

Focus
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Pakistan's Policy Choices in Afghanistan

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Nearly two years after the Taliban took over Kabul, the condition of Afghans seems to only be worsening. The economy is floundering, there is increasing malnutrition, women's rights are being violated, and there is internal displacement and migration. While physical security has improved, there has been a steady rise in attacks attributed to the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) which has led to insecurity and instability. There is mass unemployment all over the country. However, the Taliban perceive themselves to be the victors, not the vanquished. Hence, despite all their challenges, it is still difficult for the international community to make the Taliban acquiesce to its demands and conditions.

Pakistan's policy options in Afghanistan in 2023 are complex and multi-faceted, given the country's historic ties and geographic proximity to its neighbour. The situation in Afghanistan has been constantly evolving, with the Taliban regaining control of the country in 2021 following the withdrawal of the US troops. Pakistan's relations with the Taliban have been complicated, as it was historically supportive of the group while it

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was in power previously but has also supported the subsequent Afghan governments and other stakeholders through the years.

One of Pakistan's main concerns is the security situation in Afghanistan, as the instability in the country can have spill-over effects on Pakistan. The country has also been grappling with the issue of refugees, with millions of Afghans seeking shelter in Pakistan over the years.

Moving forward, Pakistan's policy options in Afghanistan will likely involve a delicate balancing act, as it navigates its relationships with the Taliban, and other regional powers. Pakistan will also need to address the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which has been exacerbated by years of conflict and the worsening economy.

Overall, Pakistan's policy options in Afghanistan are complex and challenging, and will require a nuanced and strategic approach to address the country's security concerns, while also promoting stability and peace in the region. This paper aims to look at Afghanistan's domestic governance, its relations with the region and the international community, and the internal opposition faced by the Taliban, and in so doing, derive policy options that Pakistan could implement going forward in its relationship with Afghanistan.

Afghanistan Domestic Governance

The Taliban's approach to governance has yet to be fully established, but they have indicated that they will rule the country based on Sharia law and their interpretation of Islamic principles. This raises concerns about the protection of human rights,

particularly for women and minorities, as well as the potential for political repression and authoritarianism.

The Taliban have also faced a range of governance challenges, including the need to provide basic services to the population, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. The country's economy has also been severely affected by years of conflict and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moving forward, the Taliban will need to address the following challenges and establish a functioning government that can effectively manage the country's affairs. This will require building institutional capacity and addressing issues of corruption and mismanagement.

1. **Afghan Economy:** The Afghan economy has struggled over the past year. Sanctions against senior Taliban leaders have paralyzed the banking sector and prevented Afghanistan from engaging in the international financial system and its institutions. The value of its currency, the Afghani, has plummeted, driving up import costs and exacerbating inflation and cost of living crises.¹ To make matters worse, Afghanistan's agricultural sector has been hit by drought and natural disasters such as flash floods and her June 2022 earthquake.
2. **Frozen Reserves:** The Afghan reserves still remain frozen. They have, however, been moved to a trust from where they are supposedly meant to be disbursed to the country without Taliban interference.² With the recent steps that the government has taken, it seems more and more unlikely that they will ever be given control of the frozen reserves. However, in February 2023, A US judge in New York has ruled against claimants seeking parts of Afghanistan's central bank reserves as damages for the 9/11 terrorist attacks.³

3. **Security Situation:** While, according to many observers, the current interim government has seen a massive improvement in security and consolidating power it cannot be denied that there have been increasing reports stemming from Eastern Afghanistan of “summary execution and enforced disappearances of suspected Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) fighters or people suspected of harbouring or supporting them; reprisal killings against security officials of the former regime, some of which appear to result from official actions and others from personal vendettas after decades of war; the violent suppression of demonstrations; the imposition of surveillance on the population; house searches and detentions; and the unpredictable and arbitrary exercise of power with no recourse.”⁴
4. **Policies on Media and Women’s Education:** Initially, the Taliban made policies concerning media and gender that were less regressive than what they had maintained during the previous Taliban regime. However, these policies were not included under any official institutional framework and could be reversed easily, which many of them were. On 20th December, Taliban leadership also announced that women will be barred from education at the university level too.⁵
5. **Reduced Corruption:** Taliban also claim to have considerably reduced corruption but that can be seen as a direct consequence of the stopping of foreign aid that was the primary source of the funds for corruption. However according to reports of some Qatari officials, the Taliban government is also raising funds through Kabul airport. The airport is alleged to be a major facility for smuggling and money laundering.⁶
6. **Human Rights Abuses:** There have also been instances of public floggings of men and women and public executions,

demonstrating that the Taliban are returning to the barbaric ways of their past.⁷

Internal Opposition to the Taliban

Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021, they have faced various forms of domestic opposition. There have been reports of internal opposition to the group from various factions and groups within Afghanistan. These opposition groups are diverse and their reasons for opposing the Taliban vary.

One significant opposition group is the Afghan National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud and Amrullah Saleh, who were both former officials in the Afghan government. The NRF has vowed to resist the Taliban's rule and has been involved in fighting against the group in the Panjshir Valley.

Other opposition groups include ethnic minority groups, such as the Hazaras and Uzbeks, who have expressed concern about the Taliban's treatment of minorities and the potential for discrimination and persecution. Women's groups and civil society organizations have also expressed opposition to the Taliban's policies and practices, particularly regarding human rights and freedom of expression.

The Taliban have responded to internal opposition with a mix of coercion and outreach. They have sought to co-opt some opposition figures by offering them positions in the government or promises of protection. However, they have also reportedly targeted and threatened opposition leaders, including journalists and activists.

The international community has expressed support for internal opposition to the Taliban and called on the group to respect the rights and freedoms of all Afghans. Some countries

have also provided support to opposition groups, either directly or through diplomatic channels.

The major opposition comes from the following:

1. The Armed Resistance of the **National Resistance Front**, has its main domestic base in the Panjshir Valley and its headquarters in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Karen Decker, who is the US mission to Afghanistan's Charge d'Affaires, travelled to Tajikistan in late November to attend a meeting that mainly consisted of individuals who are against the Taliban. The meeting did not include any representatives of the Taliban. In early December 2022 Thomas West, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan, went to the United Arab Emirates and had meetings with the Taliban's Acting Defence Minister and Ata Mohammad Noor, a notable commander who opposes the Taliban. Noor and some other former Afghan officials and politicians have formed a group called the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF), which opposes the Taliban both politically and militarily.
2. Taliban have faced opposition from the exiled former Islamic Republic officials who are seeking to form a common political platform, including with the NRF, to oppose or negotiate with the Taliban.
3. **Civilian protests** led mostly by women that started in Kabul but spread to several provinces.
4. Discord within the Taliban, including ethnic/factional power struggles and political differences. This **internal rift** is regarded as the main factor behind the recently resurging hard-line policies. The Taliban leadership knows that they will have to make concessions to the hardliners in order to maintain control and to stop fighters from defecting to ISKP.
5. The Taliban government has also been dealing with terrorism by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). The attacks conducted

by the terrorist unit have undermined the core belief of the Taliban that they have brought peace and stability after four decades of violence, which has led to a loss of legitimacy. Furthermore, these incidents are likely to deter foreign involvement and financial investment.

Afghanistan and the International Community

The situation in Afghanistan has been of great concern to the international community, given the country's strategic location and the potential for regional instability. The Taliban's takeover of the country in 2021 has raised a range of issues and challenges for the international community.

One of the primary concerns is the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which has been exacerbated by years of conflict and the Covid-19 pandemic. The international community has responded with aid and support for the Afghan people, with many countries and organizations providing humanitarian assistance and funding to address urgent needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare.

Another concern is the potential for terrorism and extremist groups to use Afghanistan as a base for their activities. The Taliban's previous support for terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda has raised concerns about the potential for the country to once again become a safe haven for such groups. The assassination of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri by a US drone on July 31, 2022, indicates that the Taliban failed to uphold one of the fundamental principles of the agreement as Zawahiri was safely residing in one of the most affluent neighbourhoods in Kabul. The international community has called on the Taliban to

prevent the use of Afghan soil for terrorist activities and to cooperate with international efforts to combat terrorism.

The international community has also expressed concern about the Taliban's human rights record, particularly regarding women and minorities. Many countries have called on the Taliban to respect the rights and freedoms of all Afghans, and some have imposed sanctions on the group for human rights abuses.

Moving forward, the international community will play a critical role in supporting Afghanistan's recovery and development. This will involve providing aid and support for basic services and infrastructure, promoting human rights and democracy, and working with the Taliban and other stakeholders to promote peace and stability in the region. The situation in Afghanistan remains complex and challenging, but the international community's support and engagement will be crucial in addressing the country's urgent needs and promoting a better future for the Afghan people.

1. The top diplomatic goal of the Taliban leadership is the lifting of sanctions and official US recognition. Till date, no one but Russia has given the Taliban a roadmap of what to do to get them to lift sanctions and recognize their government. A road map describes how to get to recognition.
2. There is a high probability that the Taliban would initially refuse the terms of any roadmap. Nevertheless, it could serve as a basis for actual negotiations, however, this could ultimately result in the division of the Taliban ranks.
3. Meanwhile, the international community is rapidly losing patience with the Taliban and losing interest in Afghanistan. Political will for any engagement is waning in the face of scepticism about whether viable proposals will be accepted.

4. With the rise in terrorism, it remains to be seen whether the US will take interest in Afghanistan again regarding counter-terrorism and, if so, will they work with the Taliban to fight the ISKP threat.

Afghanistan and its Neighbours

One of the critical factors in Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours will be the Taliban's approach to governance and their relations with regional actors. The Taliban have historically had close ties with Pakistan and may seek to strengthen those ties, particularly given Pakistan's role in facilitating their return to power in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's relations with other neighbours, such as Iran and Central Asian states, are likely to be more complex, given their historical differences and concerns about the potential for destabilization.

Iran, in particular, has expressed concerns about the Taliban's treatment of Shiites and minorities, and the potential for a refugee crisis if instability continues in Afghanistan. Iran has also been involved in negotiations with the Taliban and may seek to play a role in promoting stability and security in the region.

Central Asian states, such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, have also expressed concerns about the Taliban's rule and the potential for instability and terrorism. These countries may seek to increase their security cooperation and border management with Afghanistan to prevent the spill over of violence and extremism.

1. All of Afghanistan's neighbours have concluded that proxy wars are not in their interests. More than a decade of aggressive Taliban diplomacy has shown countries that once viewed the Taliban as a threat (particularly Russia and Iran) that they are more interested in consolidating power in Afghanistan than

exporting Islamic extremist views. However, neighbouring countries are rightfully concerned about the **influx of international terrorist groups** into Afghanistan.

2. The Taliban have made a promise to cut off "connections" with terrorist organizations. However, their actual commitments are vague unclear. The rise of ISKP presents a problem (or justification) for the Taliban. If they attempt to enforce the anti-terrorism clauses of the Doha Accords against other radical groups, these groups may switch to ISKP. The assassination of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri by a US drone on July 31, 2022, indicates that the Taliban failed to uphold one of the fundamental principles of the agreement.
3. For years, Pakistan has accused the Afghan government of supporting the **TTP and Baloch nationalists** with Indian backing. The Taliban government has hosted talks between Pakistan and the TTP in Kabul, but the talks have gone nowhere. Instead, the alliance between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban seems stronger than ever.
4. The Pakistani Taliban, who escaped to Afghanistan after the Operation Zarb-i-Azb in 2014, are once again invading the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Large protests have arisen against the TTP's return to the KP province. Since the Taliban's triumph, Pakistan is the only neighbouring country of Afghanistan to have experienced a rise in terrorism across the border.⁸
5. There has been an increase in **firing from across the border**⁹ into Pakistan which led to the Chaman border being closed for a more than a week. There has also been an **attempt to assassinate the Pakistani Head of Mission**¹⁰ in Kabul, which prompted Pakistan to call back its Ambassador with the condition of return being a promise of safety.

6. Despite the rocky relationship, **trade** volume surged to \$741 million from July to October 2022.¹¹ Bilateral trade was \$451 million during the same period in 2021. This is an increase of 64%. Pakistan's exports were \$333 million, whereas imports were \$408 million. This increase is attributed mainly to purchases of Afghan coal by Pakistan in recent months.¹²
7. **China** sees Afghanistan as useful for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) expansion. There are also large deposits of mineral wealth within Afghanistan. Thus, China has been very actively and openly making inroads into the country with large scale investments. This might slow down, however, due to the recent attack at a Kabul hotel where 18 foreigners were injured.¹³

Prospects of Pursuing Various Connectivity Projects under the TTA

Improved connectivity within the region will bring economic prosperity and stability. However, there are some impediments regarding this objective. Some of these are encapsulated below:

1. The existing rail networks do not match changing trade patterns. This will require upgrading and enhancing to improve integration. The extent of rail transport usage and maturity of intermodal linkages vary greatly throughout the region.
2. There are valid and shared concerns about terrorist organizations operating in certain areas within the region and the rapidly declining security situation, specifically within Afghanistan.
3. Many of the BRI connectivity dreams for Afghanistan have been shattered by attacks on Chinese nationals in Kabul and China asking its citizens to leave the country.

4. With respect to Pakistan, there have been border attacks along the Pak-Afghan border, assassination attempt on the Pakistani head of mission and the belief that Afghanistan is still sheltering TTP fighters.
5. Afghanistan has a rugged terrain, harsh climate, insecurity and a severe lack of funds, especially since China has been reconsidering its position in the country.
6. Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan have recently decided to launch a feasibility study into the Trans Afghan Railway Project; this will help to determine whether this project can be initiated under the current climate.
7. There is a growing feeling that several states need to act in concert to leverage political and security influence in order to salvage the situation and prevent further worsening of the situation.
8. The SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure is a good start for regional countries to work together on this issue and build a common list of designated terrorist organizations.
9. The hope is that this will force the TTA to take these issues seriously as the regional integration and economic prosperity depends on it.

Analysis

After more than 20 years of war and 23 years of economic sanctions, the Taliban believe they have defeated the US and will not respond to pressure. The best policy for the United States is to work with China, Iran, Pakistan, India, and the United Nations to find a common platform to work with the Taliban on a roadmap for comprehensive government recognition. For obvious reasons, the United States is currently unable to cooperate fully with Russia

and Iran, despite some degree of convergence of goals in Afghanistan.

Moreover, the near-term futures of Russia and Iran are highly uncertain. Russia has not won the war with Ukraine. Iran is under pressure from an unprecedented wave of women-led demonstrations as the health of its supreme leader deteriorates. Even the US is preparing for parliamentary and quadrennial presidential elections. Pakistan is experiencing a range of economic, political and environmental crises, including the removal of leaders of two major political parties from elected office. This does not bode well for effective international politics.

Pakistan has no better option than to continue its engagement with the Taliban to address the terrorism and security problem. Pakistan recognizes that it cannot handle the situation in Afghanistan alone, and is working with China, the Gulf States and others to ensure that humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan continues. Pakistan has also decided not to unilaterally recognize the new government.

Pakistan is faced with significant obstacles when it comes to crafting a policy towards Afghanistan now that the Taliban are in control. While Pakistan is still supporting its Afghan allies, the Taliban's military takeover and the international isolation of Afghanistan's new government could create problems in their relationship. This could result in increased instability and economic struggles, leading more Afghans to flee to Pakistan. Additionally, Pakistan's alliance with the Taliban could cause tension with the United States and other Western countries. The most crucial issue, however, is the potential threat to Pakistan's

internal security if the Taliban fail to take action against Pakistani militants who are operating within Afghanistan's borders.

The Taliban-led government lacks international recognition, which means they are not receiving any diplomatic or economic advantages that come with recognition. Pakistan is reconsidering its ties with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) due to recent aggressive actions, infiltration by terrorists, and the Taliban's disregard for human rights norms and conventions. The increased insecurity and economic difficulties in Afghanistan could lead to a significant number of Afghan refugees seeking refuge and work opportunities in Pakistan, potentially numbering in the thousands or even hundreds of thousands.

Recommendations for Pakistan

Do not Condone Taliban's Draconian Policies

To ensure its own safety, Pakistan must be careful when dealing with the Taliban and avoid endorsing their restrictive policies on women's rights. If Pakistan appears to support the Taliban's approach, it could encourage extremist groups within its own borders who share the same beliefs. Instead, Pakistan should use its influence to encourage the Taliban to compromise on governance and counter-terrorism measures that could improve their relations with other countries. This could include pushing the Taliban to present themselves as an inclusive government that respects basic human rights.* Pakistan should also remind the Taliban that a stable and legitimate government must be willing to make compromises in order to meet international demands.

* The sentence slightly modified at the request of the author after publication of the print edition. If required, please contact the editor for details.

Remain Firm on Security and Border Issues

Pakistan needs to assert that the cross-border skirmishes, violence, and infiltration need to stop before any meaningful engagement can be achieved between the two countries. It needs to underline the importance of Taliban support with the TTP as the relationship cannot go forward in a one-sided manner. The bilateral trade is also greatly affected by these incidents leading to border closures which do not benefit either country.

Advocate for Engagement Without being the Taliban's Spokesperson

Pakistan has not yet formally acknowledged the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), which is a different stance than the one taken by Pakistan when the Taliban were previously in power during the 1990s. This could cause issues with powerful Western countries, particularly the United States. It is important for Pakistan to avoid becoming overly involved with the Taliban and neglecting other crucial relationships, such as those with the United States and European Union member states.

Islamabad should proceed cautiously and encourage the Taliban to address international concerns. Pakistan can use its remaining connections with the Taliban to persuade them to make more significant concessions in terms of governance, including the respect for basic human rights and counter-terrorism commitments, through private diplomacy and public communication.

Continue Humanitarian Assistance

Open up air and road routes for humanitarian aid to be delivered to UN agencies, NGOs, and donors. Allow as much

assistance as Pakistan's resources can support. Stop deporting recently arrived Afghan refugees to prevent the situation from worsening.

Address Domestic Grievances

Pakistan's war on terrorism is being waged entirely in Pashtun-populated areas, including the KP, the former FATA areas and Upper Balochistan, resulting in widespread death, destruction and displacement of millions of people. It has caused great discontent and anger among the Pashtuns, who see themselves as victims of the war. It would be helpful to address the grievances of those communities by starting a dialogue.

Regional Approach towards Engagement with Afghanistan

Afghanistan's neighbours need to follow a regional approach towards their engagement with Afghanistan. Steps should be taken after a regional dialogue where a common stance can be discussed. For this maybe the SAARC or SCO platforms could be of help. This could go a long way in addressing broader tensions in South Asia that foster proxy action. Addressing the problem directly rather than indirectly is in the long-term interests of all countries.

Aim for Regional Economic Integration

Islamabad must support genuine free trade policies with Afghanistan and India so that economic interdependence between the countries of the region can be achieved. This would correspond to a paradigm shift declared by Pakistan to change the focus of foreign policy from geopolitical to geo-economics. Interdependence between regions should help neutralize non-state terrorist groups like the TTP, reform the Taliban, and focus

on their own economic recovery rather than engaging in destructive and destabilizing activities across the region. Strategically located between Afghanistan and India, Pakistan can use this goodwill and the opportunity of its neighbours to act as a bridge between the two countries and beyond Central Asia.

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