

Regional Response to the Taliban's Return to Power

By Amin Saikal

Saikal is professor emeritus of Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies at the Australian National University and has written numerous books, journal articles and book chapters as well as op-ed pieces in major world dailies, among them *How to Lose a War: The story of America's intervention in Afghanistan* (Yale UP, 2024).

Abstract

This chapter offers an overview of how regional states and major powers have responded to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's internal and external settings have historically and inextricably been influenced by competing interests of regional and international players. This paradigm has not drastically changed since the Taliban's reassumption of power following the retreat of U.S. and allied forces from the country in August 2021. Afghanistan's neighbours and major powers, along with the rest of the global community, have not found it politically and ethically expedient to accord formal recognition to the Taliban's de facto government. However, they have made certain adjustments in their attitudes toward it, based on two imperatives. One is to ensure that the Taliban's ideological and empirical extremism does not affect their national situations; the other is that they are in a position to advance their individual interests vis-à-vis one another when desirable or required. This is the context in which Afghanistan's neighbours and major powers have conducted their policies towards it under the Taliban.

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Introduction

The Taliban's reassumption of power in August 2021 marked another episode in Afghanistan's turbulent modern history, again reshaping the country's destiny. Many countries have been subject to the interplay between national and regional determinants in the context of a changing world order. Afghanistan is no exception to this – but few have suffered because of it as much as Afghanistan. Since its foundation as a recognizable political and territorial unit in the mid-eighteenth century, the country has moved from one crisis to another. Afghanistan's evolution has historically been affected by four interrelated variables: geographic location, mosaic population, authoritarian rule and power rivalries, and outside interventionism, both reactive and assertive. It is against the backdrop of these variables that not only the Taliban have worked as an erstwhile terrorist group to regain power and to survive thus far without formal international recognition of their regime, but that also the regional players and major powers have responded.

After a brief look at these variables, this chapter provides an overview of Afghanistan's neighbours' and major powers' treatment of the Taliban regime. It essentially argues that these actors have pursued a two-fold approach: they have, on the one hand, sought to ensure that the Taliban's extremism does not have a spill-over effect on their varying national situations; on the other, they have dealt with the group in ways that could advantage them individually and against one another.

1. Location

Afghanistan's situation, a landlocked crossroads between Central, South and West Asia, and the Far East, has been both an asset and a curse for the country. Depending on national and external vagaries in a given historical period, it places the country in a zone conducive to connection and cooperation. But it has been largely an arena of regional and international rivalry and a "highway of conquest" for most of its existence (for a detailed analysis, see Saikal, 2024, chapter 2). It has made Afghanistan dependent on the goodwill of its neighbours and, by the same token, vulnerable to the interventionist behaviour of both those neighbours and global actors in pursuit of rival interests.

2. Mosaic Population

Adding to the geographical vulnerability is Afghanistan's national diversity. The country is a tapestry of traditional Muslim micro-societies, divided along ethno-tribal, cultural and linguistic, and sectarian lines, with none holding a majority. This mosaic composition has made the task of generating national unity and state-building extremely laborious. Every attempt at reform since the early part of the nineteenth century in this respect has ended in internal upheaval of one form or another. Neither Islam, nor any processes of change and development, has proved effective in uniting a cross-section of the country's inhabitants behind a model of stable and enduring political and social order. Complicating the task further has been the micro-societies' extensive cross-border ethnic and cultural ties with Afghanistan's neighbours. Whatever transpires in Afghanistan can impact its neighbours, and vice versa. As a result, it has mostly survived as nothing more than a weak primordial state with strong societies.

3. Authoritarianism and Power Struggles

By the same token, Afghanistan has never had a national consensus over the form and function of a government capable of monopolizing force and exercising power on a legitimate basis. The country's destiny has been charted by powerful individuals (or "strongmen"), families, and tribal and ethnic groups from different points of the political and social spectrum, often in association with a foreign power. Personalization and ethnicization rather than institutionalization of politics, spawning authoritarian rule, power struggles, and violent transitions of power and regime change have generally been the order of the day. As such, Afghanistan has never enjoyed "a rough balance of power between the rulers and their subjects: between decision makers and decision takers" (Pettit, 2023, p. 2). In the absence of sufficient internal resources, the country has remained largely dependent on foreign aid. Its longest period of relative stability and security was between 1933 and 1973, but this was based on a fragile, triangular relationship between the monarchy, local power-holders or strongmen, and the religious establishment. In these years – the height of the Cold War – Afghanistan benefitted from the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, enabling it as a neutral country to exercise a notable degree of autonomy in the conduct of its domestic and foreign policy (for an analysis, see Saikal, 2012, chapters 5–6).

4. Foreign Interventionism

The lack of solid, stable domestic structures has frequently left Afghanistan vulnerable to foreign interference and intervention for rival geopolitical, geostrategic, and ideological objectives. Russo-British rivalry in the nineteenth century, the Soviet invasion and occupation and America's proxy response to them in the 1980s were of this nature. The United States's intervention (2001–2021) was also of a similar character, given Washington's original emphasis on the war on terror and democracy promotion. Further, Pakistan's relentless support of the Taliban has been rooted in regional geopolitical ambitions against the backdrop of a number of variables. They have mainly included: Indo-Pakistani hostility; the Sino-Pakistani strategic partnership; Indo-Chinese differences; Pakistan-Saudi strategic ties; Iran-Saudi rivalry; Iran-Pakistani distrust; and Sino-American and Russo-American competition. These issues have all played out in Afghanistan during the turbulence of recent decades.

The Taliban in Power

The above features played a critical role in undermining the US-led intervention and facilitating the Taliban's re-empowerment. Despite massive investment in blood and capital, the United States, backed by NATO and non-NATO allies, could not secure an effective and reliable partner on the ground. Hamid Karzai's administration (2001–2014) and that of Ashraf Ghani (2014–2021), including the National Unity Government, led by Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah (2014–2019), proved dysfunctional and kleptocratic, riddled with internal power rivalry and multiple sources of authority and legitimacy (for a comprehensive discussion of different sources of authority and legitimacy, see Weigand, 2022, introduction, chapter 2). Nor could the United States prevent Pakistan from exploiting Afghanistan's geographical and demographic vulnerability by supporting the Taliban and their affiliates to achieve a final victory.

The Taliban's success did not necessarily stem from strength in the battlefield. Rather, it was helped by the weaknesses of governments in Kabul and America's poor understanding of the very factors that had historically hampered state-building in Afghanistan. However, and in contrast to their previous rule (1996–2001), this time the Taliban are in a stronger position militarily. They have inherited a more infrastructurally developed Afghanistan, along with U.S. \$7.2 billion worth of U.S. arms including a

relatively small but useable air force. This is indeed the first time in history that a violent extremist group has come to possess an extraordinary amount of light and heavy weapons and other battlefield paraphernalia.

Under the circumstances, the Taliban, who are primarily made up of the Ghilzai tribe of the ethnic Pashtuns (the largest minority in Afghanistan), have been able to ignore the historical realities of Afghanistan, where mono-tribal and mono-ideological rule, whether secular, semi-secular or religious, has not worked in the past. Their politics of brutality, exclusivity, discrimination and uniformity to re-Islamize Afghanistan in compliance with a narrow and self-centred interpretation and application of Islam and to subdue the rest of the population to their tribal supremacy is no basis for any form of popularly acceptable governance. Nor can their exclusion of women from public life, an immense violation of human rights, be justified on the grounds of the basic tenets of Islam that exalts human dignity.

The group's draconian rules and systematic reversal of the political, social, and cultural changes of the U.S. interventionist era have driven Afghanistan into crises – humanitarian, financial, economic, business, employment-related and health-related, including mental health – unprecedented in severity. According to the United Nations and other international agencies, more than 90 percent of the population suffers from severe poverty and depends on international handouts. Yet the Taliban have refused the international community's demands for an inclusive government, severance of ties with other terror groups, more specifically Al Qaeda and Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP),¹ and respect for human rights, especially that of women.

A UN report to the Security Council in June 2023 states:

The Taliban, in power as the de facto authorities in Afghanistan ... have reverted to the exclusionary, Pashtun-centred, autocratic policies of the administration of the late 1990s. ... The link between the Taliban and both Al-Qaida and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan remains strong and symbiotic. A range of terrorist groups have greater freedom of manoeuvre under the Taliban de facto authorities. They are making good use of this, and the threat of terrorism is rising in both Afghanistan and the region. (United Nations Security Council, 2023, p. 3).

¹ The TTP is an anti-Pakistan insurgent group, whose operations have killed thousands of Pakistanis in pursuit of establishing an Afghan "Taliban-style, Shariah-compliant state" in Pakistan. See Mir, 2022.

The Taliban leaders, most of whom are under UN sanctions, have rejected the findings of this report. They have rationalised their ideological positions and policy actions on the pretext of bringing Islamic stability and security to Afghanistan. They have done so regardless of the fact that their terrorism during the United States's intervention and their prevailing reign of terror have been instrumental in Afghanistan's misfortunes. Had it not been for their protection of Al Qaeda, which masterminded 9/11 from Afghanistan, America would have had no other compelling reason to intervene. The Taliban's claim that the Islamic emirate poses no threat to any country has not as yet persuaded Afghanistan's neighbours or the broad international community.

Regional Response

Regional players have adopted a two-part policy in their stance towards the Taliban regime: they are concerned about its extremism and its potential wider impact, but have acknowledged it as a power reality. The main regional actors in terms of Pakistan, Iran, the Central Asian republics, China, and Russia have followed this pattern according to their varying and competitive national interests. In other words, while withholding formal recognition of the regime, they have found it either necessary or useful to deal with it. This is a pattern that also more or less conforms with the United Nations-led global approach – at least thus far.

Let us first look at Pakistan's approach in this context.

Islamabad has pursued a two-track policy toward the Taliban regime. On the one hand, it has transferred Afghanistan's diplomatic missions in Pakistan to the Taliban at an ambassadorial level and has worked hard to integrate Afghanistan politically and economically, including linking it to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a critical part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. In the process, it has also sought to benefit from the country's natural resources – coal in particular. Pakistan was Afghanistan's major trade partner in 2022–2023 (Lloyds Bank, 2023). This is in addition to its powerful military intelligence body, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), maintaining its influence with many of the Taliban leaders and the group's administration at all levels.

On the other hand, Islamabad has lately grown weary of the Taliban's close ties with the TTP. Since early 2023, the Taliban have allowed an influx of TTP fighters, stationing many of them in Afghanistan's non-Pash-

tun northern provinces to strengthen security, claiming the measure to be a humanitarian gesture. Islamabad has openly accused the Taliban of aiding the TTP in some of their deadly operations and has demanded a halt to cross-border terrorism from Afghanistan (for a detailed discussion, see Nadery, 2023; Sayed & Hamming, 2023). A statement issued by the Pakistani government after a National Security Committee meeting in Islamabad in early 2023 warned that “no country will be allowed to provide sanctuaries to terrorists”, and their attacks “will be dealt with [sic] full force of the state” (Hussain, 2023a).

Islamabad has enacted certain measures to pressure the Taliban to fall into line with Pakistan’s national interests. For example, in addition to the occasional bombing of TTP bases inside Afghanistan, in November 2023 Islamabad began expelling close to 1.7 million undocumented Afghan refugees, most of whom had fled Taliban rule (Hussain, 2023b). It followed this in December by launching a Hazaragi language (a Persian dialect) television transmission in Quetta (The Nation, 2023), a decision made in the context of the Taliban’s suppression of languages spoken by other minorities and the promotion of Pashto as the national medium. More importantly, Pakistan has withheld formal recognition of the Taliban regime and tied it to a regional consensus for a collective decision. While content to see the Taliban in power for its own benefit, including in relation to its rivalry with India, Islamabad wants to ensure that the Taliban’s extremism does not rebound on Pakistan.

The Islamic Republic of Iran – a predominantly Shia state under a theocratic government – has also pursued a two-sided approach. It has accepted the Taliban as a “reality”, sharing Tehran’s antipathy towards its arch global enemy, the United States. Tehran has proactively fostered high-level diplomatic ties as well as close commercial, economic, and trade relations with Afghanistan through the Taliban regime.² Its Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Kazemi Qomi, has held regular meetings with the Taliban leaders, some of whom have also been warmly received in Tehran. The most recent Taliban figure to visit Tehran was Interim Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, who spoke at an international conference on Palestine on a shared world-view, and held a meeting with the late Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on the expansion of all-round ties in late December 2023.

² Iran was the largest supplier of goods, including mineral fuels and oils, in January-February 2023. For a detailed analysis, see World Bank, 2023; Trading Economics, 2023.

However, there are also several issues that can constrain Tehran in its dealings with the Taliban. The latter's declaration of Afghanistan as a Hanifi Sunni country does not sit well with Iran's sectarian links to some 15 percent of Afghanistan's estimated 40 million population who follow Shia Islam. Nor does the Taliban's intransigence over the distribution of the waters of the Helmand River which rises in Afghanistan and flows into south-eastern Iran, and Tehran's expulsion of Afghan refugees. Tehran also has concerns about the Taliban's organic links to Pakistan and the latter's traditional ties with the United States, strategic relations with Saudi Arabia, and alleged support of Sunni Baluchi separatist groups in the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan (for a discussion, see Zambelis, 2009). While developing relations with the Taliban regime, Tehran has not formally recognized it. For Tehran, as it is for Islamabad, it is a game of wait-and-see.

The authoritarian Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan's north have also followed a similar pattern, although with diverse emphases. Turkmenistan has securitized its relatively short border with Afghanistan and remained moderately concerned about the impact of the Taliban's extremism. It has dealt with the Taliban over the completion of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which started in 2015, for export of Turkmenistan gas through Afghanistan to South Asia. Uzbekistan has developed close relations with the Taliban regime, involving high level contacts, and expansion of commercial and industrial trade, including the sale of electricity to Kabul and resumption of normal traffic through the road-rail bridge across the Oxus or Amu River, the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Friendship Bridge, which reopened in mid-2023. It has rationalised its policy conduct on an assumption that befriending the Taliban regime will prevent it from causing cross-border troubles either directly or indirectly, more likely through the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).³

Tajikistan, which shares the longest northern border with Afghanistan and a common ethnic heritage with the second-largest ethnic Tajik cluster in Afghanistan, has been most concerned about the rule of the Taliban. Dushanbe has harboured a strong distrust of the Taliban as a potentially irredentist extremist force and has been worried about the inflow of nar-

3 The IMU is a coalition of Central Asian Islamic militants whose aim is to topple the Uzbek government in favour of an Islamic system. Although not a formidable force these days, the Uzbek authorities continue to be concerned about IMU's links with the Taliban. See Intel-Brief, 2022; RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2019.

cotics from Afghanistan – a concern which is also shared by other Central Asian Republics (Afghanistan International, 2023b). It has tightened its border security, and hosts the main Afghan opposition group, the National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud, son of the legendary Mujahideen Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who fought the Soviet occupation and the Taliban before his assassination by Al Qaeda-Taliban agents two days before 9/11. Yet, at the same time, it has been careful not to unduly antagonize the Taliban authorities, enacting modest political and commercial engagement while continuing its export of electricity to Afghanistan. In December 2023, it extended an agreement with the Taliban to supply electricity to Afghanistan for another year (Ashti Subh, 2023). As such, none of the Republics have extended formal recognition to the Taliban, although Kazakhstan, which does not border Afghanistan, has shown greater political leniency towards the Taliban regime. In June 2024, it removed the Taliban from its terrorist list, claiming that it was in line with UN practices (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2024).

Sharing a short border with Afghanistan in the northeast, China has rapidly widened diplomatic, economic, and trading relations with the Taliban regime, irrespective of the two sides' fundamental ideological differences. Beijing has three important objectives: to tap into Afghani natural resources; to harness wider regional support for its Belt and Road Initiative; and to act as a counterweight to the United States in the region. It also seems to be of the view that by embracing the Taliban regime it could potentially moderate its extremism and thwart its potential influence on China's restless Muslim Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province, partly bordering Afghanistan. Not surprisingly, the Taliban have keenly reciprocated by not only remaining totally silent on Beijing's suppression of its Uyghurs, but by welcoming trade with and investment from China as an "economic partner". They have honoured the old agreements and signed several new ones with Chinese companies for the exploitation of Afghanistan's mineral resources, including iron ore, oil, and lithium (Gul, 2023). China is predicted to surpass Pakistan as Afghanistan's largest trading partner in 2024. Beijing never closed its embassy in Kabul. To cement ties further, it became the first country and global power to appoint an ambassador to Afghanistan in September 2023, which the Taliban shortly reciprocated (for details, see Aljazeera, 2023; Noorzai, 2023). Although this did not amount to China's official recognition of the Taliban regime, it has come very close to it, which must be viewed with trepidation in Washington.

Meanwhile, in a largely anti-United States move and to ensure that the Taliban do not act against Moscow's interests, especially in Central Asia, Moscow has also made overtures to the Taliban. It has transferred control of the Afghan embassy in Moscow to the Taliban, and Russia's envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, has held many meetings with Taliban leaders in Moscow and Kabul, discussing the possible threat of terrorism and the inflow of drugs from Afghanistan. Moscow has nonetheless stressed the need for an inclusive government and women's rights. In several meetings about Afghanistan held since the Taliban's return to power, it has invited not only the Taliban but also the NRF (Kawa, 2023), although separately, as well as Afghanistan's neighbours, including Pakistan and India, to ensure a regional approach in dealing with the Taliban.

In the face of its main adversaries in the region – China, Russia, and Iran – the United States has not altogether deserted the field, however. While Washington has continued to hold its public position of non-recognition of the Taliban until international demands are met, its Special Representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, has quite regularly met with the Taliban in Doha, discussing humanitarian issues, unresolved items of the US-Taliban peace deal of February 2020, and the Taliban's commitment to restraining Al Qaeda and the Taliban's rival Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K). The Taliban have launched certain operations against IS-K and claimed the elimination of the group, and have also denied the existence of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Several UN reports dispute the Taliban's account. Washington also wants to be in a position to prompt the Taliban not to get too close to China and act against US regional interests. Further, as the largest contributor to the UN humanitarian fund for Afghanistan, Washington has indirectly been involved in cash packages of U.S. \$40 million which the Taliban-controlled Central Bank claims have been transferred to Kabul (Afghanistan International, 2023a; Rezahi, 2023). These packages have strengthened the value of the Afghan currency, the Afghani.

Conclusion

The very factors of national vulnerability and external intervention that have traditionally hampered Afghanistan's evolution into a viable state are still at work, influencing the re-emergence of Taliban rule and the regional reaction to it. The Taliban leaders' negligence of these factors and the establishment of an ultra-extremist, mono-tribal and misogynistic regime

in the name of Islam do not augur well for a highly socially divided Afghanistan in a zone of regional and major power rivalry. It may ensure the survival of their regime for now, but will not transform the country into a viable functioning state in the medium to long term. Internal resistance in the shape of groups such as the NRF and the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) are already gaining pace (for details, see Goldbaum & Rahim, 2023; Loyn, 2023). Opposition to the Taliban has not yet reached the stage where it could dislodge them or prompt them to form an inclusive government with respect to human rights. But the ground for a bloody struggle for the soul of Afghanistan is being laid. Whereas internal discontent with the Taliban rule has gained momentum, the NRF and the AFF have increased their hit-and-run operations against Taliban targets (Dawi, 2023). Should the Taliban, who also suffer from growing internal divisions, especially between the rival Kandahari group from the south and the Haqqani network from the east of Afghanistan, stay on their current course of behaviour, the situation could only become more dire (Saikal, 2024, chapter 8). Since the overthrow of monarchical rule in 1973, Afghanistan has experienced five regime changes – a record by any standard. Taliban rule may very well prove to be just another phase in a turbulent region.

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