



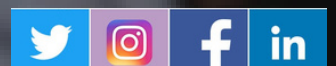
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ISSUE BRIEF

AFGHANISTAN: A TORMENTED LAND PART II: WHERE IS AFGHANISTAN HEADING?

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**AFGHANISTAN: A
TORMENTED LAND**

**PART II: WHERE IS
AFGHANISTAN HEADING?**



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Early Days of Taliban post Withdrawal. The Taliban 2.0 (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) took over the reins of Afghanistan on 15 Aug 2021, and assured the international community that they intend to stick to the terms of the Doha Agreement¹. The Agreement calls on Taliban not to allow any “international terrorist groups or individuals,” including the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISKP) and al-Qaeda, to use Afghan soil against the US, its NATO allies, and other countries. The same assurances were given to the neighbouring countries individually through bilateral meetings and agreements. However, a May 2022 letter by the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the UN Security Council highlighted the contradictions in the Taliban’s assurances and actions. The Report reiterates that links between al-Qaeda and the Taliban are either intact or have deepened over the last 20 years. In fact, the al-Qaeda is operating more freely than ever before as it believes that under Taliban rule Afghanistan is a safe haven. Unfortunately, the ISKP too, ever since August 2021, has grown in strength, increased its activities and pro-active operations against the Taliban and the Afghan people. There are credible and disturbing reports of Islamic fundamentalists and terror groups from outside relocating to Afghanistan, with obvious adverse global implications, specially to India; ironically, Russia, CAR, China, Pakistan and the West are themselves feeling the heat. To exacerbate matters, internal dissensions between leaders at the seat of power in Kabul, as also within Taliban and its various factions are getting more frequent.

An Inauspicious Start for Governance. The very start could be considered inauspicious, when the Taliban instead of being inclusive, established a Pashtun centric/heavy government. Haibatullah Akhundzada who was chosen as the supreme leader as a compromise candidate in 2016 (perceived as weak), for his religious credentials has consolidated his position, retains an overwhelming grip on decision making, which is a sure sign of internal political rivalry and jostling. Haibatullah is an Afghan Deobandi, Islamic scholar, cleric, and jurist. A highly reclusive figure, he has almost no digital footprint except for an unverified photograph and several audio recordings of speeches. He is well known for his fatwas on Taliban matters. Surprisingly, unlike most Taliban leaders, he is not of a militant background. Today, he remains the pivotal figure around whom the future of Afghanistan will be shaped; can he retain his grip over power, and could internal power struggle lead to his usurpation? The second aspect which will determine Afghanistan's course in coming years will be state of terrorism and militancy within. Experts feel that with the current state of affairs (political, economic, social, diplomatic) the Taliban may not be able to reduce the impact of ISKP; in fact, their influence and control of territory may grow. After a rather well publicised start the National Resistance Front (NRF- also referred to as Second Resistance) who are basically anti-Taliban fighters led by Ahmad Masood and former Vice President Amrullah Saleh has been showing their presence in fits and starts. Currently it is considered too weak to pose any significant challenge to the Taliban. To prevent physical external intervention into Afghanistan, the Taliban must ensure that no acts of terrorism globally is attributed to it (or to terror groups operating from within), which will encourage intervention. Secondly, it is imperative that it keeps its own flock together, as it is well known that Taliban was initially a movement, was never a single homogenous group but a loose confederation of disparate groups/clans which have come together, with their personal agendas and aims intact.

The Internal Dynamics

Has the Inevitable Power Struggle Commenced? The other Taliban leaders, even those who form part of the high table, aspire for power and holding onto it for a long time, either as part of Taliban or otherwise. They are conscious of the fact that they cannot retain control forever, specially when the economy buckles, mainly due to drying up of foreign aid. They have no real source of generating money internally except through drug money which the Supreme Leader has decried and banned. The second reason is social disharmony which is fast spreading due to poor governance, unpopular policies, corruption, social and economic inequity and clan disputes and clashes for supremacy. These leaders include the more internationally-visible segments of the Taliban; the faces of Taliban diplomacy such as Acting First Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Acting Minister of Defense Mullah Yaqub, son of the Taliban 1990s leader Mullah Omar, and Acting Minister of Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani, and some very powerful military commanders with potent networks and influence. It is public knowledge that despite trying to convince Haibatullah repeatedly about the consequences of banning girls' education and women's employment, Haibuttulah has stood rigid and firm in not rescinding the order, much to private

frustration of other leaders. After the ban, major international NGOs suspended all their operations, both because their operational capacity was critically hampered and because they hoped the suspension would force the Taliban to reverse the decision.

These difference of opinion, is the grist for internal power struggles which could very soon come out in the open. A coup which is risky, as it would require coming together of the other main power centres of Baradar, Siraj and Yaqub, currently appears unlikely, and historically too has little precedent. An alternative doing the rounds is reversion to the old practice of Rahbari Shura (the leadership council arrangement), where a consensus is presented to the Emir to decide. But Haibatullah, shows no inclination to disempower himself, and is in fact consolidating his power. Neutralising or elimination of Haibatullah by external powers may prove counter-productive with Afghan leaders closing ranks to show loyalty; as happened when former leader Mullah Mansour was assassinated in 2016 by a US drone strike in Central Kabul, and thrust Haibatullah to power. The succession scenario looks even more opaque, with none of the three willing to accommodate the other.

Terrorists Haven. There are confirmed reports by UN, US intelligence agencies of large number of terrorists from Middle East, Central Asia and Pakistan flocking to Afghanistan since Taliban's return to power². Incredibly some have been paid by regional governments! This is hardly surprising given the jihadi credentials, past political and military debts, and desperate need for funds. Apart from housing TTP and allowing it free rein within Pakistan (not overtly, but deep relationship including social between them go back many decades), there have been no reports so far of terror groups using Afghanistan as a base to launch attacks outside its borders. An interesting aspect for this non-action against foreign groups or fighters is the existence of deep personal networks. Many foreign fighters who have been fighting in Afghanistan for decades have intermarried with Taliban and local families, and bonds of camaraderie and jihadi kinship have been forged. One manifestation: Uyghur commanders in Northern Afghanistan are commanding Taliban non-Uyghur units³. The Chinese position is unique, as they are very keen to exploit the mineral and other resources in Afghanistan apart from keeping Uighur terrorists at bay. While the Afghans have desisted from condemning Chinese behaviour against Uighur Muslims, they have not pro-actively acted against them within Afghanistan (they did promise to re-locate them from China border), something which China wants. ISKP is a different matter; Taliban has been struggling to contain them, specially, since they appear to ignite sectarian internal conflict, with the aim of splitting both the Taliban and Afghanistan. This is borne out by ISKP focus on attacking Chinese, Russian and foreign assets inside. A civil war at this stage will have unimaginable adverse consequences for Afghanistan and the world. The ISKP has claimed responsibility for numerous bombings and armed attacks against Hazaras in 2022, which killed and injured at least 700 people.

A Peep into Afghanistans Security Environment. The marginalisation of different ethnic groups has remained a source of dismay for many Afghans. The increased attacks on non-Pashtun ethnic communities by the ISKP, raids by the Taliban on

Tajik communities, and extrajudicial killings have also aggravated the situation. Drawing largely from UN reports [UNSC, UNDP, UN General Assembly, The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNOMA)] on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security, find **excerpts only on the security domain, to give you a flavour of happenings during the period from 14 November 22 to 31 January 2023.**

- An increase in the overall number of conflict-related security incidents and civilian casualties compared with the same period in 2021–2022. The United Nations recorded 1,201 security-related incidents, a 10 per cent increase from the 1,088 incidents recorded during the same period in 2021–2022.
- Detonations from improvised explosive devices had increased by 7 per cent, from 52 to 56; and assassinations had decreased by 24 per cent, from 77 to 58.
- The economic and humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate, resulting in an increase in crime - related security incidents. The Western, Southern and Eastern regions accounted for 58 per cent of all recorded incidents, with Helmand, Herat, Kandahar, Kabul and Nangarhar being the most affected provinces.
- Armed opposition attacks and armed clashes with the Taliban continued to decline. UNAMA recorded 23 armed groups claiming to operate in Afghanistan. The National Resistance Front, the Afghanistan Freedom Front and the Afghanistan Liberation Movement (formerly the Afghanistan Liberation Front) claimed responsibility for attacks in Helmand, Kabul, Kandahar, Kapisa, Nangarhar, Nuristan and Panjshir Provinces. De facto security forces carried out operations targeting National Resistance Front fighters,
- The UN recorded 16 attacks by the ISKP in four provinces, compared with 53 attacks in seven provinces during the same period in 2021–2022.
- Border tensions endured. A total of 17 of 19 incidents occurred along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan,
- On 28 November, Tehreek-e-Taliban, Pakistan (TTP) announced an end to the May 2022 ceasefire with the Government of Pakistan and ordered its fighters to resume attacks against Pakistani security forces. Pakistan repeatedly expressed concern over the threat posed by terrorist groups operating from Afghan territory, especially by TTP.
- Following the de facto authorities' order of 24 December suspending women's employment with NGOs, female national staff employed by the United Nations received threatening calls and warnings for not traveling with a *mahram* (a male relative). The de facto authorities also attempted to inspect United Nations compounds in Herat, Kabul, Kunduz and Nangarhar Provinces.

The Current Socio-Economic Environment: A Humanitarian Crisis.

The Quick return to Autocracy despite promises. The Taliban, since August 2021, continues to impose numerous rules and policies violating a wide range of fundamental rights of women and girls, including freedom of movement, right to work and a

livelihood, and **access to education and health care**. Authorities also repressed or threatened the media and critics of Taliban rule, forced the closure of civil society organizations, and dismantled government offices meant to promote or uphold human rights. Taliban security forces throughout the year carried out arbitrary detentions, torture, and summary executions of former security officers and perceived enemies, including security personnel in the former government or alleged members or supporters of the armed group ISKP. ISKP on its part, increased its attacks on schools and mosques, mostly targeting ethnic Hazara Shia Muslims. Afghanistan's criminal code makes same-sex conduct a criminal offense, and the Taliban have echoed the previous government's support for the criminalisation of same-sex relations⁴.

Women Disempowerment in Power Sharing. The Taliban's leadership, which is entirely comprised of men, has not permitted women to participate in governance at any level or hold any senior positions in the civil service, including as judges. Authorities announced and frequently enforced rules prohibiting women from traveling or leaving their homes, including to go to the workplace without a male family member accompanying them, an impossible requirement for almost all families, and barred women from holding most types of jobs. Authorities also announced rules requiring women's faces be covered in public, including women TV newscasters, and stipulated that male family members will be punished when women violate rules regarding movement and dress. Taliban forces in several instances used excessive force to disperse women

Current Socio-economic Outlook. The "Afghanistan Socio-Economic Outlook 2023⁵" details how the country's economic output collapsed by 20.7% in 2021. We all know that Afghanistan was already amongst the poorest countries in the world. Despite tentative signs of recovery, such as a relatively stable exchange rate, an increase in exports, growing demand for labour, and muted inflation, GDP is estimated to have further declined by 3.6% in 2022. In 2022, 24.4 million people in Afghanistan are in humanitarian need. Almost 23 million people face acute food insecurity, and over one million children risk dying from severe acute malnutrition. **Poverty has become nearly universal affecting 95-97 percent of the population⁶**. Restrictions on women further threaten aid flows and growth and could have disastrous economic consequences. A UN report on Afghanistan's economy states that without continuity for girls' education and women's ability to work, prospects for the country's recovery will remain grim.

Freezing of Central Bank of Afghanistan Assets. Undeniably, one of the root causes for Afghanistan going further into a morass, is the US restrictions on the Central Bank of Afghanistan from using its assets (approximately \$9 billion), from carrying out essential central banking services, keeping the entire economy in a state of collapse. The Bank's incapacities have caused a massive and enduring liquidity crisis, as well as shortages of banknotes in both US dollars and Afghan currency, severely restricting legitimate financial activities by businesses, humanitarian agencies, and ordinary Afghans.

Response from the International Community including UN. Justifiably, the world is tired of managing strife specially in Afghanistan, and ironically the instability caused is mainly due to power play between the global and regional powers. Afghanistan has had periods of intense intervention including armed, and periods of neglect. There is an urgent need for a focussed, special strategy to be executed by the UN for alleviating the unprecedented humanitarian crises with a real risk of systemic collapse and catastrophe⁷. The UNSC has adopted Resolution 2681 condemning the decision of the Taliban to ban Afghan women from working for the United Nations in Afghanistan, saying that it undermines human rights and humanitarian principles⁸. The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) continues to request permission from the court's judges to resume an investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity, following a 2020 request from the former Afghan government to defer to their own investigations.

UN said last week it requires \$4.6 billion this year to help more than two-thirds of the country's 40 million population who're living in extreme poverty. Key donors, including the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, and Japan, however, continue to maintain restrictions on donor assistance; but they must ensure that legitimate banking transactions involving Afghanistan are not restricted by UN or bilateral sanctions on Taliban officials. China, Russia, and Iran are among a handful of countries that maintain warm ties with the Taliban. They have provided substantial aid to the Taliban, but have stopped short of formally recognizing the government. The US remains the single largest donor to the humanitarian response by global agencies, having provided more than \$2.1 billion since the Taliban retook power.

The China Effect. Very recently in May 2023, the Taliban agreed with China and Pakistan to extend the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Afghanistan, potentially drawing in billions of dollars to fund infrastructure projects in the sanctions-hit country⁹. Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang and his Pakistani counterpart Bilawal Bhutto Zardari met in Islamabad on 06 May 23, and pledged to work together on Afghanistan's reconstruction process including taking the \$60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to the Taliban-ruled nation. The Taliban have also harboured hopes for China to boost investments in the country's rich resources, estimated to be \$1 trillion. The government inked its first contract in January 2023 with a subsidiary of China National Petroleum Corporation to extract oil from the northern Amu Darya basin. The Chinese and Pakistani ministers also stressed on the need to unfreeze Afghanistan's overseas financial assets.

The India Factor and her Current Options

India can no longer keep harping on her tried and tested historical linkages with Afghanistan. India's almost altruistic aid to Afghanistan both for infrastructure development and humanitarian considerations has been appreciated by the people and previous government. Taliban has also made the right noises of assurance, that no anti-India activities will be perpetuated from Afghan soil. Frankly, India's post-2021 strategy on Afghanistan has been reactionary. Pakistan has always blockaded India's

direct access and connectivity with Afghanistan (except for some token humanitarian aid recently). India sought to circumvent that by participating in the development of Chabahar port in Sistan-Baluchistan province of Iran (there are some issues there too, but not being debated here). India has always seen this port as a game changer for connectivity with Iran, CAR and Afghanistan.

The presence of terror outfits in Afghanistan specially ISKP and al-Qaeda is a grave threat to India. Both are increasingly using social media to recruit as also sow anti-India propaganda, and have visibly broadened their campaign against India. The cover of the July 2022 edition of the ISKP's 'Voice of Khorasan' magazine was blatantly anti-India. The group also issued death threats against former BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma for her remarks on the Prophet; criticised the Taliban and its leaders for meeting with Ministry of External Affairs Joint Secretary JP Singh in June 2022; and threatened to carry out attacks against Sikhs and claimed responsibility for the attack on a gurdwara in Kabul in June 2022.

There is a lack of cohesion in South Asia on Afghanistan. Even most multi-lateral regional organisations like The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), SAARC, ASEAN have failed to form a joint mechanism on Afghanistan and the new terror threats emanating from Kabul. There is obviously a trust deficit, due to many geopolitical events globally between nations. For example, both China and Pakistan did not attend the regional summit on Afghanistan hosted by India¹⁰, and instead held a "Troika plus" meeting in Islamabad with Russia and the US. Herein lies a paradox, leaders in Afghanistan understand that they need to make some concessions especially ideological one (like empowering women, stance on women and children's education) to get international assistance, but the Supreme Leader remains inflexible and unmoved. It appears that the power vacuum due to exit of ISAF has been quickly filled by China, Iran and Russia. One common coalescing factor remains preventing any Western presence in this part of the world. Russia has surprisingly taken the lead and has been the most vocal proponent for the Taliban in the international arena. Most of the regional forums where Afghanistan remains a core concern are orchestrated under the Russian umbrella. These include the Moscow Format Consultations, the Tunxi Initiative of the Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan, the Tashkent International Conference, among other smaller regional initiatives¹¹. India must endeavour to exploit her long-term relations with Russia, specially, since there is commonality of approach. Pakistan-Afghanistan relations are like the proverbial yo-yo, and certainly not going the way Pakistan exulted and expected on 15 Aug 2021.

A New Pro-active Approach. We took a step forward by opening a "technical office" in Afghanistan in June 2022 and delivered a consignment of wheat for the World Food Program, which was accepted warmly by the Taliban in Jalalabad with Indian and Taliban flags flying together. The Indian Budget 2023-24, has made a special provision of US\$ 25 million development aid package for Afghanistan as announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman¹². Taliban has welcomed this step stating that this will go a long way in improving Afghan-India ties. India is also conducting a course for Taliban staff by our MEA. While not recognizing the Taliban government, India has sought to

maintain contact by providing humanitarian and other assistance. With her new-found confidence and status amongst the international community, unlike 2001, India has every intention to actively stay in the loop, in all plans and structures for Afghanistan.

Conclusion

How does one deal with the Taliban and the people of Afghanistan separately? as no one wishes that the people should continue suffering this human tragedy. Afghanistan people in some issues may have reached a point of no return after getting a taste of moderate ideologies and progressive societies; hopefully, this reality cannot be wished away using the barrel of a gun. India has virtually been the lone power, which has always advocated that the Afghanistan people should themselves decide on their future; their governance, social and political choices. After all, decades of great games, intervention of outside powers has only brought misery, destruction, lawlessness, poverty and negligible infrastructure to this benighted land. I cannot but repeat what I stated in Part I, that if the international community does not act fast in providing humanitarian assistance (note, only humanitarian), Afghanistan's history over the past half a century suggests that alternative fronts resisting the regime in power do not take long to emerge. It also demonstrates a tendency for external actors to support their proxies in Afghanistan. The day Afghanistan establishes internal political and economic stability on her own, may beckon the start of the long road to stability and prosperity, and an end to external intervention.

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.

¹ 'Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan', US State Department, available at <chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>. accessed on 17 Apr 23.

² '**What Ayman al-Zawahri's death says about terrorism in Taliban-run Afghanistan**', by Venda Felbab-Brown, August 2, 2022, Brookings Institute, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/08/02/what-ayman-al-zawahris-death-says-about-terrorism-in-taliban-run-afghanistan/>. Accessed on 27 May 23.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Numerous online articles, but also read 'Afghanistan Events of 2022', Human Rights Watch, available at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/afghanistan>. Accessed on 27 May 2023

⁵ '**Afghanistan Socio-Economic Outlook: 2023**', UNDP Report, available at <https://www.undp.org/afghanistan/publications/afghanistan-socio-economic-outlook-2023>. Accessed on 27 May 2023.

⁶ '**UN Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) for Afghanistan**', 26 Jann 2022, UN Afghanistan, <https://afghanistan.un.org/en/169578-united-nations-transitional-engagement-framework-tef-afghanistan>. Accessed on 27 May 2023

⁷ '**UN Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) for Afghanistan**', 26 Jan 2022, UN Afghanistan, <https://afghanistan.un.org/en/169578-united-nations-transitional-engagement-framework-tef-afghanistan>. Accessed on 27 May 2023)

⁸ UN Meetings Coverage, Security Council, 27 Apr 2023, available at <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15271.doc.htm>. Accessed on 27 May 2023

⁹ 'China's Belt and Road to enter Afghanistan in Taliban's victory', Economic Times, 07 May 2023 available at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/chinas-belt-and-road-to-enter-afghanistan-in-talibans-victory/articleshow/100050983.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst. Accessed on 20 May 23.

¹⁰ "India hosts NSA-level summit on Afghanistan; 7 nations in attendance," *Hindustan Times*, November 10, 2021.

¹¹ '**India's Taliban dilemma: Diplomatic engagement and moral disquietness**', Shivam Shekhawat, March 24, 2023, ORF>Expert Speak, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-taliban-dilemma/>. Accessed on 23May 23.

¹² '**Taliban welcomes Indian Budget 2023-24, says will help improve ties between nations**'

Read more at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/taliban-welcomes-indian-budget-2023-24-says-will-help-improve-ties-between-nations20230202215238/>. Accessed on 27 May 23.