and Pakistan: A Study of Foreign Policy of Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia towards Taliban: Since Mazar-e-Sharif Fall Apart," *Uloomi Siyasi Journal*, no. 2 (2009), 249, accessed December 20, 2021, <https://hawzah.net/fa/Article/View/84390/>.

interests or revive old conflicts. As such, Pakistan prefers establishing and maintaining governments like the Taliban in Afghanistan, which it can easily manipulate to achieve various strategic goals.¹¹

Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan can be classified into three main layers:

1. **Geopolitical Goals:** Pakistan seeks to establish a weak and compliant government in Afghanistan, disregarding the Durand Line dispute, and weakening Afghanistan's national power and capability. This is aimed at reducing the risk of Afghanistan posing any threat to Pakistan's interests or reviving old conflicts.
2. **Geo-economic Goals:** Pakistan aims to gain direct access to the Central Asia region and clear the vital transit route between Pakistan and the Central Asian markets. It also seeks to access the oil and gas resources of the Central Asian countries and turn Afghanistan into a market for consumer goods.¹² The establishment of the Taliban in Afghanistan is seen as a means to achieve these goals.
3. **Geostrategic Goals:** Pakistan's strategic competition with India defines the balance of power in South Asia. As the intermediary neighbor between Afghanistan and India, Pakistan seeks to maintain a superior status. To achieve this, it aims to prevent India from influencing Afghanistan and prevent the formation of regional alliances between Iran, Russia, and India, or India and the United States, in relation to Afghanistan.¹³

The Taliban's control of Afghanistan serves Pakistan's interests by providing a friendly government that supports its goals of geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic influence in the region. If the Taliban were to be removed from power, that would limit Pakistan's ability to achieve these goals and could potentially strengthen the position of its rivals in the region.¹⁴

Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a significant player in the Afghanistan conflict. The Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan was unexpected and concerning for Iran. Iran views the Taliban as a dangerous group that receives support from regional countries and global powers. Iran believes that the Taliban seeks to undermine

¹¹ Aqajari et al., "The Role of Regional Players in Post-Taliban State Building of Afghanistan," *Pazhohishnamai Ravabit Bainulmilal*, no. 30 (2015): 57-104, 67.

¹² Nawzar Shafiee, "Power Politics in Afghanistan: Objectives and Behavioral Patterns," *Mujala'i Siyasati Difah'i*, no. 20 (2002): 29-58, 35.

¹³ Umul Banin Tawhidi, "Afghanistan Issues: the US and Others," *Mah'awinat Pazhohishhai Siyasati Kharaji*, no. 301 (2009): 64-87, 11.

¹⁴ Shafiee, "Power Politics in Afghanistan," 66.

the true teachings of Islam and limit Iran's regional policies through their extreme interpretation of religion and oppressive tactics.¹⁵ While Tehran may view the Taliban as an anti-US ally, it has not forgotten how the Taliban previously ignited a war with Iran by killing Iranian diplomats and threatening its security. The US-led invasion of Afghanistan, which resulted in the overthrow of the Taliban, was initially seen by some as beneficial to Iran as it removed an ideological rival and an explicit security threat. This shared objective between Iran and the United States suggests a potential for cooperation and natural unity.¹⁶

Tehran has adopted a "wait and see" approach towards the Taliban's takeover of power in Afghanistan but remains skeptical of its former ally. The sudden and dramatic takeover of Kabul by the Taliban has left Tehran unsure of how to proceed. Despite its longstanding opposition to the Kabul regime, Iran has been cautious about engaging with the Taliban since the minor clash between Taliban fighters and Iranian border security guards in Nimruz province in December 2021. Iranian strategic communities are grappling with the unpredictability of the situation, particularly regarding the US empowering the Taliban and the fate of the military equipment seized by the Taliban from the US and Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Tehran's traditional saying, "a wise enemy is better than an ignorant friend," has left it feeling defensive and apprehensive about the Taliban's intentions.

Saudi Arabia

Despite being one of the most significant economic resources of Sunni jihadist groups and parties within the framework of its ideological strategic policies since the Afghan jihad from 1994-1996, Saudi Arabia has not played a big role in the Afghanistan conflict. The Saudis' supportive policies towards the Taliban peaked in 1996 when Saudi Arabia, as the primary financial source of this group, played a substantial role in helping the Taliban eliminate all other parties and groups from the military arena in Afghanistan. Since Prince Turki Al Faisal, director of Saudi Arabia General Intelligence Directorate, visited Pakistan in July 1996, Saudi Arabia has become the principal financial supporter of the Taliban.¹⁷ However, the Kingdom has security concerns with the anti-Saudi Islamists who have taken shelter under the Taliban's safe haven.

Furthermore, some circles and groups within Saudi Arabian religious circles have had an active physical presence at the battlefield, supporting the Taliban against the ANDSF/NATO alliance, although some have mainly held memberships in other radical jihadist parties like ISK. After the US troop withdrawal and the collapse of the Afghan government, these forces now live safely in Kabul

¹⁵ Ibrahim Ahmadi and Jawad Etahat, "A Geopolitical Analyses of Pakistan Relations with Others: Conflicts and Threads," *Tahqiqat Bainulmilali Journal*, no. 24 (2015): 1-24, 17.

¹⁶ Dehqani Firuzabadi and Sayyid Jalal, "Iran's Foreign Policy Towards Afghanistan's Crisis," *Pazhohishi Hoqq wa Siyasat*, no. 20 (2006): 7-22, 11.

¹⁷ Sajjadi, "Taliban, Iran and Pakistan: A Study of Foreign Policy."

without any engagement. Consequently, they may focus on their primary objective of conducting terror attacks on Saudi Arabia or any other target worldwide. Saudi Arabia's conservative policy towards the Taliban and Afghanistan will likely become more active. It is worth noting that the embassy of Saudi Arabia in Kabul was not among the four embassies that remained open and running consulate operations on August 15 when the Taliban entered Kabul.¹⁸ Although some Pakistanis may try to tie relations between Riyadh and the Taliban, Saudi Arabia does not trust the Taliban much.¹⁹

India

With the assistance of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence in both periods (1994-2001 and 2003-2021), the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan has been alarming to India. It has resulted in undesirable outcomes for the country. After the Taliban seized control of Kabul on August 15, the Embassy of India in Kabul closed, and political relations with the Taliban government were cut off because the Indian government did not recognize the Taliban's legitimacy. Furthermore, India regards the Taliban's ideology as a threat to its security, as the spread of their ideas in the Jammu and Kashmir region poses a danger to India's safety and unity.²⁰ The Taliban's ascension to power with the assistance of Pakistan, India's longtime rival, has limited any potential benefits for India. Access to Central Asian energy resources is of critical importance to India, and establishing military bases in some Central Asian countries is one of India's strategic objectives.²¹

India was the only country among those present in Afghanistan that did not support the Taliban, but this strategy is no longer relevant. The Bharatiya Janata Party's pragmatic foreign policy is focused on limiting Pakistan's influence, and supporting Afghan/Pashtun nationalism has been a top priority. India quickly recognized the fraudulent government of Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, and the Indian strategic community is advising policymakers to explore opportunities to establish ties with the Taliban by leveraging Pashtun anti-Pakistan sentiment. India seeks to attract the Taliban's attention toward Delhi and create a triangle of Taliban-Pashtun Nationalists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and New Delhi to exert pressure and possibly undermine Pakistan.

¹⁸ The four embassies which remained open on the days of uncertainties and insecurities were Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia. The rest had left Afghanistan weeks before or on the day of the collapse. Among the earliest evacuations was that of the Saudi Arabia's embassy.

¹⁹ Suhasini Haidar, "Taliban Have Responsibility to Exercise Good Governance, To Be Inclusive: Saudi Foreign Minister," *The Hindu*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/saudi-foreign-minister-faisal-bin-farhan-al-saud-interview-taliban-have-responsibility-to-exercise-good-governance-to-be-inclusive/article36556729.ece>.

²⁰ Aqajari et al., "The Role of Regional Players in Post-Taliban State Building," 74.

²¹ Nawzar Shafiee et al., "India's Approach towards Afghanistan after September 11," *Geopolitical Journal*, no. 2 (2012): 91-126.

Trans-Regional Approaches towards the Taliban

The US

The September 11, 2001, attack on the Twin Towers by Al-Qaeda led to the US attack on Afghanistan. The attack occurred when the US was at the height of its power and could dominate the new world order following the Soviet Union's dissolution. Consequently, since 9/11, the United States has identified new threats and enemies, and counter-terrorism has become a geopolitical priority in US foreign policy. A geopolitical code is a set of political-geographic assumptions that guide a country's foreign policy towards locations beyond its borders. Countries aim to influence other countries' geopolitical codes to achieve their goals and interests. Fighting terrorism became a priority, and Afghanistan, which provided a safe haven for Al-Qaeda, became strategically significant in terms of geography, economy, and geopolitics.

The policy of the United States towards Afghanistan underwent a significant shift in the early 2020s. Many geopolitical rivals seeking to use Afghanistan to their advantage, including China, Russia, and Iran, supported the Taliban and opposed the US presence in Afghanistan. There were even reports of direct Chinese attacks against US military forces.²² After twenty years of war, the US became exhausted and shifted to a policy of deterrence and diplomatic alliances to guard against potential threats from Afghanistan. However, the US continues to closely monitor the Taliban and has indicated that it is willing to engage in unconventional warfare if necessary.

Russia

The countries of the former Soviet Union are considered influential actors in Afghanistan's changing circumstances. Afghanistan's situation has a significant impact on Tajikistan, while Turkmenistan is not practically capable of exerting influence on Afghanistan. Uzbekistan prioritizes its national security, and Afghanistan's stability is crucial in that regard. Russia, as the most important actor of the Commonwealth of Independent States, aims to prevent Islamism from becoming the common political agenda of the Central Asia region. From Russia's perspective, Afghanistan is a source of violence and illegal trade, including drugs and weapons, and a major exporter of extremist Islamism. This view is reinforced by the historical experience of Islamist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an extremist Islamic group trained by the Taliban in the 1990s and still supported by them. During the civil war, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan established military bases and financial resources in the northwestern areas of Afghanistan.

²² اظہار بی اطلاعی چین از اخراج شهروندان اش از افغانستان به اتهام جاسوسی [China's statement of ignorance about the expulsion of its citizens from Afghanistan on charges of espionage], *Deutsche Welle*, January 8, 2021. – in Farsi.

Moscow maintained ties with the Taliban until the United States withdrew from Afghanistan. At the same time, Russia has expressed security concerns about international terrorist groups operating alongside the Taliban. If future clashes erupt due to the Taliban's lack of effective control over Afghanistan's northeastern borders, these relations could quickly deteriorate and destabilize the region. Furthermore, Russia is worried about the Taliban's vulnerability to extremist groups, as it considers these groups to be the most significant threat to stability in Central Asia. Additionally, the movement of people between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan has facilitated the development of extremist Islamic ideologies in religious circles.²³

European Union

The European Union has been involved in the Afghanistan conflict since terrorism and organized crime were identified as severe threats to Europe. Afghanistan is a critical case for the EU's fight against terrorism, and the Union seeks to expand its influence as a global actor by promoting its approach to conflict management and peace establishment. However, EU member states have differing views on their role in Afghanistan. Some states, not primarily concerned about terrorism, worry that their defeat in Afghanistan would damage the credibility of NATO and the West. Other countries are present in Afghanistan due to their deep strategic relations with the US. At the same time, some believe that their security (excluding the UK) depends on Afghanistan's situation, leading to their commitment to the US alliance. Although the European governments do not play a militarily dominant role in Afghanistan, they offer international aid within the Union's framework or through bilateral agreements to ensure Afghanistan's security and stability.²⁴

What Should Be Done in the Future?

In the author's view, both regional and faraway countries involved in the Afghan conflict should adopt a "wait and watch" approach toward the Taliban. A dual strategy is required, with a fundamental political approach aimed at finding a long-term solution to Afghanistan's conflict while providing immediate humanitarian aid to the people. Here are some suggestions:

- The Taliban's current efforts are aimed at gaining recognition, and all states should be cautious in this regard. Supporting the Taliban regime, in the long run, will not benefit anyone and may result in losing strategic friends in Afghanistan, particularly the ordinary people. On the other

²³ Mohammad Darkhor, "Regional and Trans-Regional Strategic Approach towards the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Rahnama Siyasatguzari Journal*, no. 2 (2012): 53-67, 62.

²⁴ Yaser Nooralivand and Ali Khalilipour Roknabadi, "Multilateralism and Trans-Atlantic Relationship in Afghanistan," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 51 (June 2011): 175-200, 187, <https://doi.org/20.1001.1.17350727.1390.14.51.7.9>.

hand, the Taliban is keeping an eye on US support, and yesterday's strategic enemies may seek to become tomorrow's friends.

- The international community can provide humanitarian aid and support to Afghanistan. Countries that have experience with the Taliban, such as providing monetary aid in the 1990s or experience with soft measures, can share their expertise. The co-education model and approaches to girls' education in Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional countries are good examples to follow.
- It is crucial to continue the policy of exporting goods from neighboring countries to Afghanistan, as this is vital to the people's welfare and may help reduce cross-border tensions. On the other hand, closing borders and terminating trade will harm the people.

Conclusion

The emergence and coming to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan have led to different strategies adopted by regional and trans-regional actors. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have supported and financed the Taliban, viewing it as a means to further their regional interests. However, Iran, India, and Central Asian countries have expressed concerns and perceived the Taliban as a threat to their regional interests. Trans-regional approaches to the Taliban's rise to power also differ significantly. At the start, the United States did not consider the group a threat to its interests. However, the September 11 attacks, Osama bin Laden's sheltering in Afghanistan, and the group's violent nature caused the United States to change its position and seek to defeat and dismantle the terrorist organization. The European Union's policies towards the Taliban, based on NATO's invocation of Article 5, are also noteworthy. In contrast, Russia views Afghanistan as a source of violence, drugs, and weapons and an exporter of extremist Islamism that threatens its own and the interests of neighboring countries in Central Asia. Therefore, Russia does not view the Taliban positively as a trans-regional actor in Afghanistan.

Generally speaking, there are divergent views on the Taliban at both regional and trans-regional levels. While some have expressed optimism about the group's emergence, others have taken a more pessimistic view. The Taliban's entry into the political arena of Afghanistan has resulted in the formation of multidimensional policies and varying perspectives in the international arena.

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