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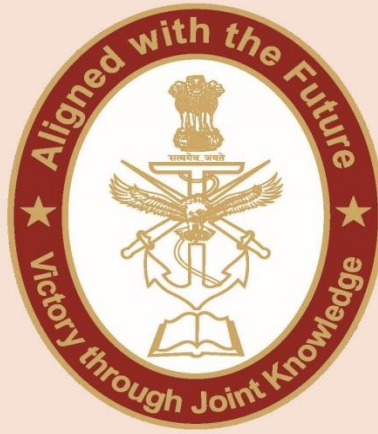
ISSUE BRIEF

AN UNSETTLING TRIUMPH: PREDICTING TALIBAN'S HOLD TO POWER IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

The Taliban's siege of Kabul in the fall of 2021 was somewhat expected. Military analysts, and academicians alike (including a prominent journalist¹) did not shy away from predicting the Taliban's rise to power as *inevitable*.² Analytical reports by government agencies, private institutions and think tanks et al, identify Afghans as societally *tribal*, socially *conservative*, and historically distant from the concepts of democracy, rule of law & equality; and that state institutions are inherently corrupt and the topography is too complex for an external force to maintain security.³ If the aforementioned assessments hold some truth, there is no denial of the fact that the Taliban are here to stay! Besides this fact, it is also safe to regard - other theories as meagre assumptions, unless proven otherwise.

¹ Mir, Hamid. 2021. "How I Predicted Kabul's Fall Two Months before Ghani Escaped." India Today, August 27, 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/opinion-columns/story/predicted-kabul-fall-two-months-before-ghani-escaped-1845901-2021-08-27>.

² Price, Brian R. 2021. "A Case for Strategic Design." Strategic Studies Quarterly 15 (4): 106–11. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48638056>.

³ Galád, Adriana Zobrist. 2012. "The Challenges and Role of Structures in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan." Connections 11 (2): 5–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26326272>.

In this Issue Brief, the author attempts to move beyond assumptions and untested theories to determine Afghanistan's future and Taliban's fate over the next three years. The author begins his argument by analysing precarious factors that are likely to determine Afghanistan's bearing in the future. The author then analyses possible scenarios that could threaten Taliban's hold to power, and later puts up a case for Taliban not only consolidating power with success but ensuring stability in the region. Reflecting on the aforementioned scenarios, the author then provides policy recommendations for New Delhi.

Forecast Predicament

The first principle of forecasting instructs researchers to segregate uncertainties for separate analysis, as it involves factors that may or may not influence a subject's future trajectory.⁴ That said, the future, in its essence, is unpredictable – more so in the absence of reliable data, correct assessment tools, or behavioural patterns of certain actors whose decision-making capability is unstructured. This further points to varying levels of uncertainty, especially when the participatory actors are asymmetric not only in decision making, but in operational principles and natural behaviour.⁵

That said, the objective of the forecast is precisely to identify a subject's trajectory and provide clear recommendations for policy makers.⁶ However, forecasting has its limitations and even with right tools in possession will not guarantee a certain future. Taking the case of Afghanistan's future trajectory and the scenarios predicting Taliban's hold to power, the author has based his forecast on limited data available on the open source and through interviews with experts from varied domains on the conditions of anonymity. That said, there may be several different futuristic scenarios that may have been plausible with varied possible outcomes. There are too many actors and scenarios intertwined in this regional space to predict a certain future. Hence, it is safe to conclude that the current scenario in Afghanistan is too complex to even try predicting its future trajectory.⁷

⁴ Fildes, R, K Nikolopoulos, S F Crone, and A A Syntetos. 2008. "Forecasting and Operational Research: A Review." *The Journal of the Operational Research Society* 59 (9): 1150–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20202189>.

⁵ Goldstone, Jack A. 2008. "Using Quantitative and Qualitative Models to Forecast Instability." *US Institute of Peace*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12255>.

⁶ Jantsch, Erich. 1970. "From Forecasting and Planning to Policy Sciences." *Policy Sciences* 1 (1): 31–47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4531371>.

⁷ Salmeron, Jose L, Marisol B Correia, and Pedro R Palos-Sanchez. 2019. "Complexity in Forecasting and Predictive Models." *Complexity* 2019: 8160659. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2019/8160659>.

Therefore, the author draws down seven probable factors that may influence Afghanistan's future trajectory, regional stability, and the potency to challenge Taliban's hold to power.

Afghanistan in a Post-conflict Age

Afghanistan, likely entering a post-conflict age, is likely to witness conflict reoccurring in its regions with an increase in violence.⁸ Taking the nature and the structure of this conflict into account (even though Afghanistan has emerged from an armed conflict) it is prone to violence-relapse more than any other state.⁹ Witness to armed conflict and ethnic based violence as early as the 1980s, Afghanistan is the best-case scenario for a conflict-trap.¹⁰

In the light of Taliban take over in 2021, its grip to power will be challenged by three key actors, over the next three years:

1. The National Resistance Front under the leadership of Ahmad Massoud and Amrullah Saleh (reaching to 5000+ fighters) has gained momentum in targeting key Taliban leaders.¹¹ Although Ahmad Massoud may be considered too young in real world combat experience (a reason for slow alliance against the Taliban), Amrullah Saleh still holds a reputation among the erstwhile ANDSF troops.¹² This explains an increase in the summer and autumn offensives of 2022.¹³
2. The recent attack on a municipality building using improvised explosives in Fayzabad highlights the ability of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) (with fighters within an estimate between 1000 and 5000) to exploit Taliban's vulnerability in maintaining necessary security within the provinces, especially that of the north. Their attacks are not only growing in lethality but convey a direct message to

⁸ A former UNAMA official in conversation with author, September 15, 2022

⁹ Davenport, Christian, Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, Hanne Fjelde, and David Armstrong. 2019. "The Consequences of Contention: Understanding the Aftereffects of Political Conflict and Violence." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (1): 361–77. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050317-064057>.

¹⁰ Wennmann, Achim. 2011. "Breaking the Conflict Trap? Addressing the Resource Curse in Peace Processes." *Global Governance* 17 (2): 265–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23033734>.

¹¹ A former journalist affiliated to Shamshad TV in conversation with author, October 03, 2022

¹² A former ANASOC commander in conversation with the author, September 12, 2022

¹³ A former commander with the erstwhile ANA 201st Corps in conversation with the author, September 04, 2022

Taliban and their fighters who once sought themselves as *secure and untouchable*.¹⁴

3. In the light of growing unemployment and hunger, there is a rise in pockets of resistance fighters such as the Afghanistan Freedom Front among other new and unknown groups with a mix of police and former members of the military joining the ranks.¹⁵
4. Right after Taliban's rise to power, Al Qaeda in Maghrib (AQIM) (which was ideologically and structurally closer to the senior leadership) has called for continued attacks against the US. But it is yet to foresee as to how Taliban will support their longstanding allies and what role it has for Afghanistan, regionally. This call appears to rally Taliban's support behind them, which was a priority for Al Qaeda's leadership during Taliban's sustained insurgency against the US-led NATO forces the Taliban insurgency, and visible during US-Taliban talks in Doha.

In addition to this, Afghanistan's complex topography may further benefit the aforementioned actors in retaining the momentum of insurgency as it played a key role for Taliban then during their violent offensives against the erstwhile NATO-ISAF and allied forces.¹⁶ Ridges and steep mountains provide necessary concealment potentially challenging Taliban's ability to initiate a counteroffensive.¹⁷

Financing War: Drugs, Guns, and Poppy

Violence is reintroduced into society when armed actors are engaged in confrontation over land, raw materials such as drugs, diamonds, or precious woods and in the case of Afghanistan, poppy.¹⁸ Today, Afghanistan contributes to over 85% in the global drug trade, as every third village in the region is involved in cultivating poppy.¹⁹ Poppy which

¹⁴ A former US State Department official in conversation with author, September 22, 2022

¹⁵ A former SFAB Commander in conversation with author August 12, 2022

¹⁶ Carter, Timothy Allen, and Daniel Jay Veale. 2013. "Weather, Terrain and Warfare: Coalition Fatalities in Afghanistan." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 30 (3): 220–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26275357>.

¹⁷ Krampe, Florian, Elizabeth S Smith, and Mohammad Daud Hamidi. 2021. "Security Implications of Climate Development in Conflict-Affected States: Implications of Local-Level Effects of Rural Hydropower Development on Farmers in Herat." *Political Geography* 90: 102454. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102454>.

¹⁸ Coyne, Christopher J, Abigail R Hall Blanco, and Scott Burns. 2016. "The War on Drugs in Afghanistan: Another Failed Experiment with Interdiction." *The Independent Review* 21 (1): 95–119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43999678>.

¹⁹ United Nations Office of Drugs & Crime (UNODC). 2022. "DRUG SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN 2021 Latest Findings and Emerging Threats." https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_brief_Nov_2021.pdf.

requires less water supply than any other cash/food crops, makes it more profitable for local Afghans to cultivate with minimal investment and a lucrative opportunity for those suffering during acute droughts. While the flourishing poppy trade is worrisome (it does not get any better), Afghanistan's saturated *poppy bazaars* have a new contender with more suppliers and customers in demand: methamphetamines, globally known as the crystal meth.²⁰ Since 2019, there is steady increase in the supply of synthetic drugs and a tenfold increase in demand, adding a boost to the global supply and potentially challenging regional stability and threatening India's national security.²¹

Curbing illicit trade

Taliban continues to maintain a stand of not supporting terror factions operating within its territories, but regional economies and in particular India, face a direct threat posed by the potential fall out of foreign made weapons currently being smuggled out of Afghanistan. The return of cross-border smuggling, which was prohibited in 2001, was somewhat inevitable. This fallout not only challenges India's national security but also that of neighbouring nations, raising questions on Taliban's commitment in accordance with the Doha Accords and a broader question on regional neighbours' commitment to counter this threat.

This is particularly true for India as most foreign trained militants may cross over in the regions of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) with foreign made weapons, night vision capabilities and heavy ordinances among others, left behind by US-led forces. This may boost the morale of pan-Islamic radical factions already motivated by Taliban's success. The smuggling of sophisticated arms to similar like-minded groups will motivate these factions to continue their jihad.

The Poppy Ban

The recent Taliban's ban on poppy cultivation – which is not the first time – is quite an intriguing decision. Why ban a water-resistant crop with lucrative financial returns at a time when Afghanistan suffers from acute food shortages, with no assurances or

²⁰ A former UNODC official in conversation with author, August 25, 2022

²¹ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. 2021. "Emerging Evidence of Afghanistan's Role as a Producer and Supplier of Ephedrine and Methamphetamine." <https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/13410/emcdda-methamphetamine-in-Afghanistan-report.pdf>.

financial support from international humanitarian aid or global financial institutions? This makes the author sceptical. Although its previously poppy ban made some remarkable reduction – by some accounts over 75% reduction in global drug trade—there is not enough data to derive a conclusion of its long-term effectiveness.

But the question is, will Taliban face the brunt of its decision, this time? Taking into account internal dissatisfaction within its rank, rival factions may use this opportunity to create further dissent within the ranks and create dissatisfaction among local populous, alienating them on the similar lines witnessed during the erstwhile Ghani government's eradication plans.

But there is a catch. The southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar not only hold great value to Taliban but hold major share in poppy production. But there is an increase in cultivation in the north, in regions where Taliban has adversaries. That said, the crop cycle in the South begins from March till April, but the duration is much larger in the North. Which means if poppy ban comes into effect, the northern regions will have more impact, than the south. Hence it is safe to say – poppy ban is a tool to exert influence in the North.

Conflict Relapse and Socio-economic Deprivation

With Afghanistan sinking in abject poverty and below-the-margin socio-economic parameters, the risk of conflict relapse remains highly likely and cannot be ignored in this forecast.²² Today, Afghanistan ranks among the list of least developed economies in Asia with a standing of 169 out of 189 nations ranked by the UN's Human Development Index.²³ With limited international humanitarian aid seeping through conscious and concerned donors, there is no end to violence unleashed by Taliban (as punishments under harsh sharia law and policy decisions influenced by inter-tribal rivalry emerging as the two instruments in governance).²⁴ In one estimate, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) projects that 97 % of Afghanistan's

²² United Nations Development Program. 2021. "Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan after August 15." [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2021-09/Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan 9 September 2021 0.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2021-09/Economic%20Instability%20and%20Uncertainty%20in%20Afghanistan%209%20September%202021%200.pdf).

²³ United Nations Development Programme. 2022. "The 2021/2022 Human Development Report." <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/AFG.pdf>.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch. 2022. "World Report 2022." <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/afghanistan>.

population could further plunge below the poverty line by the mid of 2022.²⁵ The situation will further deteriorate, hanging the fate of local Afghans (80% depend on agriculture) between seasonal floods and droughts, potentially challenging their survival.²⁶ Experts blame climate change as the main culprit, and predict the scenario to further intensify, elevating Afghanistan to the top five most vulnerable nations to natural disasters.²⁷ Experts further predict loss of vegetative lands, and excessive snow melt during the spring, which may further deteriorate land fertility and reduce vegetative pastures forcing livestock herders to migrate.²⁸

Looking to Beijing for Stability

To ensure regional peace & stability, Taliban must break the vicious circle of poverty and conflict and develop confidence in regional economies, humanitarian aid institutions and nations with global powers. But to achieve it, Taliban leadership will need to ensure positive governance initiatives and forfeit its reliance (for achieving internal stability) on one particular nation, China.²⁹ China's Afghan strategy has its foundations in two key factors, economic and security.

Economy

On the economic front, China's interest is driven by its investment in the Mes Aynak copper mine, south of Kabul and the contract for extracting oil from Qahqari, Bazar Kami and Zamarud Sai areas in the northern provinces of Faryab and Sar-e-Pol.³⁰ Under Ashraf Ghani's regime, these projects saw minimal progress due to growing regional insecurity especially in the northern provinces, which were on hold during his tenure.³¹ After Taliban took over, Chinese companies reached out to seek permission for oil & gas extraction, with some experts crediting Beijing for claiming exclusive

²⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2022. "AFGHANISTAN SITUATION REGIONAL REFUGEE RESPONSE PLAN (RRP)." <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/90471#:~:text=One in three Afghans is,internal and cross-border displacement.>

²⁶ United Nations. 2021. "Afghanistan's Farmers, Herders Desperate for Seed, Food and Cash." United Nations News, November 19, 2021. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1106212>.

²⁷ Interview with a former World Bank official

²⁸ Interview with a former ADB official

²⁹ Murtazashvili, Jennifer. 2022. "China's Activities and Influence in South and Central Asia." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 17, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/17/china-s-activities-and-influence-in-south-and-central-asia-pub-87146>.

³⁰ A prominent journalist based out of Sar-e-Pol in conversation with author, September 17, 2022

³¹ A former official of the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum in conversation with author, September 30, 2022

mining rights not only for the Amu River basin but also for Badakhshan, Parham, Takham, Baghlan, and in the Panjshir Valley, Kushaka, Herat, Katawaz and Helmand provinces, to name a few.³²

China's ambitious projects under the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) cover the northern provinces, which stresses Beijing, as many Chinese policy makers point to concerns on growing instability even after one year of post-US withdrawal.³³ That said, Chinese investments in Afghanistan will directly affect Beijing's economic interests in Pakistan and incumbent investments in Central Asian Republics. Also, the attacks on Chinese nationals in the aforementioned regions remains a cause of concern especially in the context of their security, more so now in Afghanistan. Islamabad hailed the Taliban's desire to join China's ambitious China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)³⁴, which according to one source³⁵ was discussed during the meeting between Yi and Mullah Baradar, as part of Yi's maiden visit to Taliban-led Kabul on 24th March 2022; Till date no formal decision has been taken in this regard.³⁶

Security

In the context of security, Beijing feels threatened by certain radical islamists groups with an active base of operations in Afghanistan.³⁷ This brings Beijing to focus on retaining regional stability and exert influence on Taliban to put an end to these active groups, especially those with Uyghurs as active members, posing a direct threat to China's national security.³⁸ Beijing is also keeping a close watch on Taliban's repeated

³² A journalist reporting for the TOLO news services in conversation with the author, August 03 2022

³³ Sacks, David. 2021. "Why Major Belt and Road Investments Are Not Coming to Afghanistan." Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-major-belt-and-road-investments-are-not-coming-afghanistan>.

³⁴ DAWN News Services. 2021. "'It's Encouraging': Sheikh Rashid on Taliban's Desire to Include Afghanistan in CPEC." DAWN, 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1644836>.

³⁵ A journalist reporting for Shamshad TV in conversation with the author, August 09, 2022

³⁶ ANI. 2022. "Pakistan, China Mull Extending CPEC to Afghanistan." Economic Times, July 19, 2022. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/pakistan-china-mull-extending-cpec-to-afghanistan/articleshow/92974237.cms>.

³⁷ Bloomberg. 2022. "China Wooed Afghanistan's Taliban with Investment Promises That Have Not Panned out." Al Arabiya News, September 27, 2022. <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2022/09/27/China-wooded-Afghanistan-s-Taliban-with-investment-promises-that-have-not-panned-out>.

³⁸ Soloshcheva, Maria A. 2017. "The Uyghur Terrorism." *Iran & the Caucasus* 21 (4): 415–30. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26548912>.

assurances to curtail East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) operations on its border, a factor non-negotiable.³⁹

In the end, peace & stability must endure (not only in Afghanistan but in the entire region) if Taliban wishes to make economic progress, but not if it undermines interests of local Afghans and the Afghans society as a whole. China's investment proposals may seem to be lucrative, but Beijing's tendency to make the host dependent, is a lesson Taliban is not willing to learn from Sri Lanka.⁴⁰ Beijing will take necessary actions to deny terror groups operating in the region, even if it means to interfere in Afghan affairs.⁴¹ Taliban's inclination towards Beijing comes at a time when the Afghan society is crippled with soaring cases of malnutrition and living hand to mouth in extreme poverty.

Domestic support

The Taliban which took over Kabul then in 1996, is not the Taliban that staked claim on 15 August, 2021.⁴² The tremendous loss of local lives as collateral by the NATO led coalition shifted the inclination of Afghan masses towards Taliban in a hope for peace.⁴³ However, the idea of peace remains unachieved as ISKP continues to target minority centres and top Taliban leadership, reinstating violence and challenging Taliban's security measures while sending a message of the latter's feeble hold on the seat of power.⁴⁴ This has altered local sentiments as many have compared Taliban's takeover to that of 1996, when it was focussed on reinstating order into divided, chaos and conflict-gripped Afghan society.⁴⁵ But today, they are held responsible for loss of

³⁹ Sun Tianyuan, Wang Peng. 2021. "Beijing Expects Afghan Taliban's Clean Break with ETIM Terrorist Group." CGTN, September 13, 2021. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-09-12/Beijing-expects-Afghan-Taliban-s-clean-break-with-ETIM-terrorist-group-13v5S0C6nLi/index.html>.

⁴⁰ A Wardak based political scientist in conversation with the author, August 20, 2022

⁴¹ Carice Witte, Tommy Steiner. 2021. "How China's Afghanistan Policy Impacts Its Approach to the Middle East." Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 13, 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-chinas-afghanistan-policy-impacts-its-approach-middle-east>.

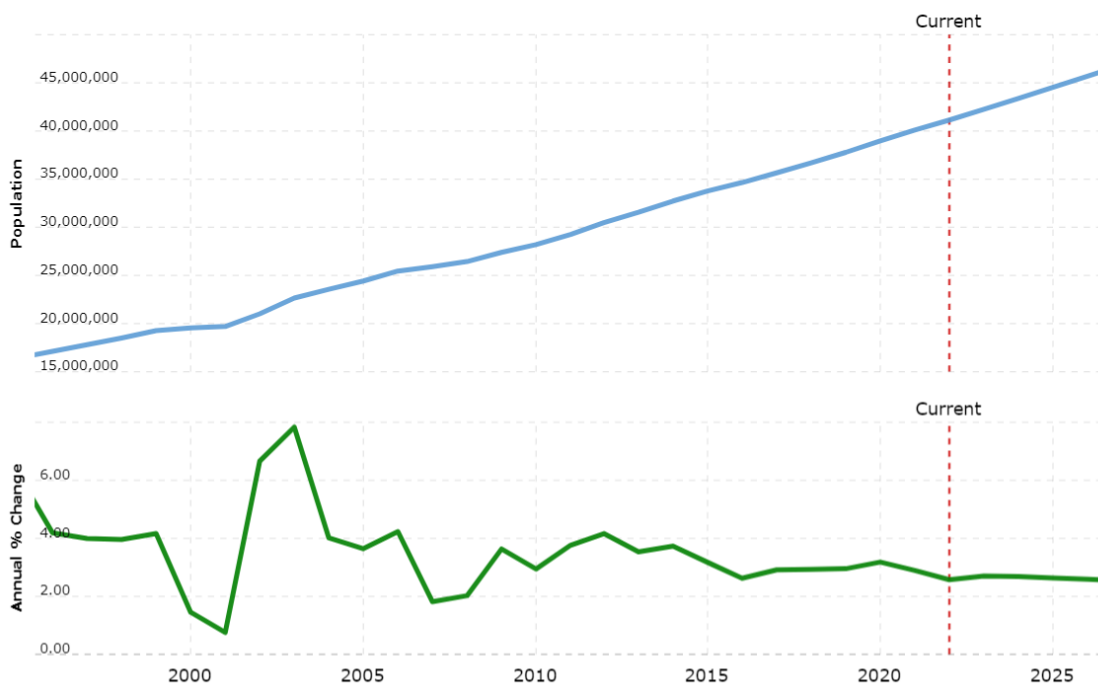
⁴² Laskar, Rezaul H. 2021. "For the Taliban, Why the Afghanistan of 2021 Is Different from 1996." Hindustan Times, September 9, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/for-the-taliban-why-the-afghanistan-of-2021-is-different-from-1996-101631177506599.html>.

⁴³ Davis, Paul K, Eric V Larson, Zachary Haldeman, Mustafa Oguz, and Yashodhara Rana. 2012. "Public Support for the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan." In Understanding and Influencing Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism, 71–98. RAND Corporation. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1122osd.11>.

⁴⁴ Rehman, Zia ur. 2022. "How ISKP Has Affected Afghanistan, Regional Security in Taliban-Ruled Country." Voice of America, August 14, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/how-iskp-has-affected-afghanistan-regional-security-in-taliban-ruled-country/6701180.html>

⁴⁵ An Afghan political scientist in conversation with the author, September 24, 2022

lives, chaos, and insecurity. Additionally, Afghan women rights, including freedom for education and expression have borne the brunt of Taliban's policy decisions in the first few months of power. They posed a direct threat to its ideology which resulted in a ban with stringent punishment for violators, alienating certain sections of the society in the first five months.⁴⁶ Thus, it remains unclear as to whether the Taliban leadership (which has the same commanders in power as compared to 1996), will establish some form of connection with younger, more informed and technology centric youths.⁴⁷ It is important to note that the Afghan population has increased twofold since 1996 and is estimated to cross the 40 million mark by 2025 (see image 1), with almost two generations carrying no memories of Taliban's first rise to power.



III

Image 1: [United Nations - World Population Prospects](#)

Post-insurgency governance

Though Taliban's internal rift will play a major factor in decoding its fate as a power contender, post-insurgency policies of governance and Afghan-centric socio-economic

⁴⁶ International Crisis Group. 2022. "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban." https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/326-afghanistans-security-challenges_0.pdf.

⁴⁷ Amal, Abdul Basit. 2022. "The Taliban Are Stuck in the Past — But Afghan Youth Can Create a Better Future." United States Institute of Peace, August 11, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/blog/2022/08/taliban-are-stuck-past-afghan-youth-can-create-better-future>.

development initiatives will test their true hold of Kabul.⁴⁸ Taliban is facing divisions on the following ethnic lines⁴⁹:

1. Factions willing to concede or share power vs the battle-hardened hardliners
2. Pashto speaking groups vs Dari/Uzbek/Turki/Baluchi speakers
3. Older, more radicalised battle-hardened follower's vs younger, English-speaking technology-oriented fighters.

Taliban has inherited Afghanistan at a time when:

- a) It has lost a major chunk of its fiscal budget (over 75%) as it was contributed by international aid institutions, humanitarian organisations, NATO member nations, which remains frozen till date.⁵⁰
- b) It is experiencing an internal rift. If Taliban survives, somehow, in the longer run, the rift will create tensions due to the complex structure of Afghan society, questioning Taliban's legitimacy as a ruler while giving opportunities to much smaller and isolated groups to contend for power.⁵¹

Regional Powers in Play

It will not be incorrect to say that, Taliban's fate depends majorly on its ability to influence international/regional economies and its efforts to elevate its position as a stakeholder. And again Iran has condemned ISKP's relentless attacks on Shia communities, pointing towards rise in Salafi insurgency, which continues to target even the most protected Taliban leaders.⁵² Considering the recent skirmishes in Nimroz, it is unlikely for Iran to negotiate with the Taliban.⁵³ China is concerned with the extremist groups operating in the region that continue to target Chinese nationals working on the border regions of Pakistan-Afghanistan, the infamous Durand Line. Curtailing these

⁴⁸ William Byrd, Ph.D. 2022. "One Year Later, Taliban Unable to Reverse Afghanistan's Economic Decline." United States Institute of Peace, August 8, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/one-year-later-taliban-unable-reverse-afghanistans-economic-decline>.

⁴⁹ A former ANDSF Commander in conversation with author, July 24, 2022

⁵⁰ Boghani, Priyanka. 2021. "Brink of Collapse": How Frozen Assets & Halted Foreign Aid Are Impacting the Afghan People." The Frontline, October 12, 2021. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/taliban-takeover-how-frozen-assets-foreign-aid-impacts-afghanistan/>.

⁵¹ A former US State Department official in conversation with author, July 17, 2022

⁵² Abdul Sayed, Pieter Van Ostaeyen & Charlie Winter. 2022. "Making Sense of the Islamic State's War on the Afghan Taliban." Hudson Institute, January 25, 2022. <https://www.hudson.org/research/17796-making-sense-of-the-islamic-state-s-war-on-the-afghan-taliban>.

⁵³ Tookhy, A. Farid. 2022. "Iran's Response to the Taliban's Comeback in Afghanistan." United States Institute of Peace, August 12, 2022. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Afghanistan-Peace-Process_Irans-Response-Talibans-Comeback-Afghanistan.pdf.

groups will pose a challenge for Taliban as any pressure would result in desertion in ranks.⁵⁴

Though Russia has expressed concerns on the similar lines (in the context of North Caucasus) it is not in any position to support Taliban due to its global isolation and its on-going demonstration of military power in Ukraine which is being closely monitored in Kabul.⁵⁵

This brings us to Pakistan whose relations with Taliban is deteriorating on four main grounds which noticeably violates Pakistan's interest and security:

a) Supporting Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

The first and the most important factor in Islamabad's alienation is Taliban's constant support to the TTP and giving them unhindered, unrestricted freedom to operate in the region. One of the first few tasks undertaken by Taliban (after taking Kabul) was freeing almost two-thousand TTP members imprisoned in Afghan jails by previous regimes.⁵⁶ After six years of peace in Pakistan, TTP attacks saw a whopping increase by 84 percent in comparison to 2020.⁵⁷

b) Not a Pakistan Stooge

The role played by Taliban to broker a peace deal between the TTP and Islamabad, contrary to the latter's expectations to fight, was to send one simple message: Taliban is not a Pakistani stooge.⁵⁸ This brings Islamabad on the negotiation table primarily with Taliban who is now in position to strong arm the former, forcing Islamabad to

⁵⁴ Rasheed, Adil, and Saman Ayesha Kidwai. 2021. "The ETIM Question: Taliban's Moment of Truth." Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, November 29, 2021. <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/etim-question-taliban-rasheed-kidwai-291121>.

⁵⁵ The Reuters. 2022. "Russia Accredits Taliban Envoy, Voices Concern about Islamist Groups." Reuters, March 31, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-concerned-islamic-states-plans-destabilise-central-asia-report-2022-03-31/>.

⁵⁶ SAYED, ABDUL. 2021. "The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan." 2Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 21, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/21/evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-pub-86051>.

⁵⁷ Afzal, Madiha. 2022. "Pakistan's Ambivalent Approach toward a Resurgent Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan." Brookings Institute, February 11, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/11/pakistans-ambivalent-approach-toward-a-resurgent-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan/>.

⁵⁸ Worden, Scott. 2022. "You Can't Choose Your Neighbors: The Taliban's Testy Regional Relationships." United States Institute of Peace, September 1, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/you-cant-choose-your-neighbors-talibans-testy-regional-relationships>.

negotiate on terms put forth by the TTP⁵⁹. This not only strengthens TTPs partnership with its brother-in-arms, Taliban, it also promotes the latter's image of a peacebuilder (an alternate to Islamabad).

c) Non-recognition of Durand Line

The Taliban does not recognise the 2,640-kilometre border with Pakistan, which has international recognition, also known as the Durand Line.⁶⁰ For Taliban the issue of the Durand Line will remain unresolved, as Pakistan's continuous efforts to construct a fence not only divides Pashtuns across the border, but rather separates Pashtun homes.⁶¹ This point of contention is going to remain prolonged between the two nations.

d) Opening Doors for India

The request by Mullah Yaqoob expressing his desire to seek India's help in training Afghan troops is a major blow to Pakistan.⁶² Such a stance in policy towards India, especially from the eldest son of Mullah Omar, speaks volumes of Taliban's outlook.⁶³ It is also a huge blow to Islamabad's foreign policy which is inclined towards making Afghanistan a reliable partner in the region, with an intent to use Kabul as a launch pad for anti-India activities. With New Delhi agreeing to train Afghan troops, Taliban is no longer dependent on Islamabad and India has a strong ally in a region opening its doors on Pakistan's western front.

In the next section the author details two probable scenarios for Afghanistan for the next three years and predicts the Taliban's possible response.

Scenario 1: Civil War Returns

⁵⁹ Asfandiyar Mir, Ph.D. 2022. "Five Things to Watch in the Islamabad-Pakistani Taliban Talks." United States Institute of Peace, June 21, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/five-things-watch-islamabad-pakistani-taliban-talks>.

⁶⁰ Khunte, Sachin. 2022. "The Durand Line Impasse: The Two Talibans And Pakistan." Australian Institute of International Affairs, June 7, 2022. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-durand-line-impasse-the-two-talibans-and-pakistan/>

⁶¹ Asfandiyar Mir, Ph.D.; Ambassador Richard Olson; Andrew Watkins. 2022. "Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Dispute Heats Up." United States Institute of Peace, January 12, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/afghanistan-pakistan-border-dispute-heats>.

⁶² Seli, Yeshi. 2022. "Afghanistan Wants Its Army Trained by India; Reopening of Indian Embassy in Kabul." The New Indian Express, June 10, 2022. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/jun/10/afghanistan-wants-its-army-trained-by-india-reopening-of-indian-embassy-in-kabul-2464104.html>.

⁶³ An Afghan political scientist in conversation with author, August 19, 2022

In this scenario, the Taliban continues to govern through stringent Sharia law and inflexible policies, with no compromise with ideology. This approach will retain influence on hardliner fighters/followers and may create following serious challenges, especially in the context of internal security:

1. If public order is not restored and ISKP continues to escalate its attacks, Taliban's ability to protect local masses will be seriously questioned and its efforts to identify regional allies/partners willing to provide economic support, will be thoroughly undermined.
2. As popular resistance will grow in the light of ideological extremism and dissatisfaction towards its ability to restore peace & stability, Taliban will be forced to strengthen security mechanisms even if it means building bridges with rival factions. This will result in acquisition of manpower and a shift in its policy to territorial control rather than that of conquest.⁶⁴
3. According to one account, the Taliban has over 75,000 fighters among its ranks.⁶⁵ If it decides to expand, it will be needing an approximately 200, 000 fighters to secure Afghanistan's vast geographical landscape and its population.⁶⁶ Such measures will force them to recruit former military and police personnel, which will add to existing stress on its financial budget, which is currently at a deficit of 44 billion Afghanis (\$501 million).⁶⁷
4. This step will deviate Taliban from its traditional policy of ideology as it decides to recruit former members of the armed forces that worked within the erstwhile government to prevent Taliban from power for the past 20 years. This may infuriate already infuriated hardliners and may create internal rift which may result in mass desertion.
5. That said, Taliban's ability to expand its security apparatus is only feasible if it can support it financially. This is due to the absence of any alternate, viable source of income; with opium markets dominated by other global players, any increment in poppy cultivation, may not translate in an increase in financial

⁶⁴ A former ANDSF commander in conversation with author, August 12, 2022

⁶⁵ A former State Department official in conversation with author, July 03, 2022

⁶⁶ A former SIGAR official in conversation with author, September 27, 2022

⁶⁷ Reuters. 2022. "Taliban's First Annual Afghan Budget Foresees \$501m Deficit." Times of India, May 15, 2022. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/talibans-first-annual-afghan-budget-foresees-501m-deficit/articleshow/91571621.cms>.

remuneration.⁶⁸ With Afghanistan having no access to transport minerals and other natural resources, copper and lithium are far from turning into economic value in the near future.⁶⁹

Hence, in this context the author assumes that the Taliban will not be able to expand its security mechanisms. This will create a ripe ecosystem for an insurgency where we will witness the rise of ethnic factions and terror organizations targeting local Afghans and claiming Chinese and Pakistani lives. This will result in a spill over effect with terror actors travelling to Russia and making a way into Europe. It may then cripple any possibilities for economic partnership with Iran, China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Central Asian economies, forcing Beijing to re-think future economic investment proposals for mining and energy exports.⁷⁰

Economically, the Taliban will be isolated. Further reluctance from international aid institutions, human rights organizations and regional economies will point towards limited or not assistance in natural disasters, such as droughts and floods or earthquakes which jolted several districts of Paktika province recently. The aforementioned situations will put Afghan lives at constant stake, giving them no choice but to emigrate. In this scenario the author predicts a gradual plunge to a state of civil war on similar lines experienced during the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in the late 1990s. The conditions then were conducive for Al Qaeda to expand its base of operations in the region. In today's context ethnic based factions will be experiencing a different challenge as it would need the Taliban's blessing to operate in the region.⁷¹

Scenario 2: Regional Stability at Last

An effective (economically) and sustainable road to consolidate power in Kabul will begin with Taliban providing ideological relaxations. This will entail Taliban entering into political negotiations with the National Resistance Front and all ethnic based stakeholders in an effort to build a political structure whose foundations are laid on

⁶⁸ Teun van Dongen, Joshua Farrell-Molloy. 2022. "One Year of Taliban Rule in Afghanistan: A Predictable Disaster." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, August 26, 2022. <https://icct.nl/publication/one-year-of-taliban-rule-in-afghanistan-a-predictable-disaster/>.

⁶⁹ Lilly Blumenthal, Caitlin Purdy, Victoria Bassetti. 2022. "Chinese Investment in Afghanistan's Lithium Sector: A Long Shot in the Short Term." Brookings Institute, August 3, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2022/08/03/chinese-investment-in-afghanistans-lithium-sector-a-long-shot-in-the-short-term/>.

⁷⁰ A former official of the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum in conversation with author, September 01, 2022

⁷¹ A former US State Department official in conversation with author, August 20, 2022

inclusivity, incorporating all ethnicities of the Afghan society. This would also entail Taliban limiting its interference in the lives of women. Although, not all of the problems can be solved by constructive mitigation, it will certainly eliminate strong local resentment, benefiting them in gaining popularity. They can then focus their attention on Islamists groups undermining their rule, and compromising future economic prospects with India, China, Russia, Pakistan, and Central Asian Republics.

If the aforementioned scenario holds true, Taliban will be alienating loyalist factions, with many hardliners considering the regime as *soft* in the context of religious/ideological beliefs. This will promote ISKP to lure Taliban deserters among their ranks and conduct serious propaganda by branding the Taliban as *un-Islamic*. Loyalists may interpret this as Taliban forfeiting its commitment towards establishing a state based on principles of Sharia, deeming this decision as blasphemy and un-Islamic. This may push hardliners and those resisting this compromise to formulate new politico-religious entities in the region. This would further compromise Taliban's legitimacy, weakening its organizational structure, political architecture, while creating a vacuum to attract foreign fighters operating elsewhere. The movement of fighters pouring in from Syria & Iraq has already commenced, and key positions being allotted to non-Afghans is becoming a trend.⁷² Absence of any intelligence alliance will further give opportunity to Islamists radicals to enter the region. Russia's weakening in Ukraine may affect its influence/presence in Syria which could boost Tahrir al-Sham and other groups to export their fighters elsewhere.

This also means that, Taliban will not be looking over a complex insurgency infused civil war but a short war with a limited security expansion and short-term increment in terms of finances. With ideological relaxations, this will remove some reluctance from international aid institutions and may attract regional powers as possible investors. But the Taliban will need to retain some stability in the region, giving some degree of confidence to regional powers in expanding their economic footprint.

This will involve a thorough check at ISKP including its recruitment propaganda. To prevent desertions within their ranks, Taliban will need to increase steady salaries of security groups and regularise them to counter any lucrative alternatives proposed by

⁷² Seldin, Jeff. 2022. "How Afghanistan's Militant Groups Are Evolving Under Taliban Rule." Voice of America, March 20, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/how-afghanistan-s-militant-groups-are-evolving-under-taliban-rule/6492194.html>.

ISKP and similar affiliates. In the context of governance, Taliban must ensure that technical experts and bureaucrats, tasked to run the wheels of governance and maintenance of critical infrastructure, do not quit their appointments.⁷³ Although limited international aid reflects months long halt on salary disbursement, Taliban must integrate principles of governance without compromising functions of an inclusive political structure with maintenance of public works, not only in the context of developing confidence within international forums, also in the interest of local Afghans.⁷⁴ This will not only assist Taliban to gain legitimacy but paves the way forward to the ultimate goal of a reliable actor consolidating power in Kabul.

Recommendations for India

From the aforementioned analysis, it is safe to conclude that Afghanistan shares a higher possibility of a conflict relapse, and the current course of events point towards its inevitability. That said, Taliban's efforts to influence international support and rigorous appeals for confidence building initiatives with regional economies, point towards its desire to seek internal stability.⁷⁵ But frequent illegal arrests and detention of former Afghan officials, members of the judiciary or anyone with linkages to erstwhile Ghani government while gunning down those disagreeing with the new rule, highlights its desire to retain policies based on traditional ideology.⁷⁶

With the aforementioned foundation now set, New Delhi is looking at Taliban's 'tricksy affair' in Afghanistan: whose course correction lies primarily in total rejection by local Afghans, but at a tremendous cost.⁷⁷ By re-establishing diplomatic presence in Kabul (and a technical team in place) India is in a unique position to deliberate with senior Taliban officials directly, while monitoring regional powers' response and activities and keeping a close eye on militant groups breeding in the region. With New Delhi

⁷³ Schmall, Zia ur-Rehman and Emily. 2022. "The Taliban Have Staffing Issues. They Are Looking for Help in Pakistan." New York Times, January 13, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/world/taliban-members.html>.

⁷⁴ Teun van Dongen, Joshua Farrell-Molloy. 2022. "One Year of Taliban Rule in Afghanistan: A Predictable Disaster." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, August 26, 2022. <https://icct.nl/publication/one-year-of-taliban-rule-in-afghanistan-a-predictable-disaster/>.

⁷⁵ Reuters. 2022. "Taliban Appeal for More Aid after Deadly Afghanistan Earthquake." The Hindu, June 25, 2022. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/taliban-appeal-for-more-aid-after-deadly-afghanistan-earthquake/article65565150>.

⁷⁶ Amnesty International. 2022. "Afghanistan: Taliban Must Immediately Stop Unlawful Killings and Arbitrary Arrests in Panjshir." Amnesty International, June 16, 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/afghanistan-taliban-must-immediately-stop-unlawful-killings-and-arbitrary-arrests-in-panjshir/>.

⁷⁷ An Afghan political scientist in conversation with author, October 19, 2022

repeatedly raising voices in support of local Afghans (on regional and international platforms), it is in a perfect position to mediate discussions/dialogues (as a responsible stakeholder) between reluctant humanitarian aid institutions, power economies, regional multilateral groups and political institutions (such as the EU) with Taliban leadership, setting conditions for a stable Afghanistan and to some extent, mould Taliban to make necessary compromises.

Taking this analysis into account, the author makes following policy recommendations for New Delhi:

1. *Mediate discussions between Taliban and international aid institutions, monetary agencies to provide conditional financial packages:*

The Taliban needs finances to govern a vast and complex topography. With a dipping economy and Afghan society gripped in malnutrition & hunger (chronic food insecurity), access to finances is a matter of socio-political security for Taliban. While international agencies have categorically refrained from releasing financial aid directly to Kabul, New Delhi can liaise with UNAMA and other agencies to provide a conditional budget to Taliban, preventing Afghanistan to further deteriorate and eventually collapse.

2. *Mediate with regional powers, isolate Pakistan:*

India must call for mediation between regional powers (isolating Pakistan), specifically with Iran and Russia and explore opportunities for cooperative investment in Afghanistan (by countering Chinese investments). This does not necessitate forceful alignment of varied interests in the region; but investing in the broader aspect of relieving pressure on a crippled Afghan society through mutual economic assistance.

3. *Supporting an inclusive political structure:*

New Delhi must bring opposition parties for mediation with the Taliban (with the assistance of UNAMA) in an effort to convince all actors to adopt an inclusive political government. This may force New Delhi to *hand hold* reluctant Afghan political groups to share the table with Taliban and expose their dissatisfaction openly.

4. *Watch for breeding militant organizations with anti-India intentions:*

For New Delhi, counterterrorism must remain a top priority, while giving special attention to militant actors with anti-India sentiments operating freely in the region.

Besides this, New Delhi may set up an intelligence collection cell for tracking movement of militant groups/actors or persons of interest crossing Afghanistan borders from battlefields of Syria & Iraq. This information may then be shared with concerned regional economies, member nations of the EU, the US and international security alliances such as NATO, for possible assessment. This will enable New Delhi to identify possible patterns of movements, enabling analysts to study influence/recruitment patterns of ISKP, IMU or regional groups with the potency to threaten instability and Taliban's ability to bring security in the region.

5. *Monitor the Meth-bazaars:*

With poppy cultivation banned in the previous Taliban regime, the current rulers too have promised to take strict action against those cultivating poppy.⁷⁸ On that note, meth has seen an increment in its users as unemployment and food insecurity takes a steep dive. To control the *menace* of meth addiction, Taliban currently operates numerous rehabilitation centres, one such in Pul-e-Sukhta, which is currently in a dilapidated state.⁷⁹ New Delhi, jointly with the UNAMA and the UNODC, must keep a close watch on meth production & distribution, which is one of the primary sources of income for ISKP and aligned groups.

Disclaimer: In the interest of safety of those interviewed for this Issue Brief, the names have been kept confidential on their request.

CERTIFICATE

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

⁷⁸ Associated Press. 2022. "Taliban Announce Ban on Poppy Production in Afghanistan." The Hindu, April 3, 2022. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/taliban-announce-ban-on-poppy-production-in-afghanistan/article65286898>.

⁷⁹ A former UNHCR official in conversation with author, October 20, 2022

