



ABOUT INTEGRITY UK

Integrity UK is an organisation committed to challenging hate and empowering communities through innovative approaches to promoting integration, cohesion and social reconciliation within the MENA region and the UK.

Responses to the Taliban | A Regional Overview

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Pakistan

Much has been said about Pakistan's role in Afghanistan over the years. Although an ally of Washington, Islamabad regularly frustrated US efforts to fully root out the Taliban. In particular, the country's main intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), is commonly viewed as having been instrumental in the creation of the group in the 1990s and is believed to have maintained links with it over the decades¹.

The View from Islamabad

Although Islamabad has regularly denied links to the Taliban beyond diplomatic links, this perception has been discredited by the statements of Pakistani officials themselves. In July, Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, referred to the group as “civilians”². Subsequently, Khan's reaction to the Taliban takeover of Kabul was that Afghanistan had “broken the shackles of slavery”³.

These statements contrasted with Islamabad's official call for an inclusive political settlement and a power-sharing agreement, with an emphasis that Islamabad would continue to work with the international community and all Afghan stakeholders to facilitate this outcome. In light of statements by Khan himself, such official proclamations are not viewed by observers as credible. Instead, many observers have called the events in Afghanistan a victory for Pakistan.

Islamabad's view of Afghanistan has been viewed through a variety of lenses, both with regards to the Taliban and with regards to the Afghan Government.

With regards to the Taliban, the aforementioned close ties between the group and the ISI are especially notable. According to the Pentagon, these relations are not just one of patronage and proxy support but extend to intermarriage, as well as ideological and geopolitical alignment⁴. Indeed, the Haqqani Network – which is also believed to have links to al-Qaeda⁵ – has been described as “an arm of the ISI” by US military officials.

Thus, although Washington is officially an ally of Islamabad, such links have been frequently tested by the endemic lack of trust between the two countries. Such scepticism was fuelled further by Washington's continued ties with India and the general anti-Americanism among the Pakistani public⁶. In this context, the Taliban likely represented the most reliable means for Pakistan to influence Afghanistan, especially if Pakistani officials expected an eventual US withdrawal.

All this plays into Pakistan's prime concern – or as some have called, *obsession* – in the form of India. The historical hostility between Pakistan and India is well known. Such hostilities have flared up in the form of border clashes, most recently in 2019.

In Islamabad, there was a longstanding view that India is plotting to break Pakistan along ethnic lines and wants to use Afghanistan as a launchpad for insurgencies into the country, especially Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Such suspicions were fuelled by the generally cordial ties non-Taliban governments in Kabul had with New Delhi. Indeed, since the Taliban was ousted in 2002, trade between Afghanistan and India picked up significantly⁷, with India becoming

¹ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/13/what-will-happen-to-afghanistan-and-pakistan-s-uneasy-border-pub-85152>

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/imran-khan-pakistan-taliban-afghanistan-b1892871.html>

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/taliban-pakistan-imran-khan-afghanistan-b1903821.html>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-15026909>

⁵ <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/hardline-haqqani-network-put-charge-kabul-security>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/may/01/pakistan-hard-country-anatol-lieven-review>

⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/the-return-of-the-taliban-and-complications-for-india/articleshow/85419928.cms>

Afghanistan's largest market in South Asia⁸. New Delhi also offered significant reconstruction support to Kabul⁹. Such developments contributed to the mood in Islamabad that Kabul was a friend of New Delhi¹⁰.

How Will Pakistan Engage with Actors in Afghanistan?

Given the relatively-positive response in Islamabad towards the Taliban takeover of Kabul, it is likely that Pakistan's main concern will be to ensure that the transition is as smooth as possible. There is little reason to believe that Islamabad will seek to constrain or limit the Taliban, even if it has the means to do so. However, it is interested in ensuring that the country does not descend into chaos in a manner that will necessitate outside intervention. Indeed, with many countries refusing to recognise a Taliban-led government, Pakistan may present itself as Kabul's sole lifeline.

In this course, it may even play the role of the peacemaker between former Afghan Government officials and the Taliban and may be instrumental in fostering a governance agreement. Such a course of action will also allow Islamabad to present itself as a positive and constructive partner to Washington after years of slow-but-steady deterioration of ties. With Washington's influence in Afghanistan practically depleted, Islamabad may indeed become Washington's best means for continued influence in the country, a fact that Islamabad will use to its full advantage. Such push for counterterrorism cooperation will likely gain renewed urgency in Washington following the bombing in the Hamid Karzai Airport that killed 13 US soldiers, alongside 72 Afghan civilians and 28 Taliban fighters¹¹.

Within the same context, Islamabad may also improve its profile as a counter-terrorism partner to Washington. Although US officials have grown increasingly sceptical about Pakistani counter-terrorism support over the past 20 years, cooperation between the two sides nevertheless continued. With the US withdrawal, there is limited room for Washington to monitor Afghanistan, leaving Pakistan as one of the few options for leverage on Kabul. Such an outcome would also help Islamabad pursue its interests while placating Washington's concerns.

Ultimately, however, practical concerns such as economy and reconstruction will take significant precedence. The Taliban has already indicated that reconstruction is one of its main concerns¹². Meanwhile, the Afghan economy, never strong to begin with, will likely suffer following the International Monetary Fund (IMF) decision to suspend Afghanistan's access to \$440 million in new monetary reserves and an exodus of skilled staff¹³.

Unfortunately for the Taliban, Pakistan is in the throes of a major economic crisis and won't be capable of providing economic aid or reconstruction support. However, Islamabad has strong ties with Turkey and China who are construction and manufacturing powerhouses respectively and neither of them reacted particularly negatively to the Taliban takeover. As such, they could, through Pakistani mediation, invest in projects in the country. Such an outcome is not far-fetched, as China was already mentioned by the Taliban as a potential reconstruction partner¹⁴.

⁸ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/taliban-halts-trade-with-india-via-pakistan-fieo/articleshow/85439615.cms>

⁹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/afghan-says-india-one-of-biggest-donors-in-reconstruction-efforts-rejects-talibans-allegations/articleshow/75800841.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/06/an-uneasy-limbo-for-us-pakistan-relations-amidst-the-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/26/us-military-personnel-in-bomb-attacks-at-kabul-airport>

¹² <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3140399/china-welcome-friend-reconstruction-afghanistan-taliban>

¹³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/will-taliban-welcome-al-qaeda-back-afghanistan>

¹⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/will-taliban-welcome-al-qaeda-back-afghanistan>

However, even if Beijing and Ankara show willingness to foot the reconstruction bill, such an outcome will also risk diluting Islamabad's leverage over the Taliban.

What are Islamabad's Main Concerns Going Ahead?

For Islamabad, the main source of concern will be ensuring that a new government in Kabul can represent its interests and counter its opponents. This process already seems to be off to a good start. However, with the Taliban stronger than it was in decades and fiercely sensitive about foreign interference, the willingness of its leaders to listen to contacts in Pakistan may be limited and subject to competition from other sources who may offer more tangible benefits¹⁵.

Another concern for Islamabad will be maintaining its relations with Washington. Over the past 20 years, Afghanistan was the crux of the relations between the two governments. And although there is room for counter-terrorism cooperation post-Afghanistan, mutual mistrust between the two capitals and Pakistan's need to balance its relations with Washington with that of Kabul will be a source of sustained troubles. Already, US officials have raised alarms after members of the Haqqani Network were placed in charge of Kabul's security¹⁶. In the aftermath of the bombing in the Kabul Airport, it may raise further alarms about the extremist danger in the country.

Domestically, the Taliban victory may come with a veritable blowback. Throughout Islamabad's alleged support for the Taliban in Afghanistan, the country's government remained hostile to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as "Pakistani Taliban"¹⁷. Although the group is ideologically aligned to Afghan Taliban, unlike the Afghan Taliban, it has attacked both Pakistani and Chinese interests since its formation. Given the widespread jubilation among jihadi groups to the Taliban takeover, the TTP might find itself galvanised enough to stage a resurgence, using its ties among the Pashtun populace on both sides of the border. Other groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed may also take advantage of the wave to reorganise themselves.

Ultimately, despite a celebratory stance towards the events in Afghanistan, Islamabad's path is still fraught with many challenges.

¹⁵ <https://carnegieindia.org/2021/08/17/will-taliban-keep-their-promises-in-afghanistan-pub-85158>

¹⁶ <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/hardline-haqqani-network-put-charge-kabul-security>

¹⁷ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/05/evolution-and-potential-resurgence-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan>

India

In the aftermath of the Taliban's rapid capture of Kabul, alongside much of the rest of Afghanistan, many observers were quick to label India as a loser. The logic is understandable: India had severely fraught relations with the Taliban during the group's rule over Afghanistan in the 1990s. The country also experienced numerous terrorist attacks by militants who used the Afghan territory as a safe haven before launching attacks on Indian forces in Kashmir and other parts of the country¹⁸.

The view of India as a loser is also fostered by the many alleged links between the Taliban and India's regional nemesis, Pakistan, which, in turn, was viewed as one of the winners. The situation is further complicated by another regional rival, China, which not only has strong relations with Pakistan but has also taken positive first steps with the Taliban.

Conversely, New Delhi had friendly relations with the post-Taliban Afghan Government. The Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, was viewed as being particularly close to India¹⁹. In the years between 2002 and 2021, India became one of Afghanistan's main trade partners²⁰, as well as a major – if not the biggest – development assistance donor²¹, with aid in developmental assistance exceeding \$3 billion²².

However, even with its deep ties, India was notably absent in the Afghan peace process in Doha, with Indian observers lamenting that the other parties in the talks isolated New Delhi²³.

Indian Response, Engagement and Rationale

New Delhi, like other powers, opened backchannel diplomacy with the Taliban after it became clear that the Afghan Government might collapse. However, these initial contacts appear to have born little fruit for New Delhi²⁴. Indeed, Indian analysts themselves have lamented New Delhi's relative inactivity over the matter in the months leading up to the Taliban takeover²⁵.

Thus, it is unsurprising that the response from New Delhi has been one of alarm. As was the case with Moscow and Beijing, the Taliban has offered assurances to New Delhi that Indian citizens and interests would not be harmed. Unlike Moscow and Beijing, however, New Delhi has responded to such offers with scepticism and continued to evacuate its citizens, as well as Afghans who worked with New Delhi²⁶. Highlighting the priorities that the BJP-led government already displayed, the evacuations – including emergency visa dispensations – were primarily offered to Hindus and Sikhs²⁷. Indian politicians and pundits themselves expressed alarm that the developments could result in “radicals” in India becoming more emboldened by the Taliban victory²⁸.

Internationally, New Delhi has coordinated its actions with Moscow, the only significant actor in Afghanistan that New Delhi has cordial ties with. The two countries announced the setup of a combined team of foreign ministry and security experts to monitor the situation. In a statement

¹⁸ <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/569013-india-in-the-eye-of-the-taliban>

¹⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/taliban-afghanistan-iran-pakistan-conflict-evacuation-withdrawal/>

²⁰ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/the-return-of-the-taliban-and-complications-for-india/articleshow/85419928.cms>

²¹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/afghan-says-india-one-of-biggest-donors-in-reconstruction-efforts-rejects-talibans-allegations/articleshow/75800841.cms?from=mdr>

²² <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/569013-india-in-the-eye-of-the-taliban>

²³ <https://scroll.in/article/1003553/new-cold-war-the-talibans-return-to-afghanistan-is-an-undeniable-setback-for-india>

²⁴ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/13/india-is-scrambling-to-get-on-the-talibans-good-side/>

²⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/13/india-is-scrambling-to-get-on-the-talibans-good-side/>

²⁶ <https://youtu.be/xy2snabHXTI>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1427368950292226059>

²⁸ <https://youtu.be/xy2snabHXTI>

issued by the two governments, Islamic radicalisation in the country as well as a spill over effect in the rest of Central Asia were cited as their main concerns²⁹. This is not surprising, as Indian officials have held talks with Russian mediation before³⁰. New Delhi likely hopes that its coordination with Moscow can help represent its otherwise-isolated interests.

The relatively limited range of responses from New Delhi – especially compared to other regional actors – are reflective of the few options India has with regards to Afghanistan. The country has experienced rising tensions with both Pakistan and China, leaving any prospects of cooperation unlikely despite mutual interests and concerns over instability.

Similarly, the Taliban will be seen as being too close to Pakistan, resulting in a trust deficit that will cast a shadow over any bilateral ties. For Taliban, New Delhi's close ties with the previous Afghan Government represents a similar trust deficit, a matter that was raised by Taliban officials³¹.

New Delhi could build ties with the nascent resistance movement based in Panjshir. After all, Indian officials have already mulled providing equipment and logistical support to “friendly militias”³². However, Indian officials are deeply nervous about deepened military involvement in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the prospects for the resistance are hardly favourable and supporting it could easily become a losing bet for New Delhi that simply ends up antagonising the Taliban with no gains.

What Is Next for New Delhi in Afghanistan?

Relations between New Delhi and the Taliban in Kabul are already off to a tough start. The two sides have already exchanged criticisms of each other. The Taliban also halted India's trade via Pakistan even as other trade has continued relatively unabated³³. It would stand to reason that New Delhi's stance in the short-to-medium term will be similar to its stance in the 1990s: That is to say a security-focused approach that is especially concerned with cross-border terrorism and proxy warfare, especially in Jammu-Kashmir where tensions have been growing steadily since New Delhi revoked the region's special status in 2019.

However, New Delhi would do well to initiate some level of contact with Kabul. Such contacts should be sober about what can and can't be achieved while at the same time conscious of the divergences between Islamabad and Kabul. With Pakistan's economy severely constrained and limited in what it can offer to Afghanistan, New Delhi can make a case towards recovering – and resuming – some of its projects in return for security assurances, both domestic and cross-border.

New Delhi may also find continued cooperation with Moscow useful and, through Russian contacts, explore ways to find avenues of cooperation with Beijing and Islamabad concerns such as cross-border terrorism. The scope of the cooperation may be limited amidst mutual suspicions, but they may act as just enough of a pressure valve to keep the situation from escalating.

²⁹ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-russia-to-assess-taliban-actions-before-any-recognition-move-101629858296074.html>

³⁰ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/13/india-is-scrambling-to-get-on-the-talibans-good-side/>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/taliban-halts-trade-with-india-via-pakistan-fieo/articleshow/85439615.cms>

Turkey

As far as Afghanistan goes, Turkey has always been somewhat of an outlier. The country does not neighbour Afghanistan. However, it has longstanding cultural links with the country. Over the 2000s, the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) were involved in NATO, being the only Muslim country to be so. The TSK's footprint in Afghanistan has been limited, with its main task training the Afghan Government forces and offering the Coalition logistical support³⁴. Ankara has also been involved in infrastructure development projects. The small footprint allowed the TSK to avoid controversies or casualties.

In the weeks leading up to the Taliban takeover, Ankara's stance was of cautious optimism. As a Muslim country with a conservative government that held close partnerships with Pakistan – which is alleged to have links with the Taliban – and Qatar – which hosted the Afghan peace talks – the general attitude in Turkey was that the situation was not of great concern for Ankara³⁵.

Indeed, this relative lack of tension is what led to talks about the TSK assuming control of the Hamid Karzai Airport in Kabul following the total NATO withdrawal. For Ankara, the prospect of control over the airport was part of its wider aims of increasing its influence in the Muslim world³⁶.

In the lead-up to the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Turkish pundits have been putting emphasis on the religious commonality between the Turkish and Afghan people. However, if there was an expectation that Ankara would react with jubilation like Islamabad, this did not come to pass.

Speaking on Wednesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that the messages he was receiving from the Taliban are positive but added that his government would not act in response to the Taliban's words but also their actions³⁷. Turkish officials, such as the spokesperson for the ruling AKP, Ömer Çelik, also noted that Turkey would be on Afghanistan's side so long as the Afghan people desired so, especially with regards to infrastructure projects³⁸. Subsequently, Ankara's stance closely mirrored other NATO members. Turkish officials said that they may recognise the Taliban Government, but this will happen with international coordination.

Furthermore, contrary to expectations that the TSK would remain in Kabul Airport, Turkish forces began the evacuation of their troops³⁹. Ankara also evacuated some members of the Afghan National Government, suggesting that despite the optimistic language, it is not hedging its bets on the Taliban⁴⁰. While it appears that talks with the Taliban are still in progress over the future of the airport, it seems the two sides are disagreeing on whether Turkish troops should be present in the area, with the Taliban demanding the full departure of the TSK⁴¹.

Through it all, Ankara's attention was increasingly diverted not to the developments in Afghanistan itself but its spill over effects. Particularly, in the weeks leading up to the Taliban takeover, the country recorded an increasing number of Afghan refugees coming to Turkey via Iran⁴². The country, already experiencing growing opposition to the presence of Syrian refugees, has reacted very negatively to taking in Afghan refugees. As a result, Ankara has increased its border security. Turkish officials have also gone on record refusing the notion of becoming a "warehouse" for Afghan refugees

³⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/2/why-is-turkey-eager-to-remain-in-afghanistan-after-the-us-exit>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ <https://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogan-taliban-dan-gelen-mesajlara-simdilik-ihiyatli-bir-iyimserlikle-yaklasiyoruz,974458>

³⁸ <https://t24.com.tr/haber/akp-turkiye-afgan-halki-istedigi-surece-yanlarinda-olmaya-devam-edecek,974590>

³⁹ <https://t24.com.tr/haber/milli-savunma-bakani-akar-dan-afganistan-daki-tahliyelere-iliskin-aciklama,974535>

⁴⁰ <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-helps-senior-afghan-officials-leave-country-167204>

⁴¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/taliban-doesnt-want-turkish-soldiers-afghanistan>

⁴² <https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/07/31/afghan-refugees-are-reaching-turkey-in-greater-numbers>

after some EU officials toyed with the idea⁴³. It appears that the refugee angle will become Ankara's overriding concern in the coming days.

Ankara's Trajectory of Relations

Unlike Syria, Iraq and, where naval borders are concerned, Libya, Ankara does not have any immediate geopolitical concerns in Afghanistan and this appears to have informed its more relaxed and diplomacy-oriented stance. It seems Ankara may be emphasising its role as a constructive partner to improve its ties with NATO after several years of steady deterioration over the developments in Syria and Libya, as well as concerning Turkey's ties with Russia. Afghanistan, in this context, represents a low-risk high-reward option.

The growing refugee crisis also played into Turkey's calculus and might explain why the earlier, more optimistic statements about the Taliban were gradually tempered with caution. Ultimately, Ankara's main concern, like other regional powers, will be to limit escalation that can lead to a refugee crisis while ensuring that its interests are not ignored.

Unlike other regional powers, however, Ankara has significantly more flexibility to operate. With contacts in both the Afghan Government and the Taliban and a relatively non-toxic legacy in the country, it seems Ankara still sees itself with a role in Afghanistan regardless who rules it. Additional coordination efforts with Pakistan only further emphasises this approach⁴⁴.

Indeed, some Turkish pundits suggested that the withdrawal of the TSK was an attempt to make a diplomatic "clean break" between the NATO mission and any post-NATO involvement Ankara may have in the country⁴⁵.

How Does Turkey's Future in Afghanistan Look?

Currently, Ankara occupies a relatively advantageous spot as far as Afghanistan is concerned. It has contacts with both sides of the Afghan conflict. As such, it is in no need to rush to the support of the Taliban, the remnants of the Afghan Government, or the budding resistance movement in Panjshir. Instead, it will likely attempt to mediate between the Afghan factions or, more likely, support Doha's diplomatic efforts, in a bid to reach an outcome that protects its interests.

Given Pakistan's lack of economic clout and China's likely unwillingness to foot the whole bill, Turkey may position itself as a source of reconstruction, allowing Ankara to ingratiate itself in Kabul. Turkey's reconstruction projects in Somalia have already given Ankara political and economic dividends in the Horn of Africa. Thus, Ankara may present its success there as a sweetener for deeper involvement in Afghanistan⁴⁶.

Ankara may also try to leverage the Islamic credentials of the AKP to offer governance assistance to Afghanistan. However, given the Taliban's staunch opposition to foreign involvement, this is highly unlikely.

Such calculations, however, will be tempered by Ankara's growing concerns around a new refugee crisis, which will put pressure on it in a variety of different ways. The EU and NATO will be pushing Ankara to handle the refugees before they reach the EU border. In turn, the domestic nationalist opposition – already attacking the AKP government over its Syrian refugee policy – will utilise the crisis to chip away support from the AKP's nationalist coalition partners. Neither of these pressures

⁴³ <https://www.ft.com/content/09abc27e-607c-4d83-8e39-84eaa179565e>

⁴⁴ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-pakistan-agree-on-close-coordination-in-afghanistan>

⁴⁵ <https://t24.com.tr/haber/murat-yetkin-nato-perdesinin-kapanmasi-turkiye-nin-afghanistan-sahnesinden-cekildigi-anlamina-gelmiyor-senaryolar-hazirlanmaya-baslanmis-durumda,974538>

⁴⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-sets-its-sights-on-the-horn-of-africa/a-52111261>

will result in a change in direction. They will, however, constrain Ankara's options and may even come to dominate Ankara's Afghanistan policy.

Iran

What has been the Reaction?

Official reaction from Tehran on the developments in Afghanistan has been one of cautious optimism, with a focus on the US' withdrawal rather than the Taliban gains. In a statement on 16th August, newly appointed President, Ebrahim Raisi, stated that "the withdrawal of America from Afghanistan must be an opportunity to return life, security and lasting peace to the country", adding that "Iran is committed to its neighbourly relations with Afghanistan"⁴⁷. Raisi added that "Iran will work for stability" and called for "all groups to reach a national agreement"⁴⁸. A day earlier, outgoing Foreign Minister Javed Zarif tweeted that "violence and war - like occupation - never solve problems"⁴⁹, later labelling the situation as "the catastrophic US-engineered situation in Afghanistan"⁵⁰. In a similar vein, Raza Naghdi, a senior commander in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), praised the resistance of the Taliban, stating that "the result of resisting against a great power is victory"⁵¹. Naghdi also stated that "the failure of the British and Soviet Union empires in Afghanistan lead to the collapse of those superpowers"⁵², alluding to the US' defeat as indicative of Washington's decline as a global power.

While many official comments have been sanguine – and viewed through what is considered as a positive development owing to the US' withdrawal – responses from religious leaders and the wider public have been more critical. In July, Grand Ayatollah Safi Golpaygani, labelled trusting the Taliban as a "grave, irreparable error" owing to the group's "history of evil and murder"⁵³. Former President, Mahmoud Ahmadian, echoed these comments, calling the Taliban's return to power as a "grave threat" to Iran⁵⁴.

The editor of Jomhuri Eslami ("Islamic Republic") and conservative cleric, Massih Mohajeri, similarly warned against normalising the Taliban and overlooking the group's history of atrocities. In an online post, Mohajeri warned that the Taliban will show their true face when they tighten their grip on power and "deceive" Afghan society⁵⁵, a sceptical view of the Taliban shared by large swathes of the public across Iran. Indeed, Afghans in Tehran⁵⁶, Esfahan, and the holy city of Qom have taken to the streets since the Taliban's takeover to protest against the group. In videos published online, protesters can be heard chanting "death to the Taliban".

From a Hostile History to Thawing of Relations

The hostility from large segments of Iranian society is understandable given the fraught history between the two sides. In 1998, Taliban forces killed eleven Iranian diplomats and a journalist after taking control of Mazar-e Sharif, a multi-ethnic city and the fourth largest in Afghanistan. Thousands of Shias from the Afghan Hazara community were also killed under Taliban persecution in the ensuing years.

During this period, Tehran stepped up its support for the Northern Alliance of anti-Taliban fighters and cautiously backed the US-led NATO invasion in 2001 that led to the overthrow of the Taliban

⁴⁷ <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5282670/خروج-امریکا-از-افغانستان-به-فرصتی-برای-احیای-صلح-و-امنیت-تبدیل>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1426929816859824133?s=20>

⁵⁰ <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1429357199722176513?s=20>

⁵¹ <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5283765/دوره-ابر-قدرتی-و-یکمنازی-امریکا-تمام-شده-است>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-iran-reaction/31417187.html>

⁵⁴ <https://t.me/dolatebahar/74171>

⁵⁵ <https://t.me/JENewspaper/86204>

⁵⁶ <https://www.isna.ir/news/1400052417375/ویدئو-تجمع-شهر-وندان-افغانستانی-مقیم-تهران-در-اعتراض-به-تصرفات>

and the instalment of Hamid Karzai as President. As a result, Tehran re-opened its embassy in Kabul whilst maintaining cordial relations with the Karzai Government, even as Tehran's strategic calculus remained concerned with its hostility to the US.

Despite the relatively positive start, ties between the Afghan Government and Tehran gradually deteriorated as a result of a series of diplomatic and geopolitical incidents. In conjunction, rumours emerged that Tehran was engaged in backchannel diplomacy with the Taliban and that it had offered military support to the group, an allegation that Tehran consistently denied.

However, in July 2016, Taliban Spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, confirmed contact with Tehran, saying that the group was "establishing new relations with Iran". In December 2018, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, announced that Iran had held talks with the Taliban⁵⁷ – with approval of the Afghan Government – during a visit to Kabul, representing the first time the two sides acknowledged official bilateral contacts. In November 2019, Zarif met with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tehran, the co-founder of the Taliban and the group's political representative. Subsequently, a more publicised and high-profile visit took place in January 2021 between a Taliban delegation and senior Iranian officials led by Zarif and Ghani⁵⁸. Whilst the meeting took place against the backdrop of Afghan peace talks and the US-Taliban peace process, it represented a shift in Tehran's relations with the Taliban by pragmatically positioning itself as a key regional middleman between the warring sides.

Other geo-political developments also contributed to Tehran's growing rapprochement with the Taliban. Iran's own warming relations with Qatar, which hosted the Taliban's political office during the years of the US-backed Afghan Government, also facilitated stronger access to top level officials – such as Mullah Baradar – and built trust between the two sides.

Subsequent meetings between the two sides took place in November 2019, after the US President Donald Trump declared the talks "dead" ⁵⁹, highlighting Tehran's strategic ploy to co-opt the Taliban but also build relations based on shared enmity towards the US.

A further key concern for Iran is security on its eastern border. Iran and Afghanistan share a 570km long border, which include numerous important access points for both countries and important transit sites for the Taliban. There are fears about the growth of terrorist groups hostile to Iran in a Taliban-led Afghanistan, which threaten to undermine the country's own security. However, previous cooperation between the Taliban and Iranian forces against the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK), which recently claimed responsibility for the attack on the Hamid Karzai Airport on Thursday (26th August), suggests that the two sides may be able to engage in some limited security cooperation against groups like the ISK that they both hold hostility towards.

What Does the Future Hold?

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan offers Tehran a strategic opportunity to redefine its role with its eastern neighbour and strengthen its relations with the Taliban more broadly. While other key regional players such as China, Russia, Pakistan and Turkey may seek to fill the vacuum left by the US, Iran will look to position itself effectively and leverage its own geo-political and cultural capital in Afghanistan, whilst continuing to gradually expand its influence on the local level and build trust with Taliban officials. While the current situation remains extremely fluid, and there is no semblance of an imminent political agreement, Tehran will likely focus on the immediate short-term situation

⁵⁷ https://twitter.com/alishamkhani_ir/status/1354375807175692288

⁵⁸ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/09/06/2147944/-/مسیر-صلح-ایران-در-مسیر-صلح-افغانستان>

⁵⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49642655>

by preventing the escalation of conflict, stymying refugee flows (Iran hosts over 3 million Afghans), and clamping down on drug smuggling.

However, there remains some uncertainty whether the contacts between the Taliban and Tehran can develop past one of mutual convenience driven by geopolitical necessities and mutual enmity towards the US. Such developments will depend less on Tehran and more on the Taliban's own internal and external politics as it seeks to establish governance across the country. How foreign powers with rivalries with Iran, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey manage their relations with the Taliban will be just as important for the future of Tehran's ties to Kabul.

For Pakistan, the Taliban's takeover has already been viewed as a "victory" owing to its long-term links with the group, whilst Saudi Arabia has been no stranger to historically funding groups and countries ideologically aligned with its own geo-political objectives.

The main risk for Tehran is that the threat along its border with Afghanistan could develop from a predictable but low-intensity hostility with the US to a more volatile threat that could also see increased anti-Shia sectarianism.

Thus far, the Taliban indicated that they want to represent all ethnic and religious groups in Afghanistan, including Shia communities from the Hazara community. Rhetoric from leading Taliban officials has emphasised national unity and the inclusion of all ethno-religious minorities, and the group recently allowed Shia Muslims to commemorate the holy holiday of Ashura in Mazar-e Sharif⁶⁰. Last year, the group also appointed its first Shia cleric, Mawlawi Mehdi, as district governor of Balkhab in northern Afghanistan⁶¹. While viewed as a largely symbolic move, and indictive of the Taliban's own pragmatism to increase its appeal with all segments of Afghan society, it nevertheless represented a volte-face in its approach with a community with which it has had a violent history. For Iranian officials, such developments represent cause for optimism. However, old biases and a history of tensions will not be overcome easily.

Nevertheless, the hope in Tehran is that it is a sign that the group is intending to change for good rather than acquiesce to short-term needs and revert to type in the long term.

⁶⁰ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/05/28/2556848/> برگزاري-عاشوراى-حسينى-در-مزارشريف-طالبان-هم-شركت-كردند

⁶¹ <https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/taliban-attempts-to-woo-afghanistan-s-hazara-community-with-new-appointment-1.1011775>

Russia

Official Reactions

The Russian response to the Taliban's swift rise to power has been relatively warm compared to the reaction from NATO states. In contrast to the evacuation of Western diplomatic staff from the country, the Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Dmitry Zhirnov, stated on 17th August that the Taliban have guaranteed the safety of the Russian diplomatic mission in Kabul⁶². He asserted that the Taliban have adopted "the most friendly and best approach to Russia", adding that the embassy in Kabul will not face any new limitations in their work and that there will be now worsening of relations compared to those with the previous government⁶³.

The Foreign Ministry's spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, commented on the developments on 19th August, stating that the authority of the Taliban in Afghanistan is a reality that the international community will have to come to terms with⁶⁴. In addition, Zakharova stated that Moscow was prepared to evacuate any foreign nationals, not only Russia's, out of Kabul⁶⁵. She also mentioned the possibility of Russia removing the Taliban from its list of terrorist organisations, which will be based on the forthcoming actions of the Taliban. Zamir Kabulov, the Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan, commented on the matter on 16th August, stating that Russia will only remove the Taliban from its list of terrorist organisations only when the UN Security Council (UNSC) will do the same. This issue, however, has yet to be raised in the UNSC⁶⁶. Kabulov also claimed that the Taliban were a "more capable" negotiating partner in comparison to the former "puppet government" in Kabul⁶⁷.

At a press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Russian President Vladimir Putin echoed Zakharova's words on 20th August, stating that the Taliban was virtually in full control of Afghanistan and that the following steps should be taken based on this reality⁶⁸. Putin also addressed the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) members on 23rd August, stressing the importance of preventing a spill over of "radical Islam" into neighbouring crises and also encouraging caution with regards to the influx of refugees from Afghanistan into Central Asian states for fear of accepting potentially dangerous individuals.

Despite these relatively undisturbed responses, more recent developments seem to have perturbed the Russian authorities as the Ministry of Defence sent four military transport planes to evacuate over 500 people on 25th August, including citizens of Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine⁶⁹. This response came after the Taliban threatened to prevent further evacuations from Afghanistan and as US President Joe Biden affirmed that the US will put into action its plan to withdraw all American troops by 31st August⁷⁰.

Russia's Strategy

Based on these responses from some of the highest-ranking state officials, including the President himself, Russia is keen to develop ties with the Taliban that have already been established over the course of the past few years.

⁶² <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2601720>

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/08/19/midtaliban/>

⁶⁵ https://lenta.ru/news/2021/08/19/moscow_suggests/

⁶⁶ <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/08/17/taliban/>

⁶⁷ <https://tass.ru/politika/12141099>

⁶⁸ <https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-signals-ready-engage-taliban-experts/story?id=79577283>

⁶⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/c2cefce2-b3dd-46ce-8cf5-c655217ff47a>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Firstly, Russia's pragmatic approach is linked to the realities on the ground, where the Taliban have developed a network of local authorities throughout the country and in many areas the group has been in de facto control, despite the presence of the NATO-supported Afghan National Army. Despite Russia's opposition to the Taliban's jihadist ideology and its potential to cajole like-minded groups and individuals in Russia and Central Asia, Russia inclination is to compromise and shift towards the group in power, especially as it has been combatting NATO forces. In addition, the Taliban's approach to politics has also shifted in recent years, with the group capitalising on local frustrations with the US-supported government led by Ashraf Ghani. Moreover, the Taliban has been engaged in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) within the borders of Afghanistan, creating the perception that the former is a nationalist-Islamist group warring against a transnational jihadi group. Russia's belligerent stance towards both NATO and the IS has made the development of relations with the Taliban an expedient course of action.

Russia is counting on the Taliban to commit to the pledges it has made on forming an inclusive government and thus encouraging political stability, which Russian officials are contrasting to the instability of the years under the US-supported government⁷¹. According to one of Russia's state-owned media outlet, RIA Novosti, the Taliban have already approached Russia to be a part of the political integration process⁷². The Taliban have reportedly asked the Russian embassy to relay a message to the resistance movement in the Panjshir region that the Taliban is ready to enter a dialogue with them and to resolve any political issues without spilling blood⁷³. The Panjshir region of northern Afghanistan is so far the only part of the country that has not been taken over by the Taliban and it is the current base of an anti-Taliban resistance led by Amrullah Saleh, who has claimed the office of the President of Afghanistan following the flight of Ashraf Ghani, and Ahmad Massoud, the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud who led the anti-Soviet resistance in the 1980s. Nevertheless, despite these overtures made by the Taliban, there are reports that its forces are approaching the Panjshir region, raising fears that this will lead to military combat, which would go against Russia's preference for intra-Afghan dialogue⁷⁴.

Another major motivation for Russia to be involved in developing relations with the Taliban is connected with Russian interests and its presence in the Central Asian states. Russia leads the CSTO, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and it has a military base in Tajikistan. Russia conducted joint military exercises with the Tajik and Uzbek militaries on 10th August following the Taliban's capture of territories bordering Tajikistan and Uzbekistan⁷⁵. Russia's Central Military District Commander, Colonel General Alexander Lapin, justified these military drills on account of a concern of the "threat of penetration of radical terrorist groups into the border countries of the Central Asian region"⁷⁶. Part of Russia's cautious acceptance of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan is the latter's guarantees that it will not seek to penetrate the Central Asian states and will focus its efforts only within the borders of Afghanistan.

A Cautious Relationship

The Russian state has been in direct contact with the Taliban for at least 6 years, when official reports of an established channel of communication first came out⁷⁷. These initial contacts are said to have been founded on mutual interests in the fight against the IS, according to Zamir Kabulov⁷⁸. Such communication is said to have been established with so-called "moderate" factions of the

⁷¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/20/no-alternative-to-the-taliban-russias-envoy-to-afghanistan>

⁷² <https://ria.ru/20210821/afghanistan-1746705181.html>

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/22/afghanistan-taliban-fighters-panjshir-valley>

⁷⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-tajikistan-uzbekistan-military-drills-afghanistan-/31403841.html>

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201510261029128786-russia-taliba-communication/>

⁷⁸ <https://www.interfax.ru/interview/486757>

Taliban⁷⁹, lending credence to the view that Russia has been interested in co-opting the more nationalist and mainstream elements of the group (represented by Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada) and avoiding the more globalist and fundamentalist elements (represented by the Haqqani network)⁸⁰.

Aside from the motivation to support a common front against the IS, Russia's approach to the Taliban has also been affected by the country's military and political cooperation with Pakistan over the past decade⁸¹. Aware of Pakistan's influence over the Taliban, Russia has seen its relationship with Pakistan as a vehicle through which to gain leverage on developments in Afghanistan, especially in case the Taliban were to gain control over the country, a possibility which has now materialised.

Overall, Russia bears the hope that the current mainstream, nationalist and "moderate" elements of the Taliban continue to maintain their authority in an inclusive government. Russia's main priority vis-à-vis Afghanistan is that the Afghan state remains stable and prevents the spread of extremist Islamism to neighbouring states. The initial responses from Russian state officials seem to even evoke a sense of glee that the US-led military mission and what Russia deemed a "puppet" government have failed in their objectives and have opened the way for an anti-Western group to take power. Nevertheless, Russia will continue to be cautious in its relationship with the Taliban considering the possible security issues for neighbouring Central Asian allies and the potential rejuvenation of Islamist groups in the region. Russia officially continues to recognise the Taliban as a terrorist group; however, the *realpolitik* on the ground has pushed its Ministry of Foreign Affairs to accept the authority of the group and to keep its channel of communication open.

⁷⁹ <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/27453272.html>

⁸⁰ Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Context" 2018, pg 29, Russia/NIS Center: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rnr_23_stepanova_russia_afpak_2018.pdf

⁸¹ Ibid, pg 31.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan Eventually Responds

The alarm bells began ringing in Uzbekistan on 14th August once the Taliban had taken over the city of Mazar-e Sharif in the north of Afghanistan, close to the border with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry released its first official statements on the developments across the border on 17th August, addressing a stern warning, stating that "any attempt to violate the state border of Uzbekistan will be strictly eliminated in accordance with national legislation"⁸². Nevertheless, the statement mentioned that the Uzbek authorities are in "close contact" with representatives from the Taliban on matters of "border protection and peacekeeping"⁸³. It also noted that the Uzbek diplomatic missions in Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif continue to operate.

The official statement came after 585 Afghan servicemen carried by 22 military aircraft and 24 helicopters entered Uzbekistan over the weekend of 14th-15th August, when the Taliban had succeeded in its advance into northern Afghanistan⁸⁴. The Uzbek authorities deemed this border crossing to be "illegal"⁸⁵. In addition, an Afghan and Uzbek plane collided in the Surxondaryo province of Uzbekistan, although no deaths were reported as the pilots managed to eject themselves from the planes in time⁸⁶.

In addition, reports claim that the well-known army commander and former warlord in northern Afghanistan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, who is also an ethnic Uzbek, crossed into Uzbekistan on 14th August with a group of loyalists⁸⁷. The reports of his presence in Uzbekistan were, however, denied by the Uzbek Foreign Ministry's news agency, Dunyo⁸⁸.

Uzbekistan has tightened its grip at the border and is reluctant to admit a large quantity of refugees into the country. A group of 150 Afghan refugees were returned to Afghanistan on 20th August by the Uzbek authorities following coordination with the Taliban, which has allegedly provided assurances that they will not harm the refugees upon their return⁸⁹. On 21st August it was reported that almost 2,000 people had been evacuated from Afghanistan through Uzbekistan, as citizens of a number of states coordinated with Uzbekistan to bring their citizens to safety⁹⁰.

On 23rd August, President Shavkat Mirzoyev took part in a CSTO session, in which cooperation and coordination between the members states regarding developments in Afghanistan was discussed⁹¹. The President's Press Office released a statement mentioning that the countries in the region are exchanging information conducive to the stabilisation of the security situation⁹². There is even talk of the possibility of Uzbekistan re-joining the CSTO⁹³, which it had left in 2012 for the second time.

⁸² <https://www.bbc.com/uzbek/uzbekistan-58243877>

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/08/16/borders-uzbekistan/>

⁸⁵ <https://thedi diplomat.com/2021/08/afghan-forces-flee-fly-to-central-asia/>

⁸⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-military-jet-crashes-uzbekistan-report-2021-08-16/>

⁸⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/europe-migration-taliban-uzbekistan-7b467c5f64c97ceea7d59ecaf0940950>

⁸⁸ <https://tashkenttimes.uz/national/7393-neither-ashraf-ghani-nor-abdul-rashid-dostum-are-in-uzbekistan-foreign-ministry>

⁸⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/graisondangor/2021/08/20/uzbekistan-deports-150-afghan-refugees-under-taliban-agreement/?sh=4c72086b1cb9>

⁹⁰ <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/31420715.html>

⁹¹ <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/08/23/borders/>

⁹² <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/4553>

⁹³ <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/31426978.html>

Differing Views on Events

The unpredictability of the Taliban's following steps after their recent military victory has left people guessing about how the group will impact regional politics and security. Uzbekistan has taken a securitised approach by tightening its border with Afghanistan. Some experts from the country are supportive of this response and are mistrustful of the Taliban's proclamations that they are simply a national movement.

Historian Ravshan Nazarov considers the transnational nature of the Taliban's ideology at its root a threat to Uzbekistan's secular character and that the countries that border Afghanistan need to "put their armed forces on high alert [and] strengthen the system of collective regional security"⁹⁴.

The other view is more lenient and credulous of the Taliban's claim that it is only interested in reinforcing its power within the borders of Afghanistan. Analyst Kamoliddin Rabbimov claimed that the "the Taliban have gained power, and now they need to hold onto it", adding that "in order to retain power, they need to see to the primary needs of society. This means that they will gradually pursue stabilization"⁹⁵.

Others are keen to swiftly adapt to the change of power in Afghanistan and to establish relations and to restart cross-border trade. In an interview with the Russian News Agency TASS, Nodirbek Jalilov, Director of the Termez Cargo Centre in the border town of Termez, stated that trade between Uzbekistan in Afghanistan will not only resume in the coming weeks, but will possibly even increase⁹⁶. He mentioned that five million tons of cargo was transported annually through the Termez-Hairatan checkpoint, 70% of which reached Pakistan through Afghanistan. He added that Uzbekistan primarily exports fuel and lubricants to Afghanistan while Afghanistan exports dried fruits to Europe through Uzbekistan⁹⁷. Jalilov claimed that the rampant corruption of the Ghani government penetrated all spheres, especially trade, making it more expensive to send goods through Afghanistan. However, he conceded that the Taliban was doing the same when it was in power⁹⁸.

In any case, on a practical level, Uzbekistan's stance towards Afghanistan in terms of inter-state relations has thus far changed very little. The diplomatic missions in Afghanistan continue to operate and energy agreements signed before are still in force. For instance, the Uzbek Ministry of Energy stated on 24th August that it will continue to abide by its commitment to provide electricity to Afghanistan as it has been doing before⁹⁹.

What Does the Future Hold?

Uzbekistan was quietly involved in the Afghan peace process in years coming up to the Taliban takeover¹⁰⁰. This included meetings with both the former Ghani government and the Taliban, as Uzbekistan acted as an intermediary between the two, relaying one another's messages. This past experience goes some way to explaining how the Uzbek authorities were swiftly able to establish contacts with Taliban representatives to stabilise the situation in the border regions once the Taliban had taken Mazar-e Sharif and the region bordering Uzbekistan.

Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov mentioned in June 2021 that Uzbekistan was the first country to establish direct contacts with the leaders of the Taliban, at a time when the insurgent group was

⁹⁴ <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-afghan-troubles-keep-border-city-on-edge>

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/12153183>

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ <https://www.ozodi.org/a/31425734.html>

¹⁰⁰ <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/what-is-uzbekistans-role-in-the-afghan-peace-process/>

making significant gains in Afghanistan¹⁰¹. Uzbekistan's increased contacts with the Taliban over the past few years, its participation in the peace process, its antipathy towards the Ghani government and the quick response security measures taken over the past fortnight indicate that the country was to a certain extent prepared for a Taliban takeover.

As with other states in the region, Uzbekistan is wary of the Taliban's ideology and its potential impact on home-grown Islamist movements. However, the most prominent Islamist Uzbek group in the region, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), has been at odds with the Taliban since it pledged allegiance to the IS in 2015. Nevertheless, an offshoot of the IMU denounced the IS and stated its support for the Taliban.

The IMU was initially only comprised of Uzbek members. However, it now has a multi-ethnic member base and operates across Central Asia. The Uzbek government will likely seek to influence the Taliban's relationship with the IMU elements that are supportive of the Taliban. As is the case with other states in the region, Uzbekistan hopes for a stable government that will act within the parameters of the Afghan state and one that will also be conducive to trade relations with a reduced level of corruption. Any incursions into Uzbekistan, whether physical or ideological, will likely meet a heavy-handed response. Officials in Uzbekistan are counting on the fact that the Taliban is seeking to shore up its legitimacy both nationally and on the international stage and will thus avoid such potential for conflict with neighbouring states.

¹⁰¹ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/07/central-asia-prepares-taliban-takeover>

Tajikistan

Cause for Concern

Out of all the countries in the region surrounding Afghanistan, Tajikistan has responded with the greatest concern to the events unfolding in Kabul. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated on 13th August that it would close three consulates in Mazar-e Sharif, Fayzabad and one in the Badakhshan region for security reasons¹⁰². Tajik President Emomali Rahmon discussed the situation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, expressing his concerns and agreeing to stay in regular contact as the situation develops¹⁰³. This conversation preceded a CSTO meeting headed by Emomali Rahmon on 23rd August, during which CSTO Secretary-General, Stanislav Zas, asserted that Tajikistan will need to receive additional support in order to shore up its border with Afghanistan¹⁰⁴. He added that a series of military trainings will take place on the Tajik-Afghan border in October¹⁰⁵. The next CSTO meeting is set to take place in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, on 16th September¹⁰⁶.

Before the Taliban took control of Kabul, Tajikistan was already on high alert as much of the territory along its border with Afghanistan had already been taken by the Taliban. Tajikistan conducted a military training exercise with Russian and Uzbek counterparts on 10th August¹⁰⁷. At the time, the Tajik Minister of Defence, Sherali Mirzo, stated that the increase in the Taliban's presence was a cause for concern, while Evgeniy Poslavskiy, the Deputy Commander of the Russian Central Military District, emphasised the threat of the IS instead, indicating a difference in priorities¹⁰⁸.

Co-Ethnic Sympathy?

A large proportion of the population of Afghanistan, especially in the northern regions near the Central Asia states, are Persian/Tajik-speaking and have close cultural ties with Tajikistan. Although ethnic denomination is not as relevant a factor in Afghanistan, the nation-building policies and process of the Soviet (and now post-Soviet) republics has led to the development of more ethnic-focused discourses in Tajikistan. The fact that the Taliban are largely concentrated and originate from Pashtun-dominated parts of the country, namely in the south, segments of Tajik society are expressing their sympathy with the plight of their "co-ethnic Tajiks" in Afghanistan.

Several sources are now claiming that Tajikistan has sent arms to the Panjshir resistance headed by Ahmad Massoud and Amrullah Saleh¹⁰⁹. The Panjshir region just north of Kabul is the only territory not to have fallen under the rule of Taliban and there is a growing anti-Taliban movement in the area. The Afghan Ambassador to Tajikistan has also called Amrullah Saleh the legitimate President of Afghanistan following the flight of Ashraf Ghani¹¹⁰.

The Democratic Party of Tajikistan ramped up the intensity of the discourse regarding the unfolding situation and has framed the recent events through the lens of co-ethnicity, calling the actions of the Taliban a "genocide" of the Tajik population of Afghanistan¹¹¹. It called on the Tajik government to cut ties with countries that are supporting the Taliban. Emomali Rahmon himself has adopted the

¹⁰² <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210813/afghanistan-tajikistan-konsulstva-zakrytie-1041627222.html>

¹⁰³ <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31417795.html>

¹⁰⁴ <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31425348.html>

¹⁰⁵ <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/politics/20210823/28754474/Kollektivnye-sily-ODKB-v-oktyabre-provedut-krupneyshie-voennye-ucheniya.html>

¹⁰⁶ <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31425348.html>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.ozodi.org/a/31402782.html>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.ozodi.org/a/31404296.html>

¹⁰⁹ https://lenta.ru/news/2021/08/23/talib_resistance/

¹¹⁰ <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31416103.html>

¹¹¹ <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2021/08/20/v-tadzhikistane-nazvali-devstviya-talibana-genocidom-tadzhikov-v-afganistane>

ethnicity paradigm by stating that “Tajiks make up 46% of Afghanistan’s population and should play a major role in the future government there” and that “Tajikistan will not recognise any government to be formed in Kabul through oppression”, in a meeting with Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi¹¹². The statistics Rahmon offers are inflated, given that the Pashtun are widely viewed as the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, making up between 40% - 50% of the population¹¹³. Nevertheless, it highlights Dushanbe’s concerns over their kin across the border.

Nevertheless, there are also Tajik citizens who have joined the Taliban, largely from the group officially known as Ansarullah (sometimes also known as the “Tajik Taliban”), which is banned in Tajikistan and recognised as a terrorist group. Reports from July of this year stated that a number of those Tajik militants were deployed by the Taliban to take control of the area bordering the state of Tajikistan¹¹⁴. The Tajik authorities have confirmed the presence of Tajik citizens fighting on the side of the Taliban in recent months¹¹⁵. Members of Ansarullah largely descend from opponents to the 1997 peace agreement that ended the Tajik civil war mainly between secular-leaning and Islamist parties. The mutual support provided between the Taliban and Tajik Islamist factions at the time is a prominent reason for the anti-Taliban stance held by the Tajik government until the present. The Taliban have rejected claims that there were Tajik citizens among their ranks, and this has raised serious suspicions among the Tajik authorities vis-à-vis any promises made by the Taliban to not violate state borders¹¹⁶.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Tajikistan is the only country neighbouring Afghanistan that has not held official talks with the Taliban, leaving it in a difficult position regarding the recognition of the Taliban as the foremost political power in Afghanistan. As mentioned above, there are (as of yet unverified) reports that Tajikistan is already supporting a resistance against the Taliban in the Panjshir region. However, if this resistance fails then Tajikistan will have very little leeway to establish meaningful relations with the Taliban and to have any influence on political developments in Afghanistan that may later have an impact on Tajikistan.

As with other bordering countries, Tajikistan has economic interests with Afghanistan. For instance, 65% of Tajikistan’s electricity supplies are exported to Afghanistan, amounting to \$45 million in 2020¹¹⁷. In addition, Afghanistan represents a transit route for Tajik goods to reach Iran and Pakistan. Tajikistan is bound to take these economic interests into account, especially considering it is known as the poorest post-Soviet country¹¹⁸, and it will have to weight them against its political stance towards the Taliban.

It is likely that Tajikistan will wait for global players such as Russia, China and the US to first make their moves regarding recognition of the Taliban before the country makes a decision itself¹¹⁹. The UN Security Council still officially considers the Taliban a terrorist organisation and so smaller ally states are unlikely to move on the issue unilaterally. States such as Tajikistan will likely follow the example of Russia and other major global states when it comes to the recognition of the new Afghan government. Tajikistan will thereafter have to find its own modus vivendi with whoever will be officially ruling Afghanistan.

¹¹² <http://www.uniindia.com/tajiks-make-up-46-of-afghan-population-should-play-a-major-role-in-afghan-govt-says-tajikistan-president/world/news/2487033.html>

¹¹³ <https://www.npr.org/2013/05/08/179079930/afghans-confront-senstive-issue-of-ethnicity>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-tajik-militants-border/31380071.html>

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.tj.undp.org/content/tajikistan/en/home/countryinfo.html>

¹¹⁹ <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31421458.html>

Turkmenistan

A Positive Response

Out of all the countries in the post-Soviet space in Central Asia, Turkmenistan was the quickest out of the block to welcome the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. On 18th August, only three days after the capitulation of the Ghani government in Kabul, meetings took place between Turkmen officials and Taliban representatives in both Herat¹²⁰ and Mazar-e Sharif¹²¹ on the same day. The Turkmen Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that consultations were held in a “friendly atmosphere”¹²². The embassy in Kabul, now guarded by the Taliban, as well as the consulates in Herat and Mazar-e Sharif are operating as normal¹²³.

These meetings took place a day after the Taliban had announced that it is prepared to cooperate on the construction of the TAPI pipeline¹²⁴ that will export gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India, a top priority for Turkmenistan and the primary motivation for a stable Afghan government that would be on good terms with the country. In its statement, the Taliban noted that Afghanistan represents a “link between Central and South Asia” and that the Taliban are “working on becoming this link and on many other projects”¹²⁵.

Preserving Security

Despite Turkmenistan’s cordial relations with the Taliban, its preference for stability and security has consistently been made clear. Back in July, when the Taliban was conducting its offensives in the north-east of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan increased its deployment of security forces and heavy weaponry near the Turkmen-Afghan border¹²⁶. Turkmenistan is thus wary of any lapses in security in neighbouring Afghanistan and will ensure that its borders are militarily secure, whoever the authority in power across the border may be.

Turkmenistan’s security concerns are dealt with internally and are rarely a part of regional cooperation, in contrast to the other Central Asian States, which are members of the CSTO (except for Uzbekistan, although it was invited as a guest in the recent meeting to discuss the situation regarding Afghanistan) and the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement. For this reason, Turkmenistan has been viewed as a weak link and a potential entry point for extremists from Afghanistan to enter the region¹²⁷. It is claimed that Turkmenistan has the weakest army in the region¹²⁸, still using arms from the Soviet era, and is thus susceptible to infiltration, especially through desert regions that are situated along the Turkmen-Afghan border. Nevertheless, there is an admission that there is very little known about the capabilities of the Turkmen army¹²⁹ and so such claims may be exaggerated in an attempt to bring Turkmenistan into the fold of Russian-led security pacts.

Stability Over Other Concerns

¹²⁰ <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2752>

¹²¹ <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2751>

¹²² <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31418555.html>

¹²³ <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/turkmenistan-opens-airspace-for-evacuation-flights-from-afghanistan-2021-8-20-0/>

¹²⁴ <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/38972/taliby-zayavili-o-gotovnosti-uchastvovat-v-stroitelstve-tapi>

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-border-afghanistan-weaponry/31352997.html>

¹²⁷ <https://jamestown.org/program/taliban-victory-unsettles-geopolitics-in-central-asia/>

¹²⁸ https://www.mk.ru/politics/2021/08/15/na-granice-s-talibami-samym-slabym-zvenom-okazalas-turkmeniya.html?from=main_omk

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Turkmenistan's priority in its internal and external politics revolves around stability, however ostensible that stability may be. Its stance vis-à-vis Afghanistan is dictated according to the same principles – the face of those in power in Afghanistan is of little significance as long as they can guarantee stability and cordial relations with Turkmenistan, especially on matters of trade and economic links. Turkmenistan had previously worked with the Ghani government on expanding links between the two countries. For instance, a ceremony celebrating the extension of the railway between the countries and the opening of a power line from the Turkmen city of Kerki to the Afghan city of Sheberghan, part-financed by the Asian Development Bank, was held in January of this year¹³⁰. However, as the Taliban has gained more and more power and territory in Afghanistan in contrast to the decline of the Ghani government, Turkmenistan has been more inclined to deal with the former in recent times.

In addition, Turkmenistan's *realpolitik* has completely shunned any humanitarian concerns. Turkmenistan has blocked the entry of any military personnel escaping Afghanistan and even of Turkmen inhabitants of the border regions seeking refuge¹³¹. The Turkmen authorities have shied away from commenting on the matter in public. Despite that, Turkmenistan has opened its airspace for the evacuation of foreign nationals from Afghanistan as the country “fulfils its international obligations, including those originating from the international humanitarian law”, in the words of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹³².

This demonstrates that although Turkmenistan is extremely isolationist in most matters, it nevertheless seeks to keep its relations with international partners consistent, avoid any diplomatic conflicts and preserve its neutrality. Turkmenistan's policy towards Afghanistan is thus informed along those lines. Keeping a secure border and a reliable negotiating partner in Afghanistan are its main priorities, and as long as it is possible to do so, it avoids getting embroiled in the complexities of regional geopolitical dynamics.

¹³⁰ <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-power-to-the-afghan-people>

¹³¹ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31412996.html>

¹³² <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/turkmenistan-opens-airspace-for-evacuation-flights-from-afghanistan-2021-8-20-0/>

Kazakhstan

A Cautious Response

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev visited a military exercise taking place in Almaty on 22nd August during which he made a reference to the situation in Afghanistan¹³³. He spoke of the need for “maximum mobilisation” and noted that the developments in Afghanistan create “certain risks”, but that they do not pose a direct threat to Kazakhstan¹³⁴. On this basis, Defence Minister Nurlan Yermekbayev has ordered the military to monitor the situation 24/7.¹³⁵

Tokayev met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss a common strategy vis-à-vis the developments in Afghanistan on 21st August¹³⁶ and also joined the same CSTO meeting together on 23rd August¹³⁷. These contacts between Kazakhstan and Russia, who are members of regional security pacts, including the CSTO and Shanghai Cooperation Organisations, point to an alignment of interests on this issue, with both states expressing caution regarding the possible infiltration of Islamist elements into Central Asia, but not outright rejecting engagement with the new forces in power in Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that a peaceful transition of power and the stabilisation of the internal situation are preconditions to engagement with the new authorities in Afghanistan¹³⁸. Similar to the language used by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kazakh counterparts are calling for an “inclusive and representative government”¹³⁹. However, Deputy Foreign Minister Akan Rahmetullin stated on 20th August that Kazakhstan does not recognise the Taliban government and has not established any political contacts with the group¹⁴⁰, in contrast to most other states in the region, including Russia. Nevertheless, the Taliban is currently guarding the Kazakh embassy in Kabul¹⁴¹.

Who Has Arrived from Afghanistan?

Kazakhstan has helped to evacuate Kazakh and also foreign citizens from Afghanistan in the past few days. On 18th August Kazakhstan brought back 25 Kazakh nationals, 14 Kyrgyz citizens and one citizen each from Russia and Lithuania¹⁴². On the same day, 141 members of staff working for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) were brought to safety in Kazakhstan¹⁴³. A second plane arrived on 23rd August with 120 members of staff¹⁴⁴. A group of three Fijians were also evacuated to Kazakhstan on 25th August¹⁴⁵.

¹³³ <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/prezident-kazahstana-verhovnyy-glavnokomanduyushchiy-vooruzhennymi-silami-posetil-ucheniya-kaysar-2021-22790>

¹³⁴ <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/kazakh-military-called-to-mobilize-amid-taliban-rise-in-afghanistan-2021-8-24-28/>

¹³⁵ <https://eurasianimes.com/pakistan-kazakhstan-joint-military-drills-afghanistan/>

¹³⁶ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66419>

¹³⁷ <https://astanatimes.com/2021/08/kazakh-president-takes-part-in-csto-collective-security-council-meeting/>

¹³⁸ <https://tass.com/world/1327725>

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ <http://www.uniindia.com/kazakhstan-does-not-recognize-taliban-has-no-political-contacts--deputy-foreign-minister/world/news/2482353.html>

¹⁴¹ <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31420128.html>

¹⁴² <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa-brussels/press/news/details/243757?lang=en>

¹⁴³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-un-evacuation-kazakhstan/31424412.html>

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/450002/fijians-stranded-in-afghanistan-evacuated-to-kazakhstan-govt>

Kazakhstan was also initially reported to be preparing to welcome for a few hundred Afghan refugees into the country, as 300 places were allegedly being readied at a school¹⁴⁶ and 100 spaces at the dormitory of an art college¹⁴⁷, both in the southern city of Shymkent. However, reports of these plans were seemingly retracted by the Kazakh authorities, who have rejected the existence of such plans as mere rumours¹⁴⁸. Social media was recently rife with rumours regarding the acceptance of Afghan refugees into Kazakhstan, with a widespread claim that up to 70,000 refugees were going to be admitted¹⁴⁹. It is not yet known whether it was this public outcry that prevented the Kazakh authorities from implementing this plan or whether such plans really did not exist in the first place.

Despite the lack of willingness to accept Afghan refugees, Afghan students studying in Kazakhstan with currently expired visas will reportedly not be sent back to Afghanistan¹⁵⁰. According to the Ministry of Education, 102 Afghan students are currently enrolled at educational institutions in Kazakhstan and that their deportation is not being discussed¹⁵¹.

Vigilant Yet Not Overly Concerned

Compared to the other Central Asian countries in the region, Kazakhstan is less invested in developments in Afghanistan, largely because it shares no land border with the country and its economic interests with Afghanistan are not reliant on transit through the country as much as it is the case for other countries.

Although Kazakhstan had forged positive ties with the Ghani government and was involved in a number of projects in Afghanistan (mainly humanitarian assistance) and signed a bilateral defence agreement earlier this year¹⁵², Kazakhstan has not been involved militarily in Afghanistan and has been reluctant to be involved in the internal dynamics of the country. Indeed, as mentioned above, Kazakhstan has not established any relations with the Taliban.

Kazakhstan's main concerns regarding the rise of the Taliban are likely to be connected to the potential danger of the spread of Islamist ideology in the region. Kazakhstan has cracked down on conservative Islam in recent years¹⁵³ and it has banned several Islamist groups in the past two decades. It has also cooperated with the US, Russia and China on counter-terrorism matters. Kazakhstan is an active regional political player and thus it has been susceptible to groups that oppose its policy outlook.

The Taliban is thus unlikely to be very interested in establishing warm relations with Kazakhstan as the country lacks any leverage on the group whether politically or economically, with the main export to Afghanistan being wheat, and petroleum gas only forming approximately 13% of exports from Kazakhstan to Afghanistan¹⁵⁴. Kazakhstan will also not be racing to form political relations with the Taliban and taking into account its recent political moves and rhetoric, it will likely follow Russia's lead when it comes to the recognition of the next Afghan government.

¹⁴⁶ <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31414104.html>

¹⁴⁷ <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31412600.html>

¹⁴⁸ https://baigenews.kz/news/mid_oproverg_informatsiyu_o_prieme_afganskikh_bezhentsev_kazakhstanom/

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.intellinews.com/kazakhstan-freezes-apparent-afghan-refugee-plans-amid-grumbling-218378/>

¹⁵⁰ <https://kursiv.kz/news/obrazovanie/2021-08/kazakhstan-ne-budet-otpravlyat-na-rodinu-afganskikh-studentov-s>

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/after-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-what-role-will-kazakhstan-play/>

¹⁵³ <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-steps-up-campaign-against-ultra-orthodox-islam>

¹⁵⁴ <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/afg/partner/kaz>

Kyrgyzstan

Holding Its Breath

The Kyrgyz authorities reacted to events in Afghanistan in a similar way to its neighbours, primarily Russia and Kazakhstan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement on 17th August in which it called for a stable transition of power that will lead to the formation of an inclusive government in the absence of violence¹⁵⁵. President Sadyr Japarov is also closely monitoring the situation in Afghanistan and is receiving frequent updates from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁵⁶. Foreign Minister Ruslan Kazakbayev stated on 24th August that the state will be increasing its expenditure on security, partly as a consequence of the developments in Afghanistan.¹⁵⁷

Kyrgyzstan has been inclined to opt for a regionally coordinated approach in dealing with the situation in Afghanistan. President Japarov attended the CSTO meetings held on 23rd August¹⁵⁸, during which it was agreed that the security bloc will hold military exercises in Kyrgyzstan between 1st – 9th September¹⁵⁹. In addition, Foreign Minister Kazakbayev mentioned that Kyrgyzstan and Russia have reached an agreement on military technical cooperation, which is partly related to the situation in Afghanistan¹⁶⁰. Moreover, the evacuation of Kyrgyz citizens has been coordinated with Russia, which has evacuated 10 Kyrgyz citizens¹⁶¹ and Kazakhstan, which transported 14 Kyrgyz nationals¹⁶².

Main Concerns

The principal concerns expressed in Kyrgyzstan are regarding the ideological consequences of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan. Kyrgyz experts are referencing the country's own historical experience of problems with Islamist groups¹⁶³, most notably regarding the events of Batken in 1999, when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) took hostages and fought local forces in southern Kyrgyzstan¹⁶⁴.

These concerns are being felt inadvertently in Kyrgyz society. Although xenophobic views and incidents have transpired in Kyrgyzstan before, a recent surge of social media posts targeting primarily Pakistanis in the country has been witnessed¹⁶⁵. *Eurasianet* has claimed that these recent incidents are partly triggered by a growing association between the appearance of these Pakistani students and tourists and images being spread from Afghanistan.¹⁶⁶ A recent headline in the Kyrgyz newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek* was entitled "Many foreigners looking like refugees from Afghanistan noticed in Bishkek"¹⁶⁷. Such posts in the mainstream and social media allude to the level of sensitivity regarding the perception of "Islamist infiltration" in the country.

Considering the public mood, the Kyrgyz government is highly unlikely to welcome refugees from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, an additional concern is the fate of Afghan citizens of Kyrgyz descent,

¹⁵⁵ <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/896824-kirgiziya-situaciya-afganistan>

¹⁵⁶ https://24.kg/vlast/204086_sadyir_japarov_vnimatejno_otsejivaet_situatsiyu_vafganistane/

¹⁵⁷ <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/08/24/kazakbaev/>

¹⁵⁸ <https://astanatimes.com/2021/08/kazakh-president-takes-part-in-csto-collective-security-council-meeting/>

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-led-security-bloc-hold-drills-kyrgyzstan-sept-1-9-ria-2021-08-23/>

¹⁶⁰ <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/08/24/kazakbaev/>

¹⁶¹ <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12223073>

¹⁶² <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa-brussels/press/news/details/243757?lang=en>

¹⁶³ https://24.kg/vlast/204377_situatsiya_vafganistane_kak_kyrgyzstan_budet_zaschischatsya_ottalibov/

¹⁶⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-summer-of-1999-and-the-imu-in-kyrgyzstan/30180837.html>

¹⁶⁵ <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-afghanistan-crisis-seen-stoking-xenophobia-for-pakistanis>

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷

https://www.vb.kg/doc/405204_v_bishkeke_zametili_mnogo_inostrancev_pohojih_na_bejencev_iz_afganistana.html

living mainly in the remote Wakhan Corridor in the north-eastern corner of Afghanistan¹⁶⁸. Kypara Mambetova, leading the work on refugee affairs in the Ministry of Health, stated on 16th August that it is possible that Kyrgyzstan will accept approximately 1,200 ethnic Kyrgyz citizens of Afghanistan¹⁶⁹. However, a representative of the Kyrgyz community of Afghanistan, Bunyamin Toker, claims that some have attempted to leave the country and have requested help from the Kyrgyz embassy, but to no avail¹⁷⁰. There have been previous cases in the past month where ethnic Kyrgyz have escaped the fighting in Afghanistan and crossed the border into Tajikistan, however, the Tajik authorities refused to accede to the request made by the Kyrgyz authorities to open a corridor that would take them to Kyrgyzstan¹⁷¹. This may still be the case as relations between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan remain tense.

In addition, the head of the State Committee for National Security, Kamchybek Tashiyev, stated on 16th August that Kyrgyzstan will continue to support Afghan students with visas coming to study¹⁷². Jana Akaev, a member of the Kyrgyz parliament, also alluded to the matter and supported welcoming Afghan students to Kyrgyzstan, leading to a mixed response from the public, which included criticisms of the policy¹⁷³.

Afghan refugees who are already in Kazakhstan have staged a protest on 25th August in front of the UN headquarters in Bishkek¹⁷⁴. They are demanding to be sent to the US, Canada or Western Europe. The protest took place after Kyrgyzstan placed restrictions on 23rd August on granting visas to Afghan citizens¹⁷⁵.

What Next?

Once the issues regarding refugees and the coordination of regional military strategy are resolved, Kyrgyzstan will face the matter of how to establish relations with the new authorities in Afghanistan. As is the case with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan has no relations with the Taliban and if they are to become the recognised authorities in Afghanistan, a new strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan will have to be formulated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

As mentioned above, Kyrgyzstan's primary concern regarding the Taliban is its potential ideological influence on Islamist-leaning groups in the region that have caused problems in the country before. The extent to which the Taliban's influence reaches out of the borders of Afghanistan and the level of inclusivity and stability in the new Afghan government will likely inform Afghan-Kyrgyz relations in the future.

¹⁶⁸ <https://eurasianet.org/taliban-weather-geopolitics-afghanistans-kyrgyz-wrestle-with-stay-or-go>

¹⁶⁹ <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-mozhet-prinyat-1200-bezhentsev-iz-afganistana/31412843.html>

¹⁷⁰

[https://kaktus.media/doc/444387 byniamin toker: etnicheskie kyrgyzy v afganistane boiatsia talibov no ne mogyt nikyda yehat.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/444387_byniamin_toker:_etnicheskie_kyrgyzy_v_afganistane_boiatsia_talibov_no_ne_mogyt_nikyda_yehat.html)

¹⁷¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-taliban-surge/31370583.html>

¹⁷² <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/08/16/kyrgyzstan-gotov-vydat-vizy-dlya-afganskikh-studentov-iz-za-situatsii-s-talibanom-glava-gknb/>

¹⁷³ <https://www.facebook.com/janar.akaev.9/posts/4249818031721955>

¹⁷⁴ <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2021/08/25/miting-bezhentsev-iz-afganistana-v-bishkeke-miliciya-prizyvaet-uchastnikov-razoytis>

¹⁷⁵ <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/23/08/2021/612374829a794758f4959b29>

China

“We defeated the Russians, we are defeating the Americans and we look forward to defeating the Chinese when the day comes.” This quote, attributed to an unnamed Taliban commander in the 2000s, may be apocryphal and is certainly boisterous. However, it is emblematic of the country’s history as a “graveyard of empires”.

With China commonly viewed as a rising superpower and already spreading its influence in Central Asia, much has been said about how Beijing will approach the events that unfolded in Afghanistan over the course of August 2021.

Beijing’s initial approach to Kabul has been noticeably muted but coherent. Its official stance in the months leading up to the Taliban takeover was that it supported Afghan national reconciliation but emphasised that it was not interested in “making an enemy of the Taliban”¹⁷⁶.

In the days that followed, Chinese think-pieces were published suggesting that the Taliban was moving towards becoming a political organisation. Similarly, China’s Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, called on the Taliban to make a “clean break” with terrorism¹⁷⁷. As early as 2019, Beijing hosted Taliban representatives for talks, and backchannel diplomacy has likely been going on for longer¹⁷⁸.

Official Chinese statements came at the back of these preparatory steps. The main criticisms were aimed at Washington for a “hasty” and chaotic withdrawal but emphasised its willingness to help ensure a “soft landing” that would avoid a humanitarian disaster or a new civil war¹⁷⁹. While some outlets suggested that Beijing is preparing to recognise the Taliban as Afghanistan’s legitimate government¹⁸⁰, this has yet to come to pass.

Beijing’s Interests

The manner in which Beijing approached Afghanistan is deeply representative of what it views as its most pressing interests.

The first and foremost interest relates to Beijing’s fraught relationship with its Uighur Muslim minority predominantly living in the Xinjiang Province. For China, which shares a small but sensitive border with Afghanistan via Xinjiang itself, the Taliban was a potential agitator and safe haven. Uighur-related concerns figured heavily into Beijing’s interactions with Muslim capitals such as Islamabad¹⁸¹ (even if that relationship has traditionally been more layered), Ankara¹⁸² and Riyadh¹⁸³. Through such contacts, Beijing sought to blunt the criticism for its policies around the Uighur minority and prevent the perception of persecution of Muslims as a whole.

Even before the clampdown on the community that started in the 2000s and escalated in the 2010s, potentials of a Uighur insurgency played heavily in Beijing’s mind. As early as the 1990s, Beijing’s contacts with the Taliban were limited to ensuring that Uighur insurgents could not establish a safe haven in Afghanistan from which they could launch attacks in China¹⁸⁴.

¹⁷⁶ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1229006.shtml>

¹⁷⁷ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1228616.shtml>

¹⁷⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/21/china-taliban-afghanistan-biden-troop-withdrawal-belt-road-geopolitics-strategy/>

¹⁷⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/china-afghanistan-80b6d1b2d880aac25542b2efa5820be5>

¹⁸⁰ <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-08-12/china-prepared-to-recognize-taliban-if-kabul-falls-sources-say-undermining-us-threats>

¹⁸¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/2/pakistan-imran-khan-china-uighurs>

¹⁸² <https://www.voanews.com/europe/turkish-opposition-challenge-erdogan-over-uighur-silence>

¹⁸³ <https://archive.siasat.com/news/saudi-prince-defends-chinas-use-internment-camps-uighur-muslims-1470526/>

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/chinas-47-mile-long-problem-with-the-taliban/>

In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Kabul, it is clear that such concerns are at the forefront in Beijing. Statements around Taliban “rejecting terrorism” seem to signal that Kabul can have a relationship with Beijing similar to what they have with Islamabad, Ankara and Riyadh.

For its part, the Taliban appears to have recognised the potential for a relationship between Kabul and Beijing. Speaking on the eve of the Taliban's capture of Kabul, the group's spokesperson, Suhail Shaheen, described China as a “friend” and expressed hope for investment and reconstruction work. Shaheen promised to offer Chinese workers security. He also emphasised that the Taliban would prevent Uighur fighters and al-Qaeda from taking shelter in the country.

While the organisation emphasised its opposition to the persecution of Muslims around the world, including Uighurs, it noted that it has no right to interfere in China's affairs¹⁸⁵ in what appears to be an unspoken acknowledgement of China's “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”¹⁸⁶.

Analysts suggested the cordial, reconstruction-oriented approach resembles its behaviour in Africa and the Middle East where it leverages reconstruction to extractive resources. The country has some of the world's largest reserves of copper, coal, iron, gas, cobalt, mercury, gold, lithium and thorium, valued at over US\$1 trillion. Chinese firms have held drilling rights in several regions, as well as the right to mine copper at the Mes Aynak mine in Logar¹⁸⁷.

While these riches likely figure into Beijing's thinking, their significance is somewhat overstated. Indeed, Chinese companies, especially state-owned ones, expressed uncertainty about the prospects for mining in Mes Aynak which has been making losses despite the value of the riches present. It is clear that short-to-medium prospects for such projects remain dim, and only small-to-medium non-state companies appear to be reacting positively to the Taliban's offer for protecting Chinese interests in Afghanistan¹⁸⁸. Such small investments may lay the groundwork for bigger investments, but it also lays bare that any economic wins for either Beijing or Kabul won't be immediate.

Concerns about the favourableness of the investment climate reflects China's bigger concern: stability. China's leaders are often stereotyped as being singularly concerned about stability. While such characterisation can mask nuances, the fact remains that China itself is going through a sensitive period of changes and renewed geopolitical challenges. In this climate, policymakers in Beijing can ill-afford distractions from an unstable Afghanistan.

Thus, while Beijing has financial and political interests in Afghanistan, the main overriding concern is to foster a state of affairs that prevents deeper Chinese involvement in the country. It is likely the US' experiences in Afghanistan – and that of the USSR before then – made Beijing less likely to engage aggressively with Kabul.

This would explain why Beijing showed up not with armies but “bearing gifts”, as one analyst put it¹⁸⁹. So long as Afghanistan doesn't become a source of security instability that can threaten its interests or create the impetus for a US return, Beijing will likely remain content to build pragmatic ties with the new government in Kabul.

Such an approach, however, will also mean that Beijing's approach will be modular. In particular, just as it has maintained backchannel contacts with the Taliban during the Afghan Government's

¹⁸⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/21/china-taliban-afghanistan-biden-troop-withdrawal-belt-road-geopolitics-strategy/>

¹⁸⁶ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbdt_665378/t1179045.shtml

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3140399/china-welcome-friend-reconstruction-afghanistan-taliban>

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1232262.shtml>

¹⁸⁹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/17/china-afghanistan-us-withdrawal-taliban-pakistan/>

rule, it is now likely to retain contacts with the remnants of the Afghan Government and even the budding resistance movement in Panjshir.

What Are the Main Concerns Moving Forward?

Beijing appears to have formulated a sombre but consistent way to deal with Afghanistan and the Taliban. It is minimal, modular and appears cognisant of what it can – or wants to – achieve in Afghanistan and what it won't. And so far, it appears to have taken the right steps.

However, Beijing's ability to take such a flexible and non-committed step also leaves its policies vulnerable to national developments. The formation of the aforementioned resistance movement in Panjshir, and the delivery of weapons to the group from Tajikistan¹⁹⁰, seems to herald a new armed conflict that can severely constrain Beijing's stability-oriented approach, especially if it is eventually forced to pick a side.

The crux of the relationship, however, is around the Taliban's ability – or willingness – to abide by Beijing's interests while keeping the country stable. US officials are already alarmed by the installation of Haqqani Network members to key security posts in Kabul in an apparent contravention to prevent al-Qaeda-linked groups and individuals into positions of power¹⁹¹. Terrorist attacks, such as the ones that targeted US soldiers and Taliban fighters in the Hamid Karzai Airport, may cause Beijing to reassess the security situation and Taliban's capacity to offer stability.

Should the Taliban play similarly fast-and-loose with Beijing's demands around the Uighurs, the relationship may deteriorate and eventually reach an impasse. This is a low risk, as Beijing not only holds leverage over the Taliban on its own merits, but also via its close links to Islamabad. However, just as is the case with Islamabad, Beijing will face an empowered Taliban who may not be eager to abide by outsiders' demands and confident in its ability to repel any invaders.

The Taliban will also be constrained by its own factionalism in its approach to Beijing. Although the group is not a transnational jihadi group, many among its supporters are transnational jihadi militants or otherwise supporters of transnational jihadism. More radical groups like the ISK have already attacked the Taliban's peace talks with the US, accusing it of being "nationalist and polytheistic"¹⁹². The fact that Taliban fighters were among the casualties of the ISK's bombing of Kabul Airport suggests the two groups are far from reconciling. Accusations and attacks by the ISK may not change the Taliban's course of action vis-à-vis Beijing but it may cost the group some of its most radical supporters who may then act as spoilers by attacking Chinese interests.

Such a risk is already present. In July 2021, Beijing and Islamabad experienced rare tensions after nine Chinese workers were killed in an apparent bombing in Pakistan. Although Islamabad promised Beijing justice, it did so after initially denying the incident was a bombing¹⁹³. If Chinese nationals and interests in Afghanistan are attacked and Kabul does not pursue the attackers, similar tensions will erupt. If that takes place, Beijing will have few good options without involving itself further in the country and, in the process, risking further attacks on its interests by spoilers.

¹⁹⁰ <https://twitter.com/HashimWahdatyar/status/1429913449929248778>

¹⁹¹ <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/hardline-haqqani-network-put-charge-kabul-security>

¹⁹² <https://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-reactions-to-the-u-s-taliban-deal-and-afghan-peace-talks/>

¹⁹³ <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/china-presses-pakistan-hold-killers-chinese-nationals-accountable>