

AFGHANISTAN: THE WAY FORWARD

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CONSORTIUM OF SOUTH ASIAN THINK TANKS

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BRIDGING POLICY RESEARCH IN SOUTH ASIA



Published by

Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT)

www.cosatt.org

**Political Dialogue Asia Programme, Konrad Adenauer
Stiftung (KAS)**

www.kas.de/en/web/politikdialog-asien

First Published : 2022

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ISBN : 978-9937-1-2579-6

Design/Layout: Sagar Shrestha

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VEERA LAMICHHANE

Preface

Afghanistan has been witnessing a political, economic, and humanitarian crisis ever since the chaotic withdrawal of the US forces a year ago. The economy declined significantly as a result of political instability, insecurity, and the suspension of fiscal and foreign aid compounded by COVID – 19 pandemic, flash floods in May 2022 and earthquake in June this year. “A staggering 95 percent of Afghans are not getting enough to eat, with that number rising to almost 100 percent in female-headed households”, according to the UN Resident Coordinator Dr. Ramiz Alakbarov who is also deputy head of the UN assistance mission. Today the challenges are so daunting that it can be called a catastrophe'- there is unprecedented level of hunger- famine like situation, economy that is dysfunctional with less jobs, massive forced displacement and a refugee exodus, unlawful killings and harassment of civil society and women activists. Moreover, there is resurgence of an atmosphere of fear. The brunt of all these has been faced by the women and children of Afghanistan. Because of the decades of war and conflict, there are large number of widows in the country who now can't work under the Taliban. Girls are discouraged to go to schools.

What is even worse is that Afghanistan is now cut off from the international community. Even though the Taliban has been in power for over a year, the Islamic Emirate is yet to be recognized. SAARC countries have also not recognized the new regime in Kabul. While

the situation is getting dire, international attention has been diverted lately to other theatres creating a donor fatigue which is even more worrisome.

Consortium of South Asian Think-Tanks (COSATT) which is a network of some of the prominent think-tanks of South Asia regard Afghanistan as a fulcrum of peace and stability in the region and a natural connector to Central Asia. We need to focus our attention on the events in Afghanistan despite the crisis in other places around the world. We need to also plan for the future and shape our discussions towards energy, road connectivity, trade and transit etc.

It is a matter of satisfaction that COSATT which has benefitted from the support of the Political Dialogue Asia Programme of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) was able to get experts from the region to write on various facets of not only the current situation inside Afghanistan but also the strategic, political, economic trajectory and their implications for South Asia in the near and long term. In this connection, I would like to thank Mr. Christian Echle, Head of the Asia Pacific Department of the KAS for his encouragement to undertake this project. I would also like to thank Mr. Andreas Klein, new Director and Ms. Megha Sarmah, Programme Manager 2030 Agenda of the Political Dialogue Asia Programme of the KAS for their support. I would like to thank individual authors for their timely submission of papers. I am optimistic that this publication will be useful to individual governments in South Asia, the SAARC Secretariat, multinational organizations, development partners, the UN, INGOs, media and the larger academia.

Afghanistan is an old nation of many centuries famous for its brave and resilient people who have endured decades of conflict, instability and turmoil. These have made them even more stronger. It is with this warm affection and sincere good wishes for better future ahead that we dedicate this book to our brothers and sisters of Afghanistan.

Dr. Nishchal N. Pandey
Convener COSATT,
Kathmandu
Oct. 2022

Taliban's Return to Afghanistan Implications for the Region

Maj. Gen. (retd.) Dipankar Banerjee

EXORDIUM

On 15 Aug 2021 the Taliban recaptured Kabul. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai left the Kabul airport at midnight with his family and treasures for the UAE, implementing apparently a plan drawn up in advance.¹ This was preceded by a haphazard US withdrawal, unnecessary, unplanned and chaotic. A repeat of an earlier image etched in the historic memory of Vietnam, on 30 April 1975, when US forces were withdrawn from rooftops in helicopters.

Brief Backdrop

The current developments in Afghanistan can be traced to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 1979. Following its capture, the Soviet supported regime in Kabul soon faced an internationally sponsored insurgency led by a coalition under the USA from Peshawar. Saudi Arabia provided the bulk of the financial support. Close military coordination was abetted by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). After intense and bitter fighting, the Soviet Army was finally beaten and withdrew north across the Amu Darya in February

1 See <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rcrt=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwic9s6vwLH3AhVu7HMBHWFjDZAQFnoECAQQA-Q&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theguardian.com%2Fworld%2Ffive%2F2021%2Faug%2F15%2Fafghanistan-taliban-close-in-on-kabul-as-last-government-stronghold-in-north-falls&usg=AOvVaw29s4w2MdArchbNJXghc9ZC> of 15 Aug 2021

1989.² The next decade saw constant conflict between different tribal factions with the rapid rise of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Bin Laden used this period to launch a global Islamic Jihad, which culminated in the terror attacks on continental USA on 11 September 2001.

The USA rapidly mobilized for operations to reoccupy Afghanistan. The NATO accorded support under the provision of its Article 5. With help from tribal leaders, Dostum in the west, and Ahmed Shah Massoud's Northern Alliance, the US defeated the Taliban by 9 Nov 2001. On 14 Nov, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1378 calling for a "central role" for the UN "in establishing a transitional administration and inviting member states to send peacekeeping forces to promote stability and aid delivery".³

The US recapture of Afghanistan did not lead to peace and stability, instead to factionalism and tribal rule. Focus on Afghanistan was then lost when Washington attacked Iraq in 2003.⁴ The situation in Afghanistan steadily went downhill after that. The 2021 US retreat under President Biden was the end game of this story. The blame for this debacle was put on the Afghan National Forces (ANF), when in reality its senior partner the US Armed Forces and their 'contractors', often left joint military bases, without even informing the ANF or 'putting off the light'. The final operations exposed US weaknesses and its diminishing capabilities particularly in Asia. Most significant were the absence of firm leadership and a clear strategy. It was in the resultant chaos that the Taliban again took over Kabul on 15 Aug 2021 and Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund assumed leadership of the country on 9 Sep.⁵

2 Read for example Steve Coll, *Ghost War*, Penguin Press, 1990.

3 UN Security Council Resolution 1378, passed on 14 Nov at its 4415th meeting. Accessed on 21 April 2022.

4 Thomas E Ricks, *Fiasco*, Kindle ed. 2006.

5 The Guardian, 15 Aug 2021; https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rcrt=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjx_onBw7H3Ah-

Afghanistan Today

The Taliban Government in Afghanistan today is clearly out of tune with the modern world, led by a group of elderly male fighters who have spent more time fighting and inside caves, than in the new world of the 21st Century. Afghanistan's economy has been devastated and its infrastructure destroyed. Ninety -seven percent of its people are today unable to afford adequate nourishment.⁶ Its GDP per capita is at 177th position in the world and its PPP rate at 169th.⁷

The Taliban continues with its policies of female exclusion from society to the point of marginalization. This is not only heinous and utterly condemnable, but it is also a major impediment to social cohesion and progress. Besides, this medieval practice makes it a pariah state in the eyes of the world and unworthy of international recognition and support. Not much can happen to elicit global support till there are substantial changes in Taliban governance.

Even then, massive aid and decades of effort will be needed for Afghanistan to recover, even to its former state of relative penury. Afghanistan is likely to become in the near term a center for global terrorism, a producer and smuggler for narcotics on an industrial scale, a source of illegal migration to the West and a candidate for large global assistance, of which there are others with higher priority.

UPR2wGHQ0sD-AQFnoECCQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theguardian.com%2Fworld%2Flive%2F2021%2Faug%2F15%2Fafghanistan-taliban-close-in-on-kabul-as-last-government-stronghold-in-north-falls&usg=AOvVaw29s4w2MdArchb-NJXghe9ZC

6 [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjEyd-JvKj3AhVjmuYKHUs_AZoQFnoEC-DYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fnews.un.org%2Fen%2Fstory%2F2022%2F03%2F1113982&usg=AOvVaw1FmuO2Q9qTyt9JnVBtYFCp](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjEyd-JvKj3AhVjmuYKHUs_AZoQFnoEC-DYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fnews.un.org%2Fen%2Fstory%2F2022%2F03%2F1113982&usg=AOvVaw1FmuO2Q9qTyt9JnVBtYFCp;); accessed on 21 Apr 22.

7 CIA World Fact Book, 2021.

EMERGING GLOBAL CHALLENGES

These changes in Afghanistan are happening in a condition of major global challenges brought about by two recent developments. The Covid-19 pandemic and the War in Ukraine. A brief discussion on three of these major changes is necessary to appreciate the possible regional impact of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

Shaping of A New World Order. Geo-political changes currently taking place will alter the Global Order as we know it today. Its major likely impacts are summarized below:

-A return to global tensions in a period defined by some Harvard professors as the ‘Thucydides Trap’. This is when during global hegemonic power transitions as of now, new powers emerge and seek more space, new power alignments emerge and new coalitions are formed. It is a time of flux and uncertainty with a high probability of war, of which the Ukraine conflict is a prime example.⁸

- The gradual diminishing of US unipolarity and a more diffused global power. This is being led by the ‘rise’ of China under Xi Jinping’s vision of the China Dream. While its impact will necessarily be global over time, its current manifestations are felt particularly in Beijing’s assertive policies in Asia.⁹

8 “The Thucydides Trap”, Graham Allison, Foreign Policy, Jun 2017, <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEw-jbs5bvaj3AhXnyzgGHUKxCmEQFnoECDYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fforeignpolicy.com%2F2017%2F06%2F09%2Fthe-thucydides-trap%2F&usg=AOvVaw28s6WzUkIn6wFPYRtwW4>_accessed on 21 April 2022.

9 Liu Mingfu, Colonel in the PLA originally sketched the idea in an article in 2015 under “The China Dream – Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post American Era”.

- A steady de-globalization is taking place as a consequence, affecting international commerce and leading to a return to nationalism, protectionism and raising of trade barriers. This is impacting the movement of people and goods with rich countries benefiting disproportionately and increasing the global poverty gap.

Impact of Covid-19 and Global Disruptions. The comprehensive impact of global disruptions caused by Covid-19 continues and is likely to increase over the coming years. As health barriers prevent free movement of goods and people, serious disruptions will take place in international commerce,. Affecting jobs, movement of goods, and impacting economic activities in poorer countries. This shift has led to massive impoverishment in South Asia, especially in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Adverse Negative Impact on World Economy. Unique economic advantages of some developing economies in terms of natural resources or agricultural production or as tourism destinations are beginning to disappear. For example, countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Nepal have suddenly found themselves enormously poorer with western tourists staying away. In turn, these have led to social unrests and serious livelihood challenges. Countries that also had unique advantages of producing niche' items of high value, or rare minerals, will find themselves suddenly unable to market their produce.¹⁰

¹⁰ For a quick survey refer to <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&cesrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiOxK755bP3AhUw-zDgGHRUYCP4QFnoECAgQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.indiatoday.in%2Fbusiness%2Fstory%2Fbusiness-story-economic-crisis-india-neighbours-pakistan-sri-lanka-nepal-china-covid-1937979-2022-04-16&usg=AOvVaw3B4k7af-7HPP9o0mAn8sYHO> dated April 22, 2021

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RETURN OF TALIBAN TO AFGHANISTAN

This brief prelude is a necessary backdrop to understand the implications of the return of Taliban in Afghanistan. It is in these changing global geo-politics that their impact on Asia will need to be measured. Our particular focus will necessarily be on Southern Asia.

Return of International Terrorism

In a more conflict prone and disrupted world, random violence motivated by organized groups will find greater freedom. Taliban led Islamic radicalism has already a base in Afghanistan and is likely to be a magnet to attract other radical forces to the country. As the early sponsor of the Taliban and with the rise of the Haqqani group, Islamabad is already under great pressure. With Government transition there, Shehbaz Sharif, will be challenged by a desperate Imran Khan. The latter in his new anti-US posture will then increasingly turn to other radical groups such as the Haqqani Group for support. Anti-US sentiment remains strong in Pakistan and Imran Khan is determined to extract every ounce of this negative feeling for his political return.¹¹ With this as the backdrop, Mujahidden and terrorist influence will surely get additional support.

Increased radicalization and factional conflict will turn to the production and drug sales to Asia and beyond. This will most likely emerge as the most potent short-term challenge. While Central Asia and even Russia are likely to be impacted seriously by this narcotics network, India will be the most lucrative and easy target.

11 Abdul Basit, "Pakistan's Military Ends Experiment with Hybrid Democracy", Foreign Policy, April 21, 2022.

Spread of Islamic Radicalism

An immediate consequence of Pakistan and Taliban collusion will be to further radicalize Pakistani society. Even as the Pakistani economy hits a road block and its politics in disarray, disparate groups can be expected to turn even more to fundamental radical ideology. Without his political mentors in the Pakistani Army, Imran Khan is expected to turn increasingly to Turkey and its variation of Islamic 'renaissance'. The Taliban in Afghanistan is already probing to exploit these possibilities.

Implications for Central Asia

President Ghani had visualized Afghanistan as being at the crossroads of Asia, linking South, Central and West Asia, in a single dynamic new economic group with access to the sea through Iran acting as a hub for regional trade and commerce. Some progress was made in this direction. Communication links were being developed, such as the Zaranj-Chahbahar road and rail link created at great expense by India.¹² With Taliban rule, these linkages are now likely to be less important. Instead, narcotics trafficking and the move of armed terrorists through pony trails and hill tracts are likely to dominate, making their interdiction more difficult.

New geo-political games are also acting as spoilers. As an example, when India offered large quantities of wheat as aid to Kabul, Pakistan refused permission for transportation in Indian vehicles. Instead Afghan trucks had to be hired, causing unnecessary delay and expense.

12 DNA, "India Hands Over Zaranj-Delaram Highway to Afghanistan", https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rcct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjAurWA6LP3AhVT73MBHYIqDBEQFnoECDgQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dnaindia.com%2Fworld%2Freport-india-hands-over-zaranj-delaram-highway-to-afghanistan-1224045&usg=AOvVaw3WFWmlVR_Q80Q_0Xu-HzRX, 16 July 2020, accessed on 15 April 2022.

Finally, a much needed route to the sea for the Central Asian Republics, a dream for centuries, is not likely to become operational any time soon, leading to further alienation, loss and distress.

Tensions with China

The great game for the control over Afghanistan however, is already underway. It is Beijing which is now the principal mover. Chinese government has sponsored many Afghan 'friendly visits' to and from China. Its experts and diplomats are eagerly looking for opportunities. The reasons for this effort are principally two-fold:- One, to acquire Afghanistan's large minerals and 'rare earth' potential. The other is to create a dependency in Afghanistan on China for political and security reasons. It is meant to create high dependency on Beijing to pre-empt any Afghan protest against the large-scale oppression of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.

A combination of the above will in turn isolate Afghanistan, with the potential to keep it firmly under China's control. The goal being to reduce Kabul's South Asian identity and turn it into another of China's vassal states.

Impact on SAARC

Afghanistan is a South Asian nation and is the eighth member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Its civilizational and historical connect is deeply rooted in its South Asian identity. Its geographical limits are shaped by the Himalayas in the north and the oceans in the south. All developments of consequence here will affect the entire region to its south and the east. It is this characteristic of Afghanistan that makes it such an integral part of the South Asian mosaic. This has been the basis of the SAARC identity, which must not be allowed to loosen. If weakened, it will challenge the

basic identity of SAARC and loosen regional integrity.

Impact on Pakistan

As the immediate neighbor of Afghanistan to the East, Pakistan is closely linked to all developments in that country. Historically they have been joined together at the hip. Contemporary relations have a more chequered story tracing it back to both the British period as well as post US intervention in the 80s. The Durand Line separates the two states, which remains intensely disputed.

Implications for South Asia

Individual countries of South Asia will be differently impacted. After Pakistan, Bangladesh has had significant relations with Afghanistan. As a part of the Islamic Jihad against the Soviet Union, Dhaka had contributed substantial forces in the fighting. As a consequence, many terrorist groups in Bangladesh trace their origins to Kabul and draw sustenance from it. These relationships may be reinforced and re-established.

Sri Lanka is marginally affected by developments in Afghanistan. However, its Muslim minority still draw succor and support from it. It was part of that larger mosaic that led to the Easter Day massacre in 2019.¹³ Since then there is a rise in incidents of violence in the island state.

A more pressing concern may well be the Rohingya connection with Afghanistan. Through Bangladesh and India and also directly from Myanmar, Rohingyas have in small numbers found refuge in Pakistan-

13 https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiOr7rF6bP3AhWS4nMBHZzKDd8QFnoECAIQ-AQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thehindu.com%2Ftopic%2Fsri-lanka-easter-bombings%2F&usg=AOvVaw1_anhMjyJcntCEz6TEKBBO accessed on 16 Apr 2022

Afghanistan. Whether they emerge as an independent group or reinforce other terrorist structures will require careful assessment.

An aspect that is of growing concern in all of South Asia is the possibility of growing narco-nexus with Afghanistan. Each country is affected by it. Pakistan most closely, both as a base of refinement and of international delivery. India is a particular target, while other nations in South Asia are not immune.

THE WAY FORWARD

Afghanistan is an integral part of South Asia and an important member of SAARC. More deliberate and effective measures will be required to deal with emerging challenges arising from the adverse consequences of Taliban rule. Four major recommendations are offered here for collective and early action by the region.

Rejuvenating SAARC

The steady irrelevance of SAARC occurred because of the continuing differences within the organization, mutual hostility and the absence of genuine cooperation. Pakistan, in particular was unable to support a free trade agreement, as a result of which the organization lacked substantial cooperation. The absence of economic cooperation under mutually agreed terms, led the way to its irrelevance. This must change.

Once this economic cooperation takes place and all perceive its benefits other areas will open up. These could be about the joint harnessing of river waters, addressing climate change concerns including sea water rise and arresting global warming.

Countering Covid-19. This pandemic is far from over. The WHO asserts that new variants and different mutations are likely to occur for several years more. It is possible that these may be less severe than in the

past, but their variations will call for continuous concern. The approach will have to be to counter the virus spread and at the same time preserve livelihoods. Drastic and coercive measures such as in Shanghai in 2021-22 are not the answer. India has emerged as the leading country in the world in offering solutions. The challenge is both to overcome hesitancy in collaboration and Delhi's generosity in providing support and counter measures. PM Modi in India took up this challenge at the outset and initiated regional consultation and cooperation. This must resume.

Countering Terrorism. Several measures had been proposed in the past for regional cooperation under SAARC in effectively countering terrorism. These must be revisited and implemented seriously at the earliest.

Economic Rejuvenation of SAARC. Finally, is the question of economic growth, which remains the biggest challenge for the region. Major efforts will be required and collective efforts will need to be made to reshape economic collaboration in a substantive manner.

CONCLUSION

Countering adverse consequences of Covid-19 pandemic, the global geo-political impact of the Ukraine War and a reversal to the earlier era of terrorism with Taliban's return in Afghanistan are serious challenges. But, they also provide opportunities for a new approach to regional cooperation. An approach and engagement that will be based on regional cooperation for a new era.

Women and Children Rights in Afghanistan: A brief on pre and post Taliban Situation

Lailuma Nasiri¹

Executive Summary

Forty years of war, recurrent natural disasters, chronic poverty, drought, and the COVID-19 pandemic have had a devastating impact on Afghan women and girls. The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has been marked by escalating humanitarian needs². The current political context, security dynamics, and economic crisis have exacerbated pre-existing lifesaving needs, protection risks and vulnerabilities complicating what was already one of the worst humanitarian situations worldwide. Currently, 24.4 million people, more than half of the Afghan population are in humanitarian need³.

The security and economic situation deteriorated as the international forces (US and NATO) decided to withdraw unconditionally in August 2021. The Afghan government collapsed and the Taliban seized power for a second time. An unprecedented and massive humanitarian crisis hit the country which resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people as hundreds of thousands sought refuge in other countries. COVID-19 and persistent draught, in addition, badly hit

1 Co-Founder Afghanistan Justice Organization, Kabul

2 *HUMANITARIAN NEEDS OVERVIEW AFGHANISTAN*. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/afghanistan_humanitarian_needs_overview_2021_0.pdf.

3 “Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2022 (January 2022) - Afghanistan.” ReliefWeb, reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-response-plan-2022-january-2022.

the Afghan economy and made life miserable for Afghans. However, in the last 20 years, the international community following military intervention in 2001 had a strong contribution in development work in Afghanistan, the continued armed conflict undermined the development work across the country.

The collapse of the Afghan government left hundreds of thousands of women and men jobless, suspension of tens of hundreds of development projects due to donor's policy change, closure of private businesses including small businesses mostly run by women made the economic collapse and humanitarian crisis even critical and the unemployment rate high.

The rights granted by the Afghan Constitution to women and girls to ensure equality are currently being dismantled by the Taliban regime. Women who made up 26% of the total number of government employees in 2020 are unemployed and prevented from upholding their right to work⁴. Violence against women and girls has increased in times of humanitarian crisis and without any support system in place⁵. Over the past 20 years, women's rights activists with support of the international partners had built up a countrywide support system for victims of violence which has collapsed entirely⁶. Organizations that were providing protection and counselling support are no longer active (Of the 27 women's safe houses, only one is still able to take in women threatened by violence) due to a shortage of funding and the Taliban regime not only does not support the idea of protection but also claim

4 *Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook*. <https://invest.gov.af/theme3/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Afghanistan-Statistical-Yearbook-first-Version.pdf>. Accessed 9 Apr. 2022.

5 "Eight Facts on Women's Rights in Afghanistan." *Medicamondiale.org*, medicamondiale.org/en/where-we-empower-women/Afghanistan.

6 *Human Rights Watch*. "I Thought Our Life Might Get Better." *Human Rights Watch*, 5 Aug. 2021, www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/05/i-thought-our-life-might-get-better/implementing-afghanistans-elimination.

that women's rights are secured and there is no violence threatening them.

This paper examines women and children's rights in Afghanistan post-Taliban. The paper focusses on the women and children situation in the last twenty years and during the first and second period of Taliban control over the country. Secondary data has been used in this article using resources such as articles, journals, websites and available online government records. While conducting online research using secondary sources of data, limitations were faced in regards to the verification of data since all of the institutions have stopped functioning and access to sources of confirmation is difficult.

Afghan Women and Children - Context and Challenges

Afghanistan is considered as the worst place for women⁷ and children to live and to be born in⁸. The factors that contribute to the high level of vulnerability of both women and children (especially the girl children) include existing cultural sensitivity, gender-based discrimination, economic, and security situation, and the strict Islamic rules.

The situation for women and girls in Afghanistan changed fundamentally in August 2021 as the Taliban took power. Twenty years after the fall of the Taliban's control over Afghanistan, a hasty move by the international community and a bad deal under the banner of peace talks made it possible for the Taliban to take control of the country for a second time. In both terms, women and children suffered the most as women and children remain a vulnerable and risk-prone category in Afghanistan.

7 Country Profile. 2017, www.womenforwomen.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Afghanistan%20Country%20Profile_0_0.pdf.

8 Bohn, Lauren. "We're All Handcuffed in This Country: Why Afghanistan Is Still the Worst Place in the World to Be a Woman." Time, Time, 8 Dec. 2018, time.com/5472411/afghanistan-women-justice-war/.

Afghanistan currently has an estimated 40,528,398 population (51% male and 48.7% female⁹) based on the latest projections of the latest United Nations data as of April 8, 2022, with a growth rate of 2.33% per year with the youngest population in South and West Asia¹⁰ and with a median age of 18.4 years¹¹. Literacy among the population of Afghanistan is only at 38.2% of the population over the age of 15 years, with males at 52% and females at 24%.

Women's Rights

Decades' long conflict left Afghan women extremely vulnerable. Women have been the frontline victims of every social, political, cultural, economic and security shifts in the country. Along with economic collapse and humanitarian crisis as a result of the decades long conflict, the COVID-19 and the recent unbelievable turn of events in Afghanistan, women and girls are subject to all sorts of violence, discrimination, disrespect, negligence and exclusion from social, political and economic life. Taliban in their first period had imposed strict social restrictions on women including mandatory wearing of burqa, education and work were banned and women were prohibited from appearing in public spaces without a male (mahram) escort¹².

9 "Population, Female (% of Total Population) - Afghanistan | Data." Data.world-bank.org, data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?end=2020&locations=AF&start=2020&view=bar.

10 UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The Right to Education: What's at Stake in Afghanistan?. UNESCO, 2021, <https://educationbirdie.com/citation/mla-8/cite-a-pdf/>

11 World Population Review. *"Afghanistan Population 2020 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)."* Worldpopulationreview.com, 2021, worldpopulationreview.com/countries/afghanistan-population.

12 Allen, John, and Vanda Felbab-Brown. "The Fate of Women's Rights in Afghanistan." Brookings, 16 Sept. 2020, www.brookings.edu/essay/the-fate-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/.

Afghan women's life improved over the past two decades. Legal reforms along with educational and employment opportunities were significant advances for Afghan women and girls. Adaption of legal framework including the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW 2009) law¹³ and the Anti-Harassment Regulation (2016)¹⁴ were major achievements. The government also adopted policies and strategies that helped establish the legal safeguards to provide for the unrestricted exercise of women's rights and their participation throughout government and society.

The government endorsed laws and regulations, formulated gender-sensitive strategies and plans to ensure women's rights in Afghanistan including Afghanistan National Education Strategic Plan (NESP I, II & III)¹⁵, National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA)¹⁶ and Afghanistan National Development Strategy. Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which provides guidance on the protection of women in conflict situations. Besides; Afghanistan started the journey of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹⁷ in 2016

13 "Afghanistan: Justice System Failing Women." Human Rights Watch, 5 Aug. 2021, www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/05/afghanistan-justice-system-failing-women.

14 "Govt Signs Anti-Harassment of Women and Children's Act | Ariana News." Ariana News, 8 July 2018, ariananews.af/govt-signs-anti-harassment-of-women-and-childrens-act/.

15 "National Education Strategic Plan 2017 to 2021 | HumanitarianResponse." Wwww.humanitarianresponse.info, www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/document/national-education-strategic-plan-2017-2021.

16 *AFGHANISTAN'S NATIONAL ACTION PLAN ON UNSCR 1325-WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY 2015-2022*. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/wps-afghanistan_national_action_plan_1325_0.pdf. Accessed 9 Apr. 2022. Accessed 9 Apr. 2022.

17 "Sustainable Development Goals." UNDP in Afghanistan, 2016, www.af.undp.org/con-

with commitment to achieve and pursue the sustainable development goals till 2030. The Afghan government had made progress towards the SDGs, with a focus on the goals and targets related to the realization of women's and children's rights¹⁸. The government had also committed to observing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Afghan constitution (ratified in 2004)¹⁹ ensured Afghan women rights, and social and economic growth that significantly improved women's socio-economic conditions were in place.

Children Rights

UNICEF report identified Afghanistan as the “worst place to be born in the world”²⁰. The UN Security Council identified six grave violations against children comprising of recruitment and use of children, killing and maiming of children, rape or other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abduction, and denial of humanitarian access for children²¹. Children are exposed to extreme situations of violence and abuse due to ongoing conflict, displacement, a poor economy, and harmful social norms and practices. At least 45% of the Afghan population is below the age of 15²². 12.9 million children are among

tent/afghanistan/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html.

18 *Government, Afghan. Sustainable Development Goals - VNR_Report_Afghanistan. 2021.*

19 *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/The_Constitution_of_the_Islamic_Republic_of_Afghanistan.pdf.*

20 *Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Afghanistan. 2021, www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/6301/file/Summary-Situation%20Analysis.pdf.*

21 “Afghanistan: ‘Children Have Suffered Enough’: UN Officials Call to Uphold the Rights of Children, Including through Global Action - Afghanistan.” ReliefWeb, reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-children-have-suffered-enough-un-officials-call-uphold-rights#:~:text=The%20six%20grave%20violations%20against. Accessed 9 Apr. 2022.

22 “Afghanistan: ‘Children Have Suffered Enough’: UN Officials Call to Uphold the Rights of Children, Including through Global Action - Afghanistan.” ReliefWeb, reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-children-have-suffered-enough-un-officials-call-uphold-rights.

24.4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, while diseases such as measles, acute watery diarrhea, dengue, and COVID-19 outbreak is high²³.

In 1994, Afghanistan ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) among 196 state parties²⁴. Afghanistan also ratified International Conventions on Child Labor such as ILO C. 138, Minimum Age, ILO C. 182, Worst Forms of Child Labor, UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict, UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography and Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons. Meanwhile; in March 2019, the “The Children Protection Act”²⁵ approved and adopted in response to the imperative need for of legislation in line with the UNCRC to ensure the fundamental rights of every child in Afghanistan.

National Anti-Trafficking in Persons Action Plan, which mandated steps to eliminate the criminal practice of bacha bazi—a form of commercial sexual exploitation of boys, national labor policy, national child labor strategy and action plan, national strategy for children at risk and policy for protection of children in armed conflict were adopted. Furthermore, 10 new Child Protection Action Network units, and Child Protection Units within the Afghan National Police recruitment centers operated in all provinces within the government structure.

23 “Children in Afghanistan.” www.unicef.org, www.unicef.org/afghanistan/children-afghanistan.

24 “Convention on the Rights of the Child.” [Www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org), www.unicef.org/afghanistan/convention-rights-child. Accessed 9 Apr. 2022.

25 “Afghanistan Begins Implementing Law on Child Protection.” [TOLONews](http://TOLONews.com), tolonews.com/afghanistan/afghanistan-begins-implementing-law-child-protection. Accessed 9 Apr. 2022.

A Big Step Backward

Afghan women had been able to accomplish much in the past two decades. Women's workforce participation went up more than 50% since 2011²⁶. Today after twenty years of development work in Afghanistan and practicing democracy and freedom, women only have a few opportunities to work. In the recent years, women had fought hard for their right to work in the profession of their choice. Since the Taliban regained power, most of the women who had gone out to work are now jobless except for women in the education and healthcare sectors. Women's rights work within civil society is under severe pressure and women's political participation is banned. The Taliban regime does not include one single woman, the Ministry of Women's Affairs has been abolished or replaced by Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

During the previous Taliban regime, between 1996 and 2001, women were not allowed to study and work and their presence in public was bound to the condition of being accompanied by a mahram²⁷. In less than a decade, they were able to claim their right to a profession and education, making up, for instance, the majority of students of universities in big cities such as Kabul, Hirat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Nangarhar. By 2021, the proportion of 10-year-old girls going to school had increased to almost 60 per cent²⁸.

The climate of fear and gender-based violence further deters many women and girls from continuing their education as one of the first

26 Merelli, Annalisa. "What's at Stake for Women in Afghanistan." *Quartz*, qz.com/2047916/afghan-women-fear-the-taliban-will-strip-their-rights/.

27 "What's at Stake for Women in Afghanistan." Flipboard, flipboard.com/article/what-s-at-stake-for-women-in-afghanistan/a-GX0tOWF8SBCPO_H4rRa-p5g%3Aa%3A1864710370-48ffab178d%2Fqz.com?format=amp.

28 "Eight Facts on Women's Rights in Afghanistan." *Medicamondiale.org*, medicamondiale.org/en/where-we-empower-women/afghanistan.

political acts of the Taliban was to forbid girls from going to secondary schools while female students at university could only attend if their institution could offer them gender-segregated classes.

Children's rights are not protected from violence and exploitation and are widely violated in Afghanistan. Children are going through multiple and severe deprivations including widespread domestic and gender-based violence; violence in schools, high prevalence of child labor; and deprivation of liberty among children in contact with the law²⁹. Children have been significantly affected by armed conflict in the context of an intensifying conflict since 2014. High occurrence of attacks and the use of improvised explosive devices, suicide attacks, target killings, school attacks, and attacks in hospitals have made Afghanistan the world's most affected country by grave violations against children in 2019³⁰. Armed groups, particularly the Taliban, were responsible for most incidents, or 46%, with Government and pro-Government forces accounting for 35%, followed by landmines and explosive remnants of war³¹.

Despite the flow of international aid throughout the last 20 years, the condition of children did not improve. The problems children face in Afghanistan are countless. Poverty is one of the outstanding problems. Children make up more than half 57% of the population in need of emergency humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan³². Child protection structures inside the country are severely lacking. Afghan children

29 *Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Afghanistan*. 2021, www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/6291/file/Full%20Report-Situation%20Analysis.pdf.

30 admin. "Orphans: The Real Casualties of Afghan War." *Afghanistan Times*, *Afghanistan Times*, 15 Mar. 2015, www.afghanistantimes.af/orphans-the-real-casualties-of-afghan-war/.

31 "Report Details Grave Violations against Children in Afghanistan." *UN News*, 16 Aug. 2021, news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097902.

32 Fabrique. "War Child in Afghanistan." *Warchild English*, www.warchildholland.org/afghanistan/. Accessed 9 Apr. 2022.

grow up with the constant threat of violence and face numerous other rights violations - including forced marriage, corporal punishment and hazardous working conditions. According to UN statistics, Afghanistan is the second poorest country in the world.

An entire generation of Afghan children and youth are growing up without opportunities to learn. An estimated 3.7 to 4 million children are out-of-school in Afghanistan³³, however; after the recent political developments, the number of children going to schools has decreased, and girls are being deprived of their right to education while boys are pushed into child labor due to poverty. Children do not receive proper health care due to limited health services. Approximately 70% of the population does not have access to drinking water, which in turn results in a lot of health problems, especially among children.

Conclusion

Since 15 August 2021, there have been immediate and dramatic setbacks on women and children's rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly impacting their right to work, access to education, basic health and protection services. Participation of women and girls in the public sphere and decision-making mechanisms is equal to zero. It has been witnessed throughout the months under the Taliban regime that despite the assurances of the Taliban to the international community about respecting the rights of women and girls, there is a rapid setback of their rights across all areas of life. The rights of women and girls require immediate improvement across the full scale of women's rights. Focusing on a narrow vision of women's rights will not serve to build an inclusive society needed to overcome the various challenges facing women and the country.

33 UNICEF. "Education." Unicef.org, 2016, www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education.

Afghan children are victims of conflict and all types of injustices. Violence coupled with poverty has framed an atmosphere for children to be abused. Strong steps must be taken to prevent violence and harm against children and consider the protection and the rights of all girls and boys in line with international standards. Both girls and boys are exposed to harmful labor practices, contact with landmines, and violence at home. Protecting the rights of all Afghans, including the rights of children is imperative and must be upheld.

Recommendations

Women's Rights: The following recommendations are presented to safeguard women's rights and freedom:

Restore the legal system and legal framework and relevant institutions that ensure women's rights including laws that guarantee women's rights to education, mobility, employment, health care and free expression. The right of millions of girls to education must be respected. Women should be involved in any discourse regarding legal reform

Afghan women must be recognized as equal partners not as victims, to inform policy priorities and decision-making. The safety and security of Afghan women's organizations should be monitored to ensure their safety from elements opposed to women's rights.

Strategic partnerships with women's CSOs in Afghanistan must be facilitated, advocacy opportunities that are driven by Afghan women need to be amplified.;

Humanitarian assistance with women's participation isn't possible and acceptable. Support and advocacy for participation of women in humanitarian assistance as an imperative to meet the needs of Afghan women and girls is required;

Children Rights: To safeguard children rights, the following recommendations are offered:

Education is not only a right but also an obligation. Children must have equal access to education.

The protection system for children at the national level must be considered and restored to the protection of the children from any kind of violence and exploitation. Child protection must be ensured through capacity-building and training, particularly to effectively support vulnerable children.

Children's access to justice must be ensured and the legal framework that protected child rights including relevant policies and procedures must be retrieved. Community-based mental health and psychosocial support services, with specialized care for children must be provided to address many mental health consequences of widespread violence in the country.

The rise in child labor is the first of its kind after 20 years of progress and development work in Afghanistan³⁴. Child labor, military recruitment and sexual exploitation of children must stop.

34 "COVID-19 May Push Millions More Children into Child Labour – ILO and UNICEF" www.unicef.org, www.unicef.org/afghanistan/press-releases/covid-19-may-push-millions-more-children-child-labour-ilo-and-unicef.

Pak-Afghan Ties Under the Taliban

Salma Malik¹

For Pakistan, stability on its western flank has been of foremost importance, both from external as well as internal security perspective. Sharing a troubled history with Afghanistan, which since the inception of the state of Pakistan, has developed multilayered dynamics, with passing decades. Once a part of the same land stretch, the 1893 Durand Line agreement between the British empire and Amir of Afghanistan, brought about a border arrangement which at best remained fluid and easily permeable till recently. Faced with active armed conflict since the decade of 1970s, whether a civil insurrection, territorial intervention, and capture by the Soviet Union, followed by a brutal civil strife that led to the complete failure of the state, which led to a two-decade long post 9/11 US intervention and attempts at democratization of this traditionally tribal society, Afghanistan as a landlocked state has been dependent on Pakistan. For the latter, as stated above, any breach in stability or internal security of Afghanistan has a direct and drastic spillover effect. To manage its troubled neighborhood, Pakistan's policy orientation has predominantly been security centric, with once declaring Afghanistan as a 'strategic depth'. Ironical, as through the troubled decades, Islamabad rather than Kabul provided the much needed (humanitarian) strategic depth to Afghan nationals who were compelled to seek refuge in Pakistan in times of need.

The post 9/11 developments pitched Pakistan-Afghanistan relations at the center stage of several political crossroads. Islamabad's uneasy

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association with the first-generation Taliban regime further turned problematic with the mounting US mantra of do more,² transforming Pakistan into a perceivable extended war front, briefly labelled Af-Pak.³ Outright cold relations with the first democratically elected government of Hamid Karzai witnessed a thaw post 2014 massacre of school children in the Pakistani city of Peshawar during the time of newly elected president of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani. However, this window of opportunity also remained limited. Fully realizing that the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and specially Balochistan are Pakistan's Achilles heel, India exploited the situation to the max by spreading and supporting militancy and insurrection in these areas through hybrid means, evidence of which was the revelations by the Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav arrested by Pakistani authorities in 2016.⁴ Besides being used as an active proxy front against Pakistan, at the extra-regional level, Afghanistan became the ground zero of evolving regional power dynamics involving China, India, Iran as well as Turkey and leading Arab powers, who aimed to increase or maintain their foothold in this rugged land for its geo-strategic location as well as immense resource potential. Given US' re-entry in South Asia, Putin's

2 Zamir Akram, "Pakistan - US Relations after 9/11: A Pakistani Perspective," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Summer/Fall 2002, pp. 115-123.

3 The term *Af-Pak* gained fame and was possibly coined, by the Obama administration's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke in March 2008, a year prior to his assuming the designated position, explaining the reason behind the term, Ambassador Holbrooke said,

First of all, we often call the problem AfPak, as in Afghanistan Pakistan. This is not just an effort to save eight syllables. It is an attempt to indicate and imprint in our DNA the fact that there is one theater of war, straddling an ill-defined border, the Durand Line, and that on the western side of that border, NATO and other forces are able to operate. On the eastern side, it's the sovereign territory of Pakistan. But it is on the eastern side of this ill-defined border that the international terrorist movement is located.

For details see: Richard C. Holbrooke, "Coordinated Support for Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly*, Vol. IX, No. 02 / No. 03, Spring / Summer 2009, March 25, 2009, pp. 28-29.

4 "Transcript of RAW agent Kulbhushan's confessional statement," *Dawn*, March 30, 2016.

Russia also revived its interests in its traditional 'near abroad' through the Moscow talks, with each vying for their share in the division of the spoils.

It was the US-led Doha talks that earned the Americans a peaceful (if not so honorable) exit from Afghanistan after two long decades of engagement. However, what it didn't bring about was the long awaited and much desired peace for the Afghans and Afghanistan. As the US led western forces hastily fled Kabul, leaving behind a tragic legacy of unfulfilled promises regarding democracy, deep rooted governance, women emancipation and a progressive society, the Taliban triumphantly marched into Kabul with their hardliner agenda and ultra-conservative mindset. Unlike their previous stint at governing, the current Taliban regime, is no longer a rag-tag band of religious fanatics, who lacked the sophistication to run a country, and remained primitive in their governance and social skills. This new leadership has been courted by all leading powers, financed, nurtured, groomed and tacitly accepted if not outrightly recognized as the main power yielders in the Afghan Game of Thrones. As much as the US may deny it, the Doha agreements of February 2020 accorded a formal recognition to the Taliban as the main stakeholders in Afghanistan, who were pivotal in not only ensuring peace in the beleaguered country but would also guarantee the US and western powers a safe exit. Signing two separate accords, one with the Taliban and the other with the Ghani government, sealed the fate of the incumbent regime of the time as toothless and inconsequential.

The Taliban regained and captured Kabul on August 15th 2021, taking control of the exit ways from the country, with the Kabul airport as the main place of action. The scenes though extremely moving, were not unexpected, the US in its haste to withdraw, left behind bases and garrisons empty, rushing to catch military transport aircrafts flying them back home. The Americans disregarded Afghan nationals who had supported and stood by them through the last two decades,

believing in their promise of purging Afghanistan off the Taliban and extremist elements. For these Afghan nationals and their families, life under the Taliban was unthinkable, as they would be hounded, persecuted and brutally killed for siding with the enemy – which was worse than treason. The Afghan government, led by Dr. Ashraf Ghani a leading international economist, considered once amongst the top 100 international influencers,⁵ and in whose person the people initially held immense faith, had caved under corruption and mis-governance. His initial vision of regional cohesion meant “breakfast in Delhi, lunch in Peshawar, and dinner in Kabul—that’s the world we seek!”⁶ and making Afghanistan a leading steel exporter, he lost domestic support which fell to 27.5% only,⁷ and the US his erstwhile benefactors referred to him as “a paranoid president ... who was (not only) afraid of his countrymen, (but also believed that the) U.S. was “plotting a coup” against him.”⁸

As the Taliban entered Kabul, and the US troops made a sudden withdrawal, President Ghani also left the country to seek asylum, to “avoid bloodshed,” with a promise to return. These sudden exoduses had a massive impact on Afghan nationals, who were haunted by the brutality of the previous Taliban regime and were gripped with fear at the unexpectedly fast-paced and unstoppable Taliban advances, and zero resistance from the Afghan and US security personnel. In their frenzy to flee the Taliban, a huge number stormed the airports and through whatever means sought refuge in neighboring countries, with Pakistan once again becoming the most likely place.

5 “World Thinkers 2013,” *Prospect Magazine*, December 1, 2015.

6 Aziz Amin Ahmadzai, “Afghanistan’s Promise for Regional Connectivity and Peace,” *The Diplomat*, January 11, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/afghanistans-promise-for-regional-connectivity-and-peace/>

7 Ali Reza Sarwar, “Ashraf Ghani and the Pashtun Dilemma,” *The Diplomat*, January 18, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/ashraf-ghani-and-the-pashtun-dilemma/>

8 Susannah George, “U.S. watchdog details collapse of Afghan security forces,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2022.

For Islamabad, though the Taliban's eventual return to Kabul was expected, the swiftness was overwhelming. Walking a tight rope, where on one hand, there was optimism that the new Taliban will prove a good friend and reliable security partner, on the other hand, not only was there a strong resonance of the experience with the regime but also critical concerns that affected both neighbors. These ranged from the using Afghanistan as a proxy war front against Pakistan, terrorists, and militant cadres such as the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), IS-Khorasan (IS-K) and Baloch insurgents operating from Afghan soil, border demarcation issues, as well as credence to extremist outfits within Pakistan, the relations initially started on a good bilateral note. Pakistan also provided major support to Afghanistan in the critical months following the fall of Kabul, as it cushioned and accommodated the massive inflow of Afghan nationals, seeking refuge or temporary asylum, extended and facilitated humanitarian assistance within the conflict affected country, and continued sensitizing the international community to save Afghanistan at that critical moment, from a complete social and financial collapse. By no means a small feat, as despite its sincere efforts to avert a major humanitarian crisis, Islamabad as always, shouldered the burden of US and ISAF ire, who scapegoated Islamabad for the failure of their flawed and disastrous actions.

The Taliban who negotiated the Doha accords and took over Kabul on the eve of August 15th, appeared different from their predecessors. Immaculately dressed, confident, camera and media savvy, several even having an active social media presence. During their negotiations with various stake holders prior to Kabul takeover, they came across as a group, which had wizened with time, and understood the need for incorporating values such as greater and more liberated civic space, inclusivity and pluralism, respect for greater human rights, girl-child and women education as well as socio-political tolerance. The Taliban as part of the Doha process and their interactions with global stakeholders, had also committed to several of these aspects. But unfortunately, soon

after their ascend to office, the first casualty was women's education and freedom to move. The reason mainly has been the supremacy of hardliners in the new set up, led by Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, and his deputies Sirajuddin Haqqani, Mullah Yaqub Omari (Mullah Omar's son), and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.⁹ The latter two considered moderate amongst the hardliners, have been instrumental in brokering peace talks with the Western powers as well as the previous Afghan government. However, despite the understanding to have an interim set up, which was to be done in consultation with President Ghani's government and other groups, the cabinet announced three months after the Taliban takeover was Pashtun dominated and not inclusive in its nature. Additionally, no time frame for elections has been provided.

Formal Recognition of the Taliban

The Taliban also reneged on their promise to Pakistan about taking a stern action against the TTP and other anti-Pakistan forces. However, despite this non-cooperation, Pakistan has remained committed to facilitating and supporting peace and stability in Afghanistan, and acts as a bridge between the Taliban and the international community in order to address Kabul's economic, humanitarian, and security predicament. For Pakistan, the question of rendering formal recognition to the Taliban regime, was much debated initially. Burnt from its past bitter experience, Islamabad is not ready to recognize the Taliban government unilaterally and repeat the same mistake as it happened in their first tenure. While on the one hand it seeks a collective decision when it comes to recognition of the Taliban government, it further wants to maintain strong enough ties to prevent Afghanistan from sliding down the path of fire and destruction. As the Taliban prior to August 2021 takeover, gained physical and political ground, there appeared little

9 Safdar Sial (ed), "Afghanistan as seen from Pakistan," *PIPS Paper Series*, Jan-Mar, 2022 Situation Review 3, p. 11.

resistance, which is how the state of affairs would be for the foreseeable future. Therefore, from the beginning, Islamabad stressed on engaging with the Taliban, to compel them into taking decisions compliant with global norms and steer them on a path to progress. Pakistan's outgoing Prime Minister in an interview to western media stated, "Is there a chance that if the Taliban government is squeezed there could be a change for the better? No. So the only alternative we have right now is to work with them and incentivize them for what the world wants – inclusive government, human rights and women rights in particular. That is the only way forward right now."¹⁰

Counter Terrorism Efforts

During the last twenty years, as Pakistan stepped up its counter militancy operations against the TTP and other militant and separatist elements, Afghanistan become a haven for such elements. Not only did they manage to find refuge in the neighboring country, along with material support but many such elements, especially the TTP, had pledged allegiance to the Afghan Taliban. The current Taliban leadership had publicly stated that the Afghan territory would not be used as a staging point by any entity (state or non-state) against another country. Similarly, the same pledge had been made concerning Pakistan, along with the assurance that they would help negotiate peace between Islamabad and TTP. However, despite the Pakistan government releasing TTP militants from jail, one attempt at a ceasefire was unilaterally called off by the TTP in December 2021, with another one negotiated in early June 2022.

Since the beginning of 2022, there has also been a spike in terrorist attacks in Pakistan from across the border, to which the Afghan Taliban regime has turned a convenient blind eye. This is also largely because

10 As cited in "Perspectives From Pakistan On Afghan Peace And Reconciliation," *PIPS Quarterly Monitor*-3, January - March 2022, p. 3.

of the deep affiliation the TTP has with the Afghan Taliban, which the latter willingly reciprocates. The affiliation that TTP has with the Afghan Taliban runs much deeper than a mere appreciation, as it labels the latter as the mothership of their movement. TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud publicly reiterated his pledge of allegiance to Afghan Taliban leader Maulvi Hibatullah Akhundzada and claimed the TTP to be a branch of the Taliban in Pakistan.¹¹ This is one of the reasons for the Afghan Taliban's non-committal attitude towards the ousting and crackdown against the TTP.

Between September 2021 to March 2022, according to Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, the TTP (based in Afghanistan) claimed to have carried out 197 attacks.¹² Despite Islamabad's efforts to fence the 2,670 kilometers miles along the Pak-Afghan border, the Taliban regime, has not created a lot of obstructions by taking the traditional Afghan stance on the mutual border, famously referred to as the Durand Line. This has resulted in increased cross-border movements of militants, and correspondingly more attacks on Pakistan security personnel. Instead of flushing out the safe havens of anti-Pakistan terrorist and militant groups, the Taliban administration is now willfully protecting them. This is not only a matter of grave concern for Pakistan, which faces enhanced threats to its internal security, as well as the western border. But also, for other neighboring states who fear the spillover impact of terrorism from Afghanistan.

Border Demarcation and Fencing

The Pakistan-Afghanistan border was drawn by virtue of an agreement signed between the Amir of Afghanistan Abdur Rahman Khan and

11 Asfandiyar Mir, "After the Taliban's Takeover: Pakistan's TTP problem," *USIP Analysis & Commentary*, Wednesday, January 19, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/after-talibans-takeover-pakistans-ttp-problem>.

12 *PIPS Quarterly Monitor*-3, p. 13.

a representative of the British Indian government in 1893. Slightly modified as a result of the Anglo-Afghanistan Treaty of 1919, it was thus inherited by Pakistan following independence. Although it is an internationally recognized border but has over the decades become a point of political point scoring within Afghanistan and a moot point in Pak-Afghan relations for the longest. Pakistan's interest in fencing the 2,670 km long border has mainly been driven by the ever-increasing incidents of terrorism, drug and illicit trafficking of all kinds, illegal immigration, smuggling across the international border, as well as cross-border terrorist infiltration. Given the unique nature of erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Pakistan – Afghanistan border became increasingly porous over the years. As much as successive Afghan governments contested the Durand line agreement, the sanctity of the territorial jurisdiction was always observed, except for select incidents.

As previously mentioned, although the border had always been a haven for trafficking and illicit activities, post 9/11, it became a zone of active conflict, and massive infiltration of violent non-state actors. To contain and check these activities, Pakistani government has carried out several measures, which include constructing a border fence, supplemented by a series of check posts as well trench, to form an effective barrier against infiltration and cross-border movement of all kinds. By June 2016, 1,100 km of trenches in Balochistan Pakistan had been completed, followed by 235 out of 338 checkpoints and a 900 km long fence constructed by 2017.¹³ By January 2022, the Pakistan government announced that only 20 km remains to be constructed. However, the Taliban not only objected, but violently obstructed and resisted the construction work, being carried out by the Pakistan army. Despite Islamabad showing utmost constraint and repeatedly raising the issue with the Taliban government, the latter not only disallowed any further construction,

13 "The Fence Driving a Wedge Between Pakistan and Afghanistan". *Bloomberg Quint*. March 15, 2019.

but also rejected the previous government's understanding of the issue. Taliban's acting Defense Minister Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob Omari stated that they had not allowed Pakistan to fence the Durand Line and it was the previous government that allowed them to do so. In the future, he reiterated, the Taliban will act as per the decision taken by the cabinet, which said no more fencing would be allowed. However, to resolve the issue amicably, a joint border committee has been formed.

Trade as a Bridge Builder

Despite the Taliban regime's non-cooperative attitude, Islamabad remains alive to the plight of Afghan nationals, and to prevent a complete economic and humanitarian disaster, has kept economics and trade as a top priority issue. Always considering Afghanistan to be a strategic link between the regions of Central and South Asia, as stated in the country's first National Security Policy 2022-2026,

Pakistan remains committed to facilitating and supporting peace and stability in Afghanistan in close collaboration with the international community through addressing economic, humanitarian, and security issues. Afghanistan's potential as a gateway for economic connectivity with Central Asian states is a key driver for Pakistan's support for peace in Afghanistan.¹⁴

The government is employing various means to facilitate trade and commerce, which include removing trade barriers, visa and travel facilitation for citizens movement across the border, barter trade system, reduction in regulatory duty for Afghan commodities, export of select commodities to Afghanistan in Pakistani currency. The number of these select items poultry, meat, cement, pharmaceutical products, textile, fruits, vegetables, salt, rice, surgical instruments, etc. was enhanced from 14 to 16. There have been visits by the Pakistan Afghanistan Joint

¹⁴ *PIPS Quarterly Monitor-3*, p. 2.

Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PAJCCI) to Pakistan which explored opportunities for trade growth and industrial promotion.

Despite facing a genuine economic crisis itself, Pakistan single handedly extended economic and humanitarian assistance of all kinds to Afghan citizens. Not only did Pakistan reach out to the international community including donor agencies including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to come to the aid of Afghans, but also to the US administration to unfreeze the \$9.5 billion of Afghan central bank reserves, and ease the economic sanctions placed against the regime. However, in the initial critical months, as harsh Afghan winters approached and no assistance in sight from International Community, Pakistan pledged more than \$28 million worth of humanitarian aid to Kabul, including 50,000 metric tons of wheat, winter shelter and emergency medical supplies.¹⁵ Sheltering 3 million Afghan refugees from the past decades, initially Islamabad was reluctant to accommodate more. But as the economic as well as security situation worsened in the country, and many people fled to safety, the Pakistan embassy in Kabul eased visa and travel procedure, facilitated vocational education for Afghan students, and helped anyone seeking asylum, protection and safe passage.

The Pak-Afghan Cooperation Forum took a lead in maintaining the humanitarian corridor open and running to prevent Afghan nationals from facing further misery. Hospitals and medical aid services have been established in the border area, for the treatment of critically ill patients, although it has been a routine practice for Afghan nationals Taliban takeover to seek medical treatment either in Peshawar or Islamabad on travel permits.

15 Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan Sends Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan," *Voice of America*, December 30, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-sends-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan-/6375649.html>

Conclusion

In conclusion, Pakistan and Afghanistan are linked to one another as what Hamid Karzai referred to as the conjoined twins. Their security, stability and progress are linked to each other, and stands affected in case of any internal or external developments. For Pakistan, like any other world actor, a stable, secure and friendly neighbor is of utmost priority, and one of the reasons for showing a favorable response towards the new regime was that this may contain and check the decadeslong usage of Afghanistan as a proxy war front and staging ground by Pakistan's principal adversary. However, with passing months, Islamabad's expectations towards a common counter terrorism approach have not been reciprocated, as it viewed the Taliban's takeover as an opportunity for cleaning up the unwanted externalities in its neighborhood i.e., a complete pullback of Indian and Western presence and influence.

As the world predictably leaves Afghanistan behind, focusing on the new unfolding drama in Ukraine, Islamabad must develop a balanced and pragmatic approach towards its western neighbour. Pakistan's humanitarian assistance highlighting to the international community the plight of Afghan citizens must be acknowledged not only by Kabul but by the whole South Asian region. As the Taliban consolidate their power at home, and interact with a global audience, Islamabad needs to prudently assess and bilaterally deliberate key critical concerns that include counter-terrorism, border fencing, trade, river water sharing as well as the most critical refugee problem, over which there still does not exist any formal agreement. Pakistan has over the past decades paid a heavy price for its association and commitment to Afghanistan both at the internal as well as external levels. Islamabad needs to shun its apologetic approach and work on building strategic terms with Afghanistan, as more than Kabul, it is Islamabad that provides the strategic depth to this bilateral relationship.

Afghan Refugees: Rehabilitation, Support and a Regional Cooperation Model in The Aftermath of Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan

By Rudroneel Ghosh¹

The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021 has certainly been a tectonic event for South Asia. The withdrawal of Western military troops, the rapid fall of the erstwhile Ashraf Ghani government, and what now appears to be a complete transformation of the Afghan political economy and society, have raised considerable concerns about regional security and human rights, including rights of refugees, women and children. Hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees have flooded neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Iran – while Pakistan says it has hosted more than 300,000 Afghans since the Taliban takeover,¹ the Norwegian Refugee Council estimates that around 4,000-5,000 Afghans were crossing into Iran daily up till November 2021.²

India too has evacuated both Indian and Afghan citizens in the wake of the Taliban takeover. This is in addition to the roughly 21,000 Afghans already in India out of whom 11,000 are registered as asylum-seekers as per the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.³ But the lack of adequate protection for refugees in India, Pakistan and even Iran means that Afghan refugees and asylum seekers face considerable livelihood challenges and put up with deplorable living conditions. This paper will seek to examine the status of Afghan refugees in Iran, Pakistan – two countries that host around 90% Afghan refugees – and India with the aim of highlighting their plight, legal hurdles and lack of access to

¹ Author is Assistant Editor 'The Times of India'.

basic human rights. It will also look at the security challenges that host nations actually face in not having a proper refugee policy and attempt to show that adopting an ad hoc approach to the matter is essentially self-defeating. It will also delve into the possibility of a regional high-level coordinating mechanism comprising host countries Iran, Pakistan, India and the Central Asian Republics to address the issue of Afghan refugees, which in turn could lead to the creation of a new coordinating platform in South and Central Asia, boosting regional dialogue and security.

Afghan refugees in Iran

As a major host country for Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, Iran should be at the forefront of providing humanitarian assistance to those fleeing the crisis in Afghanistan. In fact, Iran, unlike India and Pakistan, is both a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol. According to the UNHCR, there were over 2.25 million undocumented Afghans and another 1.38 million documented Afghan refugees in Iran in 2021.⁴ The Iranian foreign ministry said in April 2022 that the number of Afghans in that country had jumped to 5 million from the nearly 4 million before the Taliban takeover in August last year.⁵ Yet, Iran has been pursuing a policy of forcibly repatriating undocumented Afghans, an approach that appears to have intensified in recent months. Social media videos circulated in April 2022 showing the mistreatment and abuse of Afghan refugees by Iranian border guards and civilians that promoted retaliatory protests against Iranian diplomatic missions in the Afghan cities of Kabul and Herat.⁶ With the International Organization for Migration estimating that Iran was deporting 20,000 to 30,000 Afghans each week, Tehran is clearly guilty of undermining the principle of non-refoulement.⁷ It is to be noted that Iran does not recognise the principles of wage-earning employment, public relief, social security and freedom of movement for refugees as enshrined in the refugee convention.

Pakistan: Afghan safe haven or refugee quagmire?

It is often said that some Afghans have a car with a full tank of fuel and loaded boot which they keep in reserve. If crisis unfolds, they use the car to make a beeline for Peshawar in Pakistan.⁸ Given geographic proximity, the history of the two countries and ethnic similarities, Pakistan is a natural safe haven for Afghans. Indeed, Pakistan has over the years hosted millions of Afghan refugees who have filtered across the Durand Line. And while Pakistan is not a signatory to the refugee convention and protocol, it has largely accepted the UNHCR verification of Afghan refugees. In fact, only recently Pakistan concluded a months-long campaign to register Afghan refugees and issue them new smart registration cards.⁹ The drive has updated the data of 1.4 million Afghan refugees. However, these refugees were already residing in Pakistan and holding UNHCR cards before the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in August 2021. As per the UN refugee agency, another 300,000-plus Afghan refugees have fled to Pakistan since the Taliban takeover, most of whom are still awaiting registration.¹⁰

In fact, as per media reports, Afghan refugees who came to Pakistan after August 2021 are facing extreme hardships. They have no legal protection and without registration don't have access to humanitarian aid, healthcare or education. As a matter of fact, many Afghan refugees protested outside the offices of the UNHCR in Islamabad in April 2022, seeking the distribution of immigration cards to expedite their registration.¹¹

Clearly, the Pakistani government is in no mood to properly host those Afghan refugees who fled Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. Perhaps this is because Islamabad sees the Taliban regime as legitimate and wants those Afghans who left to return to their home country to bolster the international recognition of the new Afghan dispensation. However, the fact remains that most Afghan refugees have fled due to genuine fears for their lives and for better prospects for their family

members – especially women and girls – for whom they don't see a positive future under an ultra-conservative Taliban government.

Of course, the matter of Afghan refugees is also delicate for Pakistan. The big wave of Afghan refugees that flooded across the Durand Line in the 2000s after the US military intervention in Afghanistan led to serious security ramifications for Pakistan. Back then Afghan fighters that took shelter in Pakistan's tribal agencies contributed to the rise of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, an umbrella terrorist organisation that took over large swathes of Pakistani territory.¹² It was only after multiple operations by the Pakistani army that control of these areas was regained by the Pakistani state. Thus, it is understandable to some extent that Islamabad is reluctant to host more Afghan refugees at this point given the 1.4 million previously registered Afghan refugees and the history of security concerns.

India: Between non-refoulement and political expediency

India, like Pakistan, is neither a signatory to the refugee convention nor its protocol. Hence, the government makes no distinction between foreigners and refugees. In fact, the Foreigners Act of 1946, the Passport Act of 1967, and the Extradition Act of 1962 apply to both foreigners and asylum-seekers in the country. As a result, even though India has largely stuck to the principle of non-refoulement and hosted millions of refugees over the years – from erstwhile East Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Tibet and Afghanistan – its approach towards refugees has been ad hoc and often based on political expediency. This is exemplified by the Indian Parliament's passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act in recent years that provides for Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Thus, we have a situation where the estimated 21,000 Afghan asylum-seekers in India live in relatively impoverished conditions while Tibetan

and Sri Lankan refugees live in camps and enjoy the benefits of specific government policies.¹³ But while this dichotomy is often explained away by Indian authorities as reflective of the country's national security interests, it also leads to unfortunate consequences.

Here I would like to present the case of Indian national Iqra Jamal and her Afghan husband.¹⁴ At the time of writing this paper, Iqra is in her ninth month of pregnancy. She and her spouse are stuck in Herat in western Afghanistan, and have been running pillar to post to return to India. Iqra's husband had got a job in the erstwhile Foreign Ministry of Afghanistan under the Ashraf Ghani government in 2020. The two had met in India as students studying in the same university. Iqra then travelled to Afghanistan in July 2021 to join her husband. However, after the Taliban took over Kabul on August 15, 2021, the couple headed to Kabul airport for evacuation back to India. But chaotic scenes at the airport coupled with the bombing of August 26 meant that Iqra and her husband failed to board a flight out of Afghanistan.

Subsequently, the Indian government cancelled all existing visas for Afghan nationals and started issuing emergency e-visas.¹⁵ Iqra's husband did apply for such an e-visa on August 28, 2021. But his application remains under process till date. The desperate couple undertook a trip to Iran in December 2021 and called on the Indian embassy in Tehran. There Iqra was told that she could return to India any time via any available flight, but her husband could only do so via a valid e-visa. Given that her husband was officially an employee of the previous Afghan government and potentially in danger under the Taliban regime, Iqra was understandably not willing to leave her husband behind. The couple has repeatedly tried to contact Indian government authorities regarding Iqra's husband's e-visa but has so far not got any response. Plus, Iqra dreads that should her child be born in Afghanistan, it would make her return to India even more complicated.

Iqra's case is a classic example of how not having a proper refugee policy can even lead to complications for Indian citizens. After all, we live in an increasingly interconnected world and clean divisions between people, nationalities, foreigners and citizens are not possible. This is precisely why the Indian government should reconsider its approach to refugees and at least enact a national law on refugees, eschewing political agendas.

As for Afghan refugees in India, multiple reports suggest that they struggle to make ends meet.¹⁶ From basics such as renting an accommodation to earning a livelihood, everything is a challenge. This is even true for those Afghans processed and registered as asylum-seekers by the UNHCR in India. The blue document they receive have limited recognition among Indian authorities. In fact, in September 2021, several thousand Afghan refugees protested outside the offices of the UNHCR in New Delhi demanding recognition and better economic security.¹⁷

An opportunity for cooperation

While India, Pakistan and Iran each have a different perspective on the Afghan refugee issue, the current moment also presents an opportunity for cooperation between the three countries. This is particularly true if one considers the current geopolitical situation. The war in Ukraine and the refugee crisis engendered by that conflict are likely to keep Western nations occupied for the near to medium term. But the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover cannot be ignored either. This is particularly true for Afghanistan's neighbours who are directly affected by the fallout of any Afghan crisis. The last thing anyone would want is another civil war in Afghanistan that exacerbates the current Afghan refugee crisis and again undermines regional security. Looked at objectively, countries like India, Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian Republics should be working on coordinated security measures to prevent Afghanistan from turning into a haven for militant outfits.

A coordinating mechanism for refugee host countries

However, hitherto vested political interests, strategic calculations and a significant trust deficit have prevented such coordination. But cooperation is possible if the Afghan refugee crisis is treated as the main subject of concern. A high-level coordinating mechanism on Afghan refugees, aided by the UNHCR, with Iran, Pakistan, India and the Central Asian Republics as member parties will not only go a long way in ameliorating the suffering of displaced Afghans, but also provide a useful forum for regional countries to collectively manage the fallout of the Afghanistan situation.

The coordinating mechanism will look at the situation of Afghan refugees in the host countries, channel aid to Afghan refugees where it is most needed among the member parties, and provide better support to those displaced Afghans who have family members spread across the region. Of course, all of this will also require coordination with the Taliban authorities in Afghanistan at some point. But since the coordinating mechanism's main mission is humanitarian in nature with multiple regional parties involved, this shouldn't be a problem and neatly sidestep the issue of providing official diplomatic recognition to the Taliban government in Kabul.

In fact, the final interface with the Taliban authorities can be through the UNHCR. Besides, the coordinating mechanism will help in facilitating exchange of information among the host countries on Afghan refugees, creating a solid base for future regional security cooperation. True, we already have the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, and the Regional Refugee Preparedness and Response Plan being led by the UNHCR and covering Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.¹⁸ But these platforms do not facilitate adequate direct high-level inter-governmental coordination between the host countries on the Afghan refugee issue. Besides, after August 2021, the situation has considerably changed

within Afghanistan itself. Therefore, we need a platform that sits on the axis of the humanitarian refugee issue and legitimate regional security concerns. This is precisely why the coordinating mechanism as proposed in this paper is ideal to serve both purposes.

Yes, relations between India and Pakistan today are fraught. But the Afghan refugee issue is one area where the two countries can actually cooperate without compromising on their respective strategic interests. In that sense, working on the Afghan refugee issue through the coordinating mechanism can serve as an ice-breaker between New Delhi and Islamabad. And that in turn can lay the platform for further confidence-building measures between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

Conclusion

Taken together, there is urgent need to prioritise the Afghan refugee crisis which has only worsened since the Taliban takeover. A high-level regional inter-governmental coordination mechanism of host countries is imperative to not only support the Afghan refugees spread across Iran, Pakistan, India and the Central Asian Republics, but also to lay the foundation for cooperation among these countries on security issues emanating from Afghanistan. The tragedy of Afghan refugees fleeing potential persecution and deterioration of livelihoods, human rights and lifestyles in Afghanistan cannot be ignored. Nor can the refugee host countries be left to their own resources and devices to manage the situation. With the Ukraine refugee crisis occupying Europe and the West in general, regional countries in South and Central Asia must band together to help Afghan refugees and address security concerns arising from Afghanistan.

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Humanitarian Challenges in Afghanistan: Aid, the United Nations and the Politics of Recognition

Hernaikh Singh and Shavinyaa Vijaykumarr¹

The withdrawal of Western forces and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan not only worsened the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan but also created new challenges. Globally, states see the need to do more for Afghanistan's humanitarian issues. However, the international community, aware of the Afghan economy's dependence on aid, views economic sanctions and conditional aid as possible tools to influence the Taliban's behaviour towards human rights issues in the country. However, herein lies the paradox. Conditional aid may worsen poverty and induce further humanitarian and security concerns without seriously influencing the Taliban government. It is imperative for the international community to arrive at a consensus that aid should only be conditional when it does not come at the expense of humanitarian and medical assistance.

On 15 August 2021, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan came to a swift and complete end. President Ashraf Ghani's promise of never abandoning his people went with the wind when he fled Kabul to Uzbekistan. With the President gone, the government collapsed. The Taliban offensive, which was already gaining ground in the weeks preceding the President's flight, entered Kabul with ease. Within hours, footage of Taliban fighters occupying the offices within the Presidential palace gripped mainstream media worldwide. Simultaneously, images and videos of tens of thousands of desperate people rushing to the

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Kabul airport “in hopes of escaping the Taliban’s harsh rule and potential retribution” was flashed in the tv.² The scene at the Kabul airport dominated media channels following the Taliban takeover, painting the Taliban regime to be the sole actor to precipitate the humanitarian disaster that was to ensue. However, contrary to what the media portrayed, the humanitarian challenges are not a recent crisis sparked by the pull-out of the United States (US) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Taliban takeover but a result of complexities arising from the recent 40-year history of Afghanistan.

This paper asserts that the lack of a structural and institutional framework of governance and a contracting economy in Afghanistan have resulted in a paradoxical situation. The international community cannot successfully play the politics of recognition by using its economic leverage to steer the Taliban government to align with international laws and rights without exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

Humanitarian Challenges

Afghanistan faces serious humanitarian challenges. Climatic factors such as droughts and food shortages predate the Taliban takeover. Other factors, such as the health and socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, have been felt globally.

Currently, the country is on the brink of famine caused by drought and rising food prices. It is projected that during the next winter, approximately 23 million Afghans will starve, and the United Nations (UN) foresees up to a million Afghan children dying consequently.³ The scale of the humanitarian crisis has been further propelled by

2 Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, “The Collapse of Afghanistan”, *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 1 (2022), 40.

3 Hardin Lang and Jacob Kurtzer, “Aid Agencies Can’t Fix Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Crisis”, *Just Security*, 15 February 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/80221/aid-agencies-cant-fix-afghanistans-humanitarian-crisis/>.

Afghanistan's sluggish economy – increasing poverty, food shortage, a collapsing healthcare system and a serious refugee crisis.⁴

Even before the Taliban took control of the country, the Afghans were heavily reliant on foreign aid for their economic and humanitarian needs. However, the challenges were compounded by the Taliban takeover and the policy reactions of the donor governments. The international community's response to the Taliban's seizure of power was to stop assistance amounting to billions of dollars and implement sanctions on the country. The economy took an immediate hit.

The decision by the international community also impeded relief work being undertaken in the country. For instance, the suspension of international aid to the System Enhancement for Health Action in Transition Project in Afghanistan, following the Taliban take over in August 2021, worsened the already weak health sector. Since August 2021, about 3,000 health clinics have shut down due to the lack of funding.⁵ The World Health Organisation's prediction, in September 2021, of declining public health conditions came true early this year with increasing incidences of measles, diarrhoea and polio in children.

The Taliban leadership would also have been acutely aware of the likely economic and global responses to its forced takeover of the government and its management of the country, particularly its dealing with certain segments of the society. However, this did not stop the Taliban from conducting egregious human rights violations. "During its offensive and following its takeover, the Taliban conducted reprisal and extrajudicial killings of people associated with the former administration, including

4 Lindsay Maizland, "A Look at Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis", Council on Foreign Relations, 12 January 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/article/afghanistan-humanitarian-crisis-famine-foreign-aid-taliban>.

5 William Byrd, "Afghanistan 2021", *Amnesty International*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/>.

members of the Afghan National Security Forces.”⁶ The Taliban had also reneged on their promises to the international community to respect women’s rights and freedoms. The group had also violently repressed the freedom of expression and assembly and detained journalists and civil rights activists.

Aid-dependent Afghan Economy and Institutions

The sudden cessation of aid triggered an economic shock to an aid-dependent Afghanistan. Its economy was starved of about US\$8 billion of aid, amounting to almost 40 percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP).⁷ The sanctions worsened the situation and “hindered macroeconomic adjustment, private sector activities and delivery of humanitarian aid”.⁸ An estimated US\$10 billion of foreign currency reserves were also frozen.⁹ This decision was made over the fears about the Taliban’s access to and control over huge amounts of capital. It was also prompted by the legality of the Afghan state representation and, thereby, the legitimate claimant to the funds. The resultant credit crunch compelled Afghan banks to limit withdrawal amounts. At the same time, international financial institutions refused to entertain entities and persons connected to Afghanistan for fear of flouting global sanctions on Kabul.¹⁰ As a result, the country’s trade and commerce came to a standstill. The International Monetary Fund predicts that the Afghan economy will contract by up to 30 percent this year.¹¹

6 Ibid.

7 William Byrd, “How to Mitigate Afghanistan’s Economic and Humanitarian Crises”, *op. cit.*

8 Ibid.

9 Hardin Lang and Jacob Kurtzer, “Aid Agencies Can’t Fix Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Crisis”, *op. cit.*

10 William Byrd, “How to Mitigate Afghanistan’s Economic and Humanitarian Crises”, *op. cit.*

11 Hardin Lang and Jacob Kurtzer, “Aid Agencies Can’t Fix Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Crisis”, *op. cit.*

For nearly 20 years before the Taliban takeover, the US and other donor governments contributed 80 per cent of the finances to the Afghan public sector.¹² The assumption was that international aid, in the form of the provision of public goods, could appeal to the people and win allegiance to the state. This assumption drove donors to bestow billions of dollars to the Afghan economy for institution-building, infrastructure and community development projects. While there is no concrete evidence to show the extent to which these efforts benefitted the country, the “donor efforts undermined governance and stability in [the] communities”.¹³ Donor efforts often “gave rise to a state bureaucracy and myriad ministries but granted no formal role for citizens to oversee what was happening”.¹⁴ International aid was entangled in practices of corruption, rents and appropriation by Afghan native strongmen. This eroded the state’s legitimacy.¹⁵

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Afghanistan notes that “despite some progress towards raising and better managing revenues, attempts to build accountable public finance and civil service institutions largely proved inadequate to offset the impact of broader political economy drivers and patronage-based governance.”¹⁶ The UNDP’s appraisal of the Afghan economy underscores that the aid administration was not well-thought-out as many civilian projects were “weakly coordinated, and often duplicative and wasteful”.¹⁷ Domestic fiscal revenues were minimal at below 15 per cent of GDP, equivalent to US\$2.7 billion in 2019 (compared to total government expenditure of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, “The Collapse of Afghanistan”, op. cit., 46.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan after August 15 – A Rapid Appraisal”, The United Nations Development Programme Afghanistan, 9 September 2021, <https://www.undp.org/publications/economic-instability-and-uncertainty-afghanistan-after-august-15>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

US\$11 billion and the GDP of around \$20 billion).¹⁸

In an insightful observation, Jennifer Murtazashvili noted that the World Bank-funded National Solidarity Program was one such example of donor efforts producing undesirable results:

“...the World Bank-funded National Solidarity Program, one of the largest and most celebrated aid programs in Afghanistan, aimed to build local-governance structures across the country to sideline the informal traditional structures that were already in place to channel donor aid to communities. In the mid-2000s, when I first looked at the program, it was promising to build social capital and reconnect Afghans to their government by creating more than thirty-thousand Community Development Councils. Through ostensibly participatory processes, these councils would decide on community priorities and then receive large block grants to solve the problems that citizens identified. My research found that [the] communities with these councils were more likely to have disputes and less likely to be able to solve them than were those without the councils. The World Bank’s own evaluation of the program found that governance outcomes in [the] communities with the councils were worse than in those without them. They were ineffective because they fostered corruption and created parallel processes of decision-making that undermined longstanding social norms about community governance. Yet, over years, donors pumped more than US\$2 billion into the project.”¹⁹

Essentially, the 20-year history of donor aid to Afghanistan points to one thing – without foreign aid, there would hardly be any semblance of the Afghan economy and institutions. There are no real structures or

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili. “The Collapse of Afghanistan”, op. cit., 46.

institutions in Afghanistan that could operate independently, relying solely on the Afghan population and local resources.

The freezing of foreign aid and halting of domestic revenue collection created a funding shortage that made regular, day-to-day governance impossible. The Taliban's sources of finance are unreliable and unstable. As per a recent UN report, in addition to charitable and foreign donations, the Taliban derive much of their revenue from unlawful activity, including opium and looted minerals, money laundering, illicit import and export of consumer goods and spare parts, Islamic taxes and extortions.²⁰ In 2019, these activities were estimated to bring in about US\$1.6 billion in revenue. Despite the Taliban's sources of finance, the Afghan economy is not able to sustain itself without aid from foreign donors and governments.

Politics of Recognition and the Taliban

The conversation about the international community's extension of humanitarian aid and UN assistance has been predicated on the politics of recognition.

What's in a Name?

The discussion surrounding the 'recognition' of the Taliban concerns such factors as "...political legitimacy, constitutionality, human rights performance or willingness to establish diplomatic relations".²¹ The international recognition of governments has often been associated with the formation of a government that is inclusive and representative of

20 "Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan after August 15 – A Rapid Appraisal", op. cit.

21 Ben Saul, "'Recognition' and the Taliban's International Legal Status", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 15 December 2021, <https://icct.nl/publication/recognition-talibans-international-legal-status/> #:~:text=No%20country%20has%20%E2%80%9Crecognised%E2%80%9D%20the,preconditions%20and%20consequences%20of%20recognition.

the population it governs. Ben Saul notes that “withholding recognition can be leveraged to induce behavioural change – whether on democracy, human rights or counter-terrorism – assuming that other states can offer things that the entity needs or wants strongly enough.”²²

Additionally, the concept of ‘recognition’ influences the decisions of international actors to either accept or reject an establishment as the government representing a particular member state. At the end of last year, the UN Credentials Committee put off a decision on the Taliban administration. This could stem largely from unhappiness with the powers in Kabul rather than a denial of a legitimate government. As a result of the refusal of the states to recognise the Taliban government, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have withheld much-needed funds from Afghanistan, including emergency funds to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic crisis.²³

To Recognise or Not to Recognise

As of August 2022, no country has formally recognised the Taliban government. The Taliban officials have repeatedly requested the international community to formally recognise their government. However, the US and several Islamic countries, such as Pakistan, assert that the Taliban need to do more before the international community can formally recognise their government and legitimise their rule. The international community is wary of a premature formal recognition of the Taliban government over concerns about the regime’s human rights violations and approach on counter-terrorism efforts.

States, such as China and Russia, and the Islamic countries, including Pakistan, have established informal diplomatic relations with the Taliban. In fact, China was the first to pledge emergency humanitarian

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

assistance of about US\$30 billion to Kabul when the Taliban took control of the country.²⁴ On the other hand, the US and the European Union held back on delivering humanitarian aid as they did not want the money to fall into the Taliban's hands. Nevertheless, even the states which have established informal diplomatic relations have largely ignored the Taliban's request for formal recognition.

From Kabul's perspective, "much of the Taliban's overtures to seek or establish international recognition seem to be driven by the group's pressing economic needs, their desire to see funds unfrozen and various forms of assistance delivered."²⁵ To this end, the Taliban have appointed Suhail Shaheen as Ambassador to the UN and press statements have been released encouraging foreign embassies to return to Kabul. Notably, the Taliban have established and sustained a high-level of diplomacy with regional states, including Russia, China and India.

Despite these external overtures, the Taliban have repeatedly made it clear that their priority is improving the domestic conditions. The Taliban interim government is filled with individuals from its own leadership – several of them are internationally sanctioned persons and a few ethnic minorities. The government lacks women and minority representation. Despite their rhetoric, the local situation has worsened. The members of Taliban have been engaged in the suppression of demonstrations, with protesters and journalists being violently beaten and detained. Some sections of the group have adopted brutal law enforcement policies, public execution being one jarring example. Women rights and freedoms have also been severely restricted by the government – the Ministry of Women's Affairs was disbanded and

24 Claudia Chia and John Joseph Vater, "Six Months On: China and Taliban 2.0", Institute of South Asian Studies, 8 March 2022, https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/six-months-on-china-and-taliban-2-0/#_ftn3.

25 Kate Bateman, Asfandiyar Mir, Richard Olson and Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Seek Recognition, But Offer Few Concessions to International Concerns", United States Institute of Peace, 28 September 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/09/taliban-seek-recognition-offer-few-concessions-international-concerns>.

replaced by the historically infamous Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Perhaps the most pertinent reflection of a return to the past by the Taliban government has been to rename the country as the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'. This was the name for the country 20 years ago before the Taliban were removed by the US and its allies. It is obvious that there is a prioritisation of hardline domestic issues over international recognition.

The international community's apprehension about recognising the Taliban has influenced the UN's approach to dealing with the Taliban. On 17 September 2021, the UN Security Council (UNSC) had requested for the UN Secretary-General to provide "strategic and operational recommendations on future UN system engagement in Afghanistan".²⁶ It was expected that these recommendations would be used to take shape the decisions on updating the UN's mandate.

Weeks before the UNSC was to update the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's (UNAMA) mandate, the head of UNAMA, Deborah Lyons, asserted that humanitarian aid to the Afghan people would be an impossibility without collaborating with the *de facto* authorities. However, the distrust and apprehension that exist between the Taliban and the global community complicate the roles and functions of the UNAMA. Lyons stressed that while the UNAMA continues to raise concerns about the human rights violations it detects on the ground, it is crucial that the mission work alongside the Taliban government in the humanitarian efforts. "You are about to approach a critical moment in your relationship with Afghanistan", she told the UNSC, noting that it has the chance to build a more solid and relevant mission and avert the country's further collapse.²⁷ She also underscored that the UN was

26 "To Avert 'Irreversible' Damage in Afghanistan, International Community Must Engage with Country's De Facto Authorities, Mission Head Tells Security Council", The United Nations, Meeting Coverage and Press Releases, 2 March 2022, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14815.doc.htm>.

27 Ibid.

“well-positioned to continue supporting the Afghan people, acting as an enabler of others who are willing to provide support, and engaging with the de facto authorities.”²⁸

In March 2022, caught in an inconvenient situation, the UNSC “adopted a resolution to secure a formal presence in Afghanistan, whose Taliban government remains unrecognised by the international community”.²⁹ Without mentioning the word ‘Taliban’, the resolution outlines an updated one-year mandate for the UNAMA. The biggest obstacle to the functioning of the UNAMA is the international community’s non-recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. There is a need to build confidence and trust between the Taliban government and the international community over the trajectory of their relationship.

The US and the other Western donor governments expect humanitarian relief agencies, such as the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross, to fill the void in the Afghan economy after the withdrawal of the West. In January 2022, the UN announced a humanitarian appeal that called for US\$4.4 billion of relief aid for Afghanistan, of which US\$3.6 billion would be part of the Transitional Engagement Framework plan to provide essential services such as health, education, water and sanitation.³⁰ A Wall Street Journal report notes that under this plan, the UN would “move beyond a purely humanitarian mission” and “take on many of the functions of [the] government”.³¹

28 “With Afghanistan ‘Hanging by a Thread’, Security Council Delegates Call on Taliban to Tackle Massive Security, Economic Concerns, Respect Women’s Equal Rights”, The United Nations, Meeting Coverage and Press Releases, 26 January 2022. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14776.doc.htm>

29 “UN votes to secure formal presence in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan”, *Aljazeera*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/17/un-votes-to-secure-formal-presence-in-taliban-ruled-afghanistan>.

30 Hardin Lang and Jacob Kurtzer, “Aid Agencies Can’t Fix Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Crisis”, op. cit.

31 Ibid.

A Paradoxical Situation

A paradoxical situation is emerging in the humanitarian aid situation in Afghanistan. States want to use their economic leverage to influence the Taliban to address human rights issues and respect international human rights standards. Given the Taliban's approach to local issues, this is a tall order indeed! At the same time, the Afghan economy's structural and capital dependency on foreign economic intervention has created a situation whereby any economic constraints by the international community are likely to worsen the economic and humanitarian situation.

Political recognition is a political discretion – it is not a matter of international law or regulations. Therefore, any decision regarding the recognition of the Taliban government, and the consequential economic and social ramifications, should be assessed on the criteria of progress and development in counter-terrorism and humanitarian efforts. Essentially, there needs to be an international consensus that aid should only be conditional only when it does not come at the expense of humanitarian and medical assistance.

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Afghanistan as a Regional Asset: Transportation and Energy Cooperation between South Asia and Central Asia

D. Suba Chandran¹

Afghanistan is undergoing transformation. Once again.

During the last five decades, Afghanistan has witnessed multiple regimes, with different ideologies and approaches towards nation building process. Afghanistan was also caught in a Cold War, intervention by its neighbours and violent outbursts. Afghanistan seems to be caught in a trap – of its own making, and also by regional/global developments. Will the country be able to break this circular trap?

This essay looks at Afghanistan's challenge to the region, and also South Asia's challenges in Kabul; and argues that the country can make use of a few infrastructural projects to its advantage. The essay also argues that Afghanistan can make optimum use of its geography, and play a crucial connector between South Asia and Central Asia, provided it is able to create stability within. The essay makes six recommendations at the end, on how Afghanistan could become a regional link between South Asia and Central Asia.

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Afghanistan's South Asia Challenge, & South Asia's Kabul challenge

Afghanistan has been a challenge for South Asia. Afghanistan has remained unstable during the last five decades and is yet to have a stable polity. There were regular elections and a relatively orderly change during 2002-2020; however, the return of the Taliban in 2021 has undermined those little achievements made during the last two decades.

The emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s, and its return in 2021, has been a challenge for South Asia. Pre-Taliban period, Afghanistan witnessed multiple regimes – led by the Mujahideens and pro-Soviet regimes. The 1980s saw an intense and violent rivalry between the US and the then Soviet Union. As the Cold War was being played in Afghanistan, it had an impact on regional security as well. With Pakistan siding with the US openly, India was apprehensive of developments in Afghanistan. The slow progress of the SAARC in the 1980s had an Afghanistan factor.

The challenge of Afghanistan to the region is not post-1970s. It existed during the colonial period as well. Referred to as the “Great Game,” there was a regional rivalry between the British India and the Tsarist Russia during the 19th century. It followed, aggravated the British India's equations with the Emir of Afghanistan during this period, thereby complicating political stability in the then North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

If Afghanistan has been a challenge to South Asia, the opposite is also true. Political equations within South Asia especially between India and Pakistan, and the slow progress of regional cooperation has been a challenge for Afghanistan. Before 1947, the British India's policies towards Afghanistan, and the British-Russia war over Afghanistan made Kabul unstable, and remain divided.

Afghanistan is landlocked; it abuts two regions – Central Asia and South Asia. While the geographic location should be a natural asset, unfortunately for Kabul, political equations in the neighbourhood have been a liability. India and Pakistan differed in their regional pursuits vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

Before the return of the Taliban in 2021, both India and Pakistan wanted to strengthen their bilateral relations with Afghanistan. However, this approach did not foresee a common approach towards Afghanistan, as the bilateral equation between India and Pakistan played a role in preventing any combined approach towards Kabul. Since Afghanistan is situated in the westernmost part of South Asia, and is linked with the rest of the region through Pakistan and India, the Indo-Pak bilateral tensions did not allow regional cooperation with and through Afghanistan.

If instability in Kabul has been a challenge for the security in South Asia, regional non-cooperation undermined the evolution of Afghanistan as a regional gateway. Can the above conundrum be addressed, and Afghanistan made a regional asset?

The essay argues a case for the above, through the following three hypotheses:

- Afghanistan's land and ethnic borders could be pursued as an asset by two regions – Central Asia and South Asia.
- Kabul as the heart of two regions would be a win-win for all three – South Asia, Central Asia, and Afghanistan.
- Transport and energy corridors in particular could transform the future of Afghanistan, and also the two regions.

Afghanistan as a regional asset: The geographic, ethnic, historic and riverine boundaries

Afghanistan borders Pakistan in the east. Though there is a small border with Gilgit-Baltistan legally claimed by India, Pakistan has effective administrative control of the region; hence, Afghanistan does not have a de facto border with India, or with the rest of South Asia.

In the north, Afghanistan is linked with Central Asia; three countries share land borders with Afghanistan – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Afghanistan's land border with Turkmenistan is around 800 kms; start with a Afghanistan-Iran-Turkmenistan trijunction, and travel northeast to a Afghanistan-Turkemenistan-Uzbekistan trijunction. Both countries also share a riverine border –the Amu Darya. On the ethnic side, both countries share the Turkmen. While most of the Turkmen live in Turkmenistan, there is a sizeable population in Iran, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. In Afghanistan, there are around one million Turkmen, living along the border, and also in pockets in other provinces.

Afghanistan's shares the shortest boundary with Uzbekistan – when compared to the other two Central Asian countries – Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The border starts with the Afghanistan-Turkemenistan-Uzbekistan trijunction, along the riverine Amu Darya, and travels 140 kms east to the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan trijunction. Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan is also the shortest of its borders; it shares a long border with Turkmenistan in the west, and with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in the east. On the ethnic side, Afghanistan shares the Uzbeks with its northern neighbour. An estimated two million Uzbeks live in Afghanistan, mainly in the northern districts. Though Afghanistan has a short physical geography with Uzbekistan, it shares a larger ethnic geography.

Afghanistan's border with Tajikistan is around 1300 kms. It starts with a Afghanistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan trijunction, travelling east and north towards a Afghanistan-Tajikistan-China trijunction. It crosses the Wakhan corridor, and also has a few riverine boundaries, including the Panj and Pamir rivers. On the ethnic geography, there are around six million Tajiks in Afghanistan, constituting roughly one fourth of the population. Afghanistan shares the Tajik population with not only Tajikistan, but also Uzbekistan.

In the north, Afghanistan also shares a small border with China. Starting with a trijunction between Afghanistan, Tajikistan and China in the north, Kabul shares the shortest of external borders – around 70 kms, to the trijunction between Afghanistan, China and Gilgit-Baltistan. The GB region is legally claimed by India, but has been under Pakistan's control. The Wakhan corridor, is a narrow strip, created as a part of an agreement between the British India and Russia in 1893. The Corridor has a small population.

In the west, Afghanistan shares a long border with Iran. Starting from a Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Iran tri-junction in the north, the border travels around 900 kms southwards to a Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran trijunction. The border agreement took a long time to conclude during the 19th and 20th centuries. Three provinces of Afghanistan – Herat, Farah and Nimroz share the border with Iran; it shares a shia population with Iran.

With South Asia, Afghanistan's border is primarily with Pakistan. Though India claims a de jure border, in reality, Afghanistan's South Asia border is with Pakistan. Starting from a Afghanistan-Iran-Pakistan trijunction in the south, the border travels more than 2600 kms – referred as the Durand Line. While Pakistan considers the border as settled, for Afghanistan, it is more of a Durand Line, drawn during the British period, and not a permanent border between the two countries. The Pashtuns cut across the Durand Line, and live across the Af-Pak

region. Pakistan also hosts more than a million Afghan refugees; the numbers vary according to official and unofficial estimates.

Historically, from the Mongol in the north to Persian empire in the west and the British empire in the south, Afghanistan was the heart of multiple empires. South Asia – from the days of the Mauryan to the Mughal empires looked at Afghanistan as the gateway to economic and political expansion. So did the Central Asian kingdoms.

Thus, Afghanistan shares not only history and geography with three regions – Central Asia, Persia and South Asia, but also a strong ethnic linkage with all three of its neighbouring regions.

Unfortunately, for Afghanistan, its ethnic geography has not helped build better relations with the neighbouring countries. The reason is primarily internal – the unstable equation between the ethnic groups within Afghanistan. If Kabul wants to improve its relations with its neighboring regions, it has to build a better working relationship with all its ethnic communities. This would be a prerequisite; without a larger nation-building process within, Afghanistan will not be able to make use of its physical and ethnic geography as an asset vis-à-vis Central Asia and South Asia.

Three major regional infrastructural and energy projects

Afghanistan is a part of one of the oldest infrastructural projects in the region, much before even the British and the Soviets came to the region. The Grand Trunk Road built centuries earlier by Sher Shah Suri and later used by the Mughal empire connected Kabul with Kolkotta. There were multiple movements across the GT Road between Afghanistan and the rest of South Asia. Traders, armies, cultures, religions and history moved along the GT Road between Afghanistan and the rest of South Asia. Historically, the GT road not only connected Kabul with Kolkotta, but also had multiple feeder roads. These feeder roads

connected Afghanistan with different parts of what later became India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Afghanistan, historically, was also a part of the Silk Route. The Silk Route was a series of routes, connecting China with Central Asia, Persia, the Ottoman Empire and beyond. Multiple goods were traded through the Silk Routes; besides the goods, the Silk Route also witnessed the movement of armies, invaders, ideas, people and cultures. Geographically, Afghanistan was in the centre of Silk Route connecting multiple regions from East Asia to the Atlantic. Herat, Balkh, Bamiyan and Kabul were major centers of the Silk Route in Afghanistan.

During the recent period, numerous infrastructural projects have been introduced either through Afghanistan, or adjacent to it. Afghanistan could be the crucial connect to these projects. This essay looks at three projects, which could transform Afghanistan, and also through Kabul, the regional connectivity and economy.

The International North South Trade Corridor (INSTC) is one of the earlier infrastructural projects. Envisaged by New Delhi, the INSTC links India's western coast with Iran through the sea, and then takes a land route linking the Arabian Sea with Russia and Europe. While Iran remains the centre of the INSTC, Afghanistan could become one of the feeder routes linking Chahbahar port with Central Asia through Zahedan in Iran, and northwards. Historically, Afghanistan has played its role as a feeder route, in the Silk Route mentioned above.

The INSTC is a multi-modal infrastructure project involving road, rail and ships, linking India with Russia and Europe. Besides Iran and Afghanistan, the INSTC would criss-cross the Central Asian countries and also the caucuses – Armenia and Azerbaijan.

With the recent war in Ukraine and its likely political and economic fallouts, the INSTC could become a pivot. While one of Moscow's

major objectives is to reach the Black Sea, thereby finding a sea route for Russia's trade, the rest of Europe and the US want to prevent this axis. Given the differences between Russia and rest of the West, trade through the Black Sea is less likely to be an easy one. The INSTC could be an alternative for Russia, Central Asia and the rest of South Asia; Afghanistan could reap the benefits of the INSTC's success.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the second major infrastructural project in the region. Though the CPEC is bilateral between Pakistan and China, many projects are likely to benefit Afghanistan. The CPEC has energy projects, infrastructural corridors, and more importantly developing the Makran coast and the port infrastructures. Gwadar has a special focus within the CPEC; but the rest of Makran coast is also likely to get strengthened in terms of infrastructure. For Afghanistan, Gwadar would be an easier port to reach via Balochistan, than Karachi via Khyber Paktunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh.

The INSTC and the CPEC infrastructural projects runs between north and south, and also runs parallel. While the INSTC links Mumbai with Zahedan, and move north towards Afghanistan, and then into Central Asia, the CPEC links with Gwadar with Kashgar, and then into the rest of China. One of the CPEC corridors (the western route) runs via Balochistan and KP, before reaching Gilgit. For Afghanistan, though both projects – the INSTC and CPEC run in parallel, they provide access to the Arabian Sea.

As was the case during the GT road, the INSTC and CPEC could act as primary feeder roads. India has been investing substantially within the country with multiple corridors linking north, south and east India. In the recent years, India has also been investing in the BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) infrastructural connectivity. Reclaiming the GT road would make all three infrastructural projects – the INSTC, CPEC and BBIN an asset to Afghanistan.

Third, and the most important infrastructural project involving Afghanistan is the CASA-1000 – an energy infrastructural project linking Central Asia with South Asia through Afghanistan. The CASA foresees an energy export from Central Asia – primarily Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan into Afghanistan, and through it, finally to Pakistan.

An earlier energy project – the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline could not materialise. Though the political differences between India and Pakistan were blamed as main reason for the failure of the TAPI, there were serious problems in getting the necessary funding support. Besides instability in Afghanistan also played a role in TAPI project not making progress.

With the CASA-1000, it is expected that the energy exports from Central Asia could flow into Afghanistan and then to Pakistan. The 1.5 billion USD project is expected to bring electricity from Central Asia into Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan could play both as a recipient and also a transit country. The project is expected to complete by 2023.

Making use of history, geography and economy Six Recommendations for Afghanistan and South Asia

The primary question is: will Afghanistan be able to make use of its history, and geography and become an economic connect for the two regions?

The essay makes the following conclusions and recommendations:-

First, Afghanistan has the history and geography on its side, to play an important role in not only improving its own economy, but also as the regional connector. Afghanistan has played this role historically during the Silk Route days. The new regime should look at this aspect, and work towards making Afghanistan as a crucial connect.

For the above to happen, Afghanistan has to take the nation-building process forward and bring all the ethnic communities on board. As mentioned in the second part of the essay, Afghanistan shares ethnic communities from the north in Tajikistan to the east in Pakistan. The Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Turkmen are important ethnic communities, besides the majority Pashtuns, who control the south and east. Kabul must initiate a nation-building process, bringing all the ethnic communities on board, which in turn would act as bridges with the neighbouring countries.

Second political stability within Afghanistan. Economic movements cannot happen in an unstable environment. Unfortunately, Afghanistan has been at war with itself for the last few decades, besides being torn apart because of Great Game earlier and the Cold War later. Unless Afghanistan finds peace with itself, the neighbouring countries and the regions may not be able to do much, making Kabul the heart of Asia and beyond.

Third, the new opportunities in and around Afghanistan. As mentioned in the above section, the INSTC, CASA-1000 and CPEC are three big-ticket items in and around Afghanistan. While the countries would attempt to politicise the above initiatives for their narrow gains, it is in the interest of Afghanistan to ensure that Kabul reaps the benefits of all these projects. Afghanistan can work with all three projects, and does not have to choose one over the other.

Fourth the regional imperative. While instability in Afghanistan has played a role in the country not being able to make use of its regional potential, the regional rivalry in South Asia has also ensured that Afghanistan's full potential was not explored. The first section of the essay looked at both these points. India-Pakistan rivalry in the region has hindered Afghanistan from becoming a regional gateway and a connect between South Asia and Central Asia. While Afghanistan should take responsibility for building political stability within, India

and Pakistan should look beyond their regional rivalry to ensure that the country becomes a regional gateway, as was earlier. In short, India and Pakistan should start travelling the Grand Trunk Road, which Sher Shah Suri and the Mughal rulers used.

Fifth, Pakistan should look at Afghanistan as a regional connect, not as a surrogate state. Pakistan's approach towards Afghanistan is more of British India's; it looks at Kabul as a prize to be won, have a friendly government, and prevents any other countries from having an influence. Islamabad has pursued this approach since independence, resulting in more pain and suffering for Pakistan than any tangible progress.

Sixth, bringing other countries of South Asia into the above. The regional connectivity – historical, ethnic and economic between Kabul and the rest of South Asia are primarily limited to India and Pakistan. The challenge is how can Afghanistan increase its footprints in the rest of South Asia and vice-versa?

A recommendation on the above point is to expand the CASA-1000. The project looks at energy imports from the hydel-rich Central Asian countries – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan into Afghanistan and Pakistan. Can the CASA-1000 project be made truly CASA – engaging more countries of Central Asia and South Asia?

In South Asia, Nepal and Bhutan also have rich hydel sources to generate electricity for larger consumption. India and Bangladesh need the energy to sustain their economic growth. India and Bangladesh are growing rapidly; despite the COVID challenges, these two countries are likely to continue their economic growth.

With global emphasis on climate change, the hydro resources of Nepal and Bhutan could become an asset to India and Bangladesh. There have been discussions already on the subject under the BBIN network. Can the above sources of Nepal and Bhutan be connected with the CASA-1000?

If the hydel production of electricity in the Himalayan region is connected with the same in Central Asia, then both the regions will succeed in making use of clean energy. India, Pakistan and Afghanistan can become a big transit hub for energy between the two regions. This would be a win-win for all the countries, and both regions.

The above would also bring more of South Asia into working with Kabul and expand the regional footprints in Afghanistan.

Contested Contours of State, Society, and Sovereignty in Afghanistan

Dr. Mallika Joseph¹

There is a popular African proverb, “do not look where you fell, but where you slipped.” Another equally telling proverb from the continent is, “if you want to know the end, look at the beginning.”

Since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, most of the analyses have been centered on the events preceding the US withdrawal and the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. Many pointed out that the international intervention, particularly the US initiative, was doomed to fail from the start. Some others tried to locate the failures in recent developments within Afghanistan, within US domestic politics, and the overall pandemic and post-pandemic international milieu accelerating towards de-globalization, economic stress, and re-nationalization. In short, there was simply no bandwidth within the Afghanistan government or the international community, particularly the US, to continue with their modernization project. Very few analyses have actually located current developments within Afghanistan’s historical attempts at state-building and modernization – the instances where the slips originally happened before the fall. A quick review of the literature relating to state, society, legitimacy, and sovereignty in Afghanistan over the decades demonstrates that very few lessons have been learned.

Key questions that should be addressed while reviewing the current developments are: why has state-building been such a daunting task in Afghanistan and not delivered the intended results? What are the lessons from history, particularly the outcome of externally enforced

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agendas? Are there competing narratives of legitimacy, sovereignty, statehood, and modernization? What are the prerequisites for stability in the country? And finally, what next for the Taliban and the people of Afghanistan?

The crisis of legitimacy in Afghanistan predates the recent Taliban takeover. As a matter of fact, it predates even the first Taliban takeover. Analysts have pointed out that at the core of the crisis is the identity of Afghanistan as a “state,” a framework within which the state and society interact, and political geography torn between the extremities of pre-existing “traditional state” and externally enforced “modern state.”

In his article, “Lineages of the State in Afghanistan,”² Barnett Rubin argues that the elements of the modern state never took root in Afghanistan. He cites Anthony Giddens’s categorization of traditional state and modern state to explain this further. Traditional states are just but class-divided societies where “the state apparatus is located in fortified cities from which it dominates the predominantly rural or tribal communities within its territories by dealing with them externally through force or negotiation, rather than by penetrating and governing them.”

But the core element that differentiates the traditional state from the modern state is sovereignty – a measure by which a government has full control over a defined territory, and its control is recognized by the international community. Is this why successive external attempts at “state-building” in Afghanistan have failed? Because Afghanistan is in some sense a traditional state which hasn’t transitioned or because it has not gone through the process of competing nationalisms, or a dialogue between citizenship and rights, or a dialectic between different ideologies and political representations? Or perhaps there exists within Afghanistan beyond the political capital a customary governance mechanism that is functional, something which is antithetical and resists a centralized form of governance framework as compelled

by the Westphalian notion of the modern state? “The imbalanced modernization of the Afghan state was the result of its implantation and precarious consolidation.” This was Rubin’s assessment in 1988, even before the first takeover by the Taliban. And it holds even today.

Fractured Foundations: Parallel Coexistence of the State and Tribal Society

Since the time of Ahmad Shah, who was chosen king by the *Loya Jirga* in 1747, the purpose of the state had been to administer conquests rather than to govern the territory which now roughly represents Afghanistan. Instead of putting in place a revenue system, the state’s resources came from conquests like the ones in India (mainly Punjab and Kashmir), which brought in more than three-fourths of the state’s income.

The tribes that formed the Afghan state were exempted from taxation. The rudimentary elements of the social contract were therefore between the Pashtun tribes and the king; for their services of providing tribal warriors, the tribes received a share from the pillaged goods and recognition. The tribes understood the state to be responsible for the administration of new territories conquered by the tribal confederation. However, regarding the state’s presence in the tribal areas, they considered it “redundant and totally unnecessary.”³

This model of governance with parallel decentralized existence of the state and the tribes worked for the leaders following Ahmad Shah but perhaps ended up being antithetical to the evolution/formation of a centralized modern state decades later. It continued well into the 20th century when external powers shaped Afghanistan as a buffer state between two superpowers and continued to pay the head of the state for maintaining the Afghan army, while other colonies began building their state, putting in place revenue generation and fiscal measures to maintain their centralized armies.

Attempts at Modernization

Afghanistan's history, particularly the last century, is therefore dotted with failed attempts at modernization that aimed to bring the country under central rule. One of the earliest attempts can be traced to Sardar Abdur Rahman Khan who kept the British and Russians at arm's length, institutionalized the bureaucracy and the army, and weakened the power of the tribes.

However, it was Amanullah, at the turn of the 20th century, who made the first decisive attempts at modernizing Afghanistan. He revised the pan-Islamist policies, putting him at crossroads with traditionalist clergy and the northern population in Afghanistan. He course-corrected his relationship with the British in the South and earned further enemies. However, it was his "accelerated attempt to centralize authority and radically transform the Afghan society from a traditional society into a modern one that led to rebellion."⁴ He gave Afghanistan its first constitution and written administrative legislation. He centralized conscription based on the Turkish model which backfired and set off a revolt. His reforms struck the center of power of the religious establishment by rejecting the recommendations of *Loya Jirga*. Deprived of Islamic legitimacy and alienated from tribal support, the mullahs gave the tribal revolt Islamic sanctions.

It is important to contextualize current developments in Afghanistan with this history because we see it repeating itself every time attempts are made to centrally govern the country.

Nearly fifty years after Amanullah, the next push for modernization came from Mohammed Daoud, who launched a wide-sweeping and ambitious reform agenda. Nader Shah who had preceded him had no money, no army, and no treasure, and was dependent on the religious establishment and the tribal insurgents for remaining in power. To offset the domestic situation, he developed international linkages and

expanded the state-dominated enclave around Kabul, insulating it from the tribal-peasant society in the rest of the country. This resulted in Kabul emerging as a “mini-nation-state.” Rural sector tax, an indication of the presence and control of the state in rural areas, diminished over time. From 62.5 percent domestic revenue in 1926, it dropped to 18 percent in 1952-53, and further down to 7 percent five years later and less than 2 percent by the 1970s.⁵ On the other hand, successive governments focused on tax on foreign trade. Following this trend and increasing competitive foreign aid from the US and Soviet Union, international linkages developed, which also brought in benefits in the form of the Kandahar airport built by the US to link Afghanistan to Pakistan. While this facilitated fresh inroads into the countryside and connected them with manufactured goods, the downside was the closure of the local manufacturing triggering internal migration and movement of people.

This not only exposed the inability of the government in Kabul to penetrate beyond the capital, but it also revealed the challenges of not having a national economic model, which in turn restricted any attempt at bringing about centralized governance.

Daoud was followed by the communists, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, that attempted even more radical social change in the face of the Soviet Union forcing them to tone down their reform vigor, violence, and agenda.

All three major attempts at modernizing, before the latest attempt led by the US coalition, has certain commonalities.⁶ First, all the reforms were pushed in haste, and sought to strengthen the state at the center. Second, they all aimed at strengthening the tax base, which has been fundamentally missing and problematic throughout Afghanistan’s history. Third, all three reform attempts placed importance on the educational sector and foregrounded the rights of women in their modernization plans. They called for a modern agenda that was

based on statutory law. Fourth, land reforms were central in all three modernization attempts.

All three modernizations ended abruptly with those leading them violently killed or forced into exile. The Taliban, committed to anti-modernity, seized power, only to be violently deposed to usher in the latest round of modernization, which too like all previous modernization efforts has run aground, paving the way for the Taliban to return to power.

Unlearned Lessons from Failed Modernizations

All three modernizing attempts failed, but their paths to failure were a little different. In the case of Amanullah, religion trumped nationalism. The religious establishment was alienated from the beginning when he “promulgated codes to liberalize the position of women, increased the scope for secular law, and attempted to divest the clergy of all control over education.”⁷

Daoud, similarly, pushed through his reforms without building a reform-friendly coalition. He failed “to codify his program in a way acceptable to the predominantly traditional and Islamic society.” It is important to note that efforts at modernization had developed a politically conscious social class that protested against the authoritarian style of Daoud’s administration.

The modernization process of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), particularly their violence along with the visible external (Soviet) agenda creation, undermined the legitimacy of the government. The Soviet invasion that followed made it easier for resistance groups to mobilize under the banner of nationalism and Islam, and also receive external financial support and weapons to fuel their struggle.

Summing up the lessons that should have been learned, Astri Suhrke (2007) puts forward three findings:

- a) Don't overload the modernist agenda in relation to the modernist coalition that will carry it (King Amanullah).
- b) Don't exclude potential rebels from the political arena (President Daoud).
- c) If a militant opposition develops, don't let foreign forces lead the war against them (PDPA).

The failed state of the latest US-led modernization effort appears to have precisely followed the previous three failed attempts at trying to strengthen the center (which historically has been strongly resisted) and sow elements of a modern Westphalian state (disregarding preexisting semblance of localized governance).

Connecting the dots

The end of the Cold War brought in new narratives about international peace and security. Significant among them were two trends. The first was an altered view of how the relationship with peripheries was being seen. They were no longer places of strategic interest but certain areas posed a potential threat. For the US, Afghanistan fell into this category, particularly after 9/11. The second was how the concept of sovereignty underwent a change. From states having a responsibility to protect their territory, it shifted to states having a responsibility to protect their citizens. Failing which, the international community had a right and an obligation to intervene. This provided the US with the framework to intervene in Afghanistan post 9/11.

The challenge began when the developmental agenda started overlapping with the democratization agenda, with the presupposition

that Afghanistan, like other countries that the international community intervened in, was ungovernable or ungoverned, therefore requiring state building. This stemmed from the refusal to recognize the existence of different social orders that have in place mechanisms, institutions, organizations, and beliefs to deal with violence. In Afghanistan, these were the customary mechanisms at the local level providing local governance, far removed from the ideological dispensation at the center. One of the reasons for developmental initiatives state building and modernization efforts, failing are because they “clash with substantially different internal social logics in developing societies.”

What Next?

Katja Starc, in her paper, *Limits of Internationalized State-Building*, puts forward an interesting observation on why stability is elusive in countries marked by fragility, like Afghanistan.⁸ According to her, stability is a combination of two complementary dimensions - horizontal stability (a political power-sharing relationship between elites) and vertical stability (the relationship between the state and the society), and long-term stability is possible only when both dimensions of stability are achieved complementarily. While this succinctly explains why previous modernization attempts have failed, including the latest one, because either or both dimensions of stability were missing, it also signals what the Taliban in power portends for Afghanistan, where both dimensions of stability are missing.

Within the construct of horizontal stability, it remains to be seen how inclusive the current Taliban would be. Analysts have pointed out the Pashtun claims over the Afghan empire have never been realized; Afghanistan's history is testimony to “minimal leadership successes and many catastrophes.”⁹

But the larger issue that remains elusive is the fundamentals for vertical stability, a defining relationship between the state and the society,

articulated through legitimacy and identity. Some have argued that in Afghanistan, national consciousness hardly coincided with the territory. On the other hand, the sense of belonging to the Islamic community, and to a region, tribe, or ethnic group have been the foregrounded traits of identity.¹⁰ However, Afghans are not alone in this type of identity expression, as most of the multi-ethnic post-colonial states went through a process of nation-building where identity creation was part of the process. Sub-national identities still persist in many parts of the developing and post-colonial world that unless acknowledged and addressed in an inclusive manner have resulted in internal strife and bloody conflicts. The departure in Afghanistan, however, has been the absence of leadership that has been able to mobilize and churn identity creation along national lines, and the overwhelming external presence and influence in trying to enforce ideas and models alien to the country and its people.

Above all, the challenge to the current Taliban regime will come from its lack of legitimacy¹¹ – popular legitimacy as well as international legitimacy. Popular resistance to previous regimes came from those who had been exposed to narratives of social change and had specific expectations of modernization and development. Today, it will be these voices, particularly those of women, whose lived realities and expectations of a different future, that will give shape to the vertical dimension of stability signaling different political alternatives.

2 Rubin, Barnett R. "Lineages of the State in Afghanistan." *Asian Survey*, vol. 28, no. 11, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 1188–209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644508>

3 Roy, Olivier, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986. As quoted in Cheryl Benard et al., *Afghanistan: State and Society, Great Power Politics and the Way Ahead*, RAND Centre for Middle East Public Policy, 2007.

4 Cheryl Benard et al., *Afghanistan: State and Society, Great Power Politics and the Way Ahead*, RAND Centre for Middle East Public Policy, 2007.

- 5 Rubin, Barnett R. "Lineages of the State in Afghanistan." *Asian Survey*, vol. 28, no. 11, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 1188–209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644508>
- 6 Astri Suhrke, Reconstruction as Modernisation: the 'post-conflict' project in Afghanistan, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 7, 2007, pp 1291 – 1308
- 7 Gregorian, V., *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization*, 1880 – 1946, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969, p 261. As quoted in Astri Suhrke, Reconstruction as Modernisation: the 'post-conflict' project in Afghanistan, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 7, 2007, pp 1291 – 1308
- 8 Katja Starc, *Limits of internationalized state-building: The stabilization of post- 2001 Afghanistan*, The Barlett Development Planning Unit Working Paper No. 158, 2013
- 9 Allan, Nigel J. R.. "Rethinking Governance in Afghanistan. (The Future of Afghanistan)." *Journal of International Affairs* 56 (2003): 193.
- 10 Centlivres, Pierre and Micheline Centlivres-Démont. "State, national awareness and levels of identity in Afghanistan from monarchy to Islamic state." *Central Asian Survey* 19 (2000): 416 - 425.
- 11 Weigand F. Why Did the Taliban Win (Again) in Afghanistan? *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2022; 2(3): 5, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.54>

Afghanistan as a Land-Bridge between Central Asia and South Asia

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Geographical location of Afghanistan adjoining South Asia and Central Asia has been an important factor in regional geopolitics. Historically, this connection between Central Asia and South Asia has seen flow of language, culture and has contributed to the rich cultural heritage of the subcontinent reflected in various historical monuments, art and architecture. Modern Afghanistan has been projecting itself as 'land bridge' and describes itself as 'heart of Asia' given its geographical location preceded by long history of such linkages. The concept of 'land bridge' defines aspiration of a country that has witnessed much violence in the recent years to reclaim its glorious past. After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 and the refusal of the international community to recognise the Taliban regime, country's potential as a land bridge remains mired in the larger geopolitics of post US withdrawal and emergence of Taliban. Although, ironically peace in Afghanistan and the need for stability in that country has been explained through its potential as a geo-economic player in the region. This projection of Afghanistan's role as a bridge was proposed to blunt the geopolitical rivalry between regional and global players that contested and competed with each other for influence in Afghanistan. It was believed that any country that controls Kabul will benefit from its immense geo-economic potential to harness energy from land locked Central Asia as well as minerals from resource rich Afghanistan that has Ainak and Hajigok mines. Moreover, trade and transit have remained important factors in regional integration and Afghanistan is central to such a proposition.

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Since 1980, Afghanistan has been mired in political conflict and civil war. The resultant instability makes it difficult for it to play its historical role in transporting culture and facilitating trade. It is well known that several emperors crossed Afghanistan in search of wealth and made this part of the South Asian region their home. Their rule saw unique Indo-Persian culture that flourished in the past contributing to art and literature. This paper looks at Afghanistan as a land bridge in the context of Kabul emerging as a hub of trade and energy connectivity. It will also examine the historical socio-cultural ties that exist between Central Asia and South Asia in which Afghanistan has played a central role historically.

A Land Bridge of Prosperity?

Afghanistan's diversity is its strength. Its role can be shaped by several ethnic groups that live in Afghanistan who share close familial ties with people living across the countries that borders Afghanistan. For example: the Tajiks, Uzbeks have close relations with their ethnic brethren in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the Shia Hazaras share close socio-cultural relations with Iran and the Pashtuns and Balochs share close relations with Baloch and Pathans of Pakistan. The Sikhs and Hindu minorities share socio-cultural linkages with India. Kandahar finds mention in the Hindu religious epic - the Mahabharat which is mentioned as home of Queen Gandhari. These ties can be leveraged to convert Afghanistan truly as a land bridge binding culture, religion and language that serves as a strong connection. Moreover, in the past, it served as a land bridge and a melting pot for culture and religion. Afghanistan has been part of both central Asian empires as well as Moghul Empire that ruled the Indian subcontinent. Afghanistan was part of several empires like Kushan, Mauryan Empire and also Mughul empire. During Kushan dynasty, Buddhism spread to Afghanistan. The empires flourished through trade networks that passed through the current territory of Afghanistan, not only bringing fortunes but also became a melting pot of culture and people.

According to a study by the Asian Development Bank, “Limited connectivity leads to inefficient allocation of production inputs across sectors, firms, and regions. Misallocation of resources across firms is one of the main sources of differences in productivity and economic activity across countries”. The Central Asian countries are rich in energy resources. It can be a major source of energy for energy deficient countries of the South Asian region. Traditional trade routes connecting South Asia and Central Asia also pass through Afghanistan. Grand trunk road, ancient silk route which is being revived by China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a case in point. Afghanistan can be a major game-changer in the context of its geo-economics potential. In fact, it is its very geo-economic potential that made it the battlefield of new ‘great game’. The civil war, political turmoil and violence since 1989 has not allowed Afghanistan to play its potential role as a land bridge.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Central Asian Republics (CARs) emerged as a main source of energy resources. Out of Soviet shadow, these countries wanted to emerge as energy hub in the international market that was competing for new source of energy resource. In this context, Afghanistan emerged as an important country to evacuate Central Asian oil and gas. It became the focus of new great game as controlling Afghanistan after Soviet withdrawal became important. Oil companies like Birdas, Unocal, that had an interest in the energy resources of the Central Asian Republics tried to engage initially the Majaheedins and later the Taliban to evacuate energy from the CARs. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline was envisaged keeping Afghanistan position as a land bridge in mind. Former President Ashraf Ghani who participated in the ground breaking ceremony of the project described it as “super highway of cooperation” which Indian Vice President Hamid Ansari described this as “first step towards the unity of the region”. Pakistan was keen on Southern transport route so that it can reach Turkmenistan. It remains a gateway to landlocked Central Asian republics and major route for trade between South Asia and Central Asia. Historically, according to

B.D. Hopkins, "Afghanistan's trade routes were firmly anchored by the nodal cities of the Central Asian corridor which serviced them. This constellation of cities provided both markets in their own rights and convenient stopping points for merchants and goods on their way to the larger bazaars of India, China and Russia, as well as Persia".²

In the recent years, cross border energy projects have gained momentum as Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have abundant energy resources and countries of South Asia are energy deficient. After Afghanistan joined as a member of SAARC, the South Asian countries, especially Pakistan and India were keen to connect with Afghanistan. Projects like Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project, CASA 1000 (connecting Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan with Afghanistan and Pakistan) and TUTAP has great potential for connecting Central Asia with South Asia through energy grids. According to a World Bank study, "economic benefits of up to \$6.4 billion (in discounted terms) can be realized between 2020-2030 through better exploitation of hydro potential and thermal generation in the region" connecting Central Asia with Afghanistan and Pakistan. It further says, "When the CASA-1000 and TUTAP projects are put into operation, they could add another \$2.6 billion to these gross benefits..."³ CASA-1000 has the capacity to transform regional electricity market, for example: It will be a major source of revenue in the regional electricity market, transmitting 4.6 billion kilowatt hours (kWh)/year.⁴ Currently much of the energy resources of Central Asian countries is exported to China. There is another energy project the TAP-500 which is a 500 KV power transmission network. As the acronym suggests, it is a project involving Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. First India-Central

2 B.D.Hopkins, "The Afghan Trade Corridor. In: *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*", Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London, p.137

3 World Bank, "Central Asia Electricity Trade Brings Economic Growth and Fosters Regional Cooperation", 20 October 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/10/20/central-asia-electricity-trade-brings-economic-growth-and-fosters-regional-cooperation>

4 <https://www.casa-1000.org/>

Asia virtual summit was held in New Delhi in January this year.

Prospects for trade and Connectivity:

Peace in Afghanistan would provide the Central Asian countries an opportunity to expand their markets. Among the South Asian countries, India and Pakistan are keen to expand their trade and import energy. For both, Afghanistan remains an important transit country to reach the Central Asian region. While Pakistan, Afghanistan is a land bridge for its trade with Central Asian countries. It has not been able to realise its potential due to the situation in Afghanistan. Cross Border Transport Agreement (CBTA) between Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan already exist. Lapis Lazuli Trade and Transit Agreement connecting Afghanistan with Europe is via road and railway. Some scholars argue that Afghanistan can gain its old strategic importance if it emerges as a hub of transit.⁵

Afghanistan is part of BRI of China. It can link the Central Asian Countries to ports in Iran, Pakistan and India for their export and lessen their dependence on Russia. Every land locked country want multiple ports in different countries available for imports and exports. Already, several roads and infrastructure network have come up after 2001. In July 2012, Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to extend the APTTA to Tajikistan, a first step in the establishment of a north-south trade corridor. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan (PAKAFUZ) signed a strategic plan for a mega railway project of 573-km long railway track connecting Peshawar with Mazar-e-Sharif and Uzbekistan which will be the shortest route connecting South Asia with Central Asia.

India also has a Connect Central Asia policy that was formulated in 2012. However, until now most of these projects aims to overcome the infrastructure barrier to access Afghanistan. Pakistan has refused to provide overland transit to India to reach Afghanistan. International

5 Haroun Mir and Habib wardak, "Afghanistan, SAARC and the Road ahead", Vol 41(3/4), 2014-2015, India International Centre Quarterly, See p,24

North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is another transport corridor that would connect South Asia with Central Asia. The fulcrum of this connectivity would be the Chahbahar port. Prior to Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, Iran, India and Afghanistan had a tripartite agreement on Chahbahar port.

At the initiative of Uzbekistan, in July 2021, a conference was organised on the theme of ‘Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity – Challenges and Opportunities’ in Tashkent in which delegates from forty countries participated. The five Central Asian countries pledged, “seeking opportunities to strengthen connectivity between the Central and South Asian regions via trade, transport, and energy links.”⁶ India-Uzbekistan-Iran-Afghanistan Quadrilateral Working Group has been formed on the joint use of Chabahar port. India also invested in developing infrastructure in Afghanistan that could have served as trade route. In December 2021, India and five countries of Central Asia had a virtual summit that focussed on trade and connectivity issues, cultural exchanges, and security cooperation. In July 2021, Pakistan and Uzbekistan signed the transit agreement.

Table 14.3. India’s and Pakistan’s exports to Central Asia (in USD million)

	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2018	2019	2020
India	118.8	173.9	211.8	261.7	414.1	543.4	417.9	425.5	478.17	612.34
Pakistan	18.0	16.8	11.9	9.1	11.9	22.4	27.8	116.6	118.6	90.3

Source: Data extrapolated from the International Trade Centre, Trade Map (2020). <https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>

Pakistan has been trying to gain connectivity to Central Asia through Afghanistan. However the previous Ashraf Ghani regime had linked

6 <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-c51-on-the-international-conference-central-and-south-asia-regional-connectivity-challenges-and-opportunities/>, 16 July 2021.

Afghanistan's willingness to allow this transit access if Pakistan allows India land route access for trade with Afghanistan. Though Pakistan allows Afghan trucks to carry Afghan goods to the Indian market these trucks return empty as Pakistan does not allow India's overland trade with Afghanistan. Pakistan had signed Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) with China, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in 1995 and Uzbekistan became a member in 2022. With the emergence of Taliban, Pakistan is unlikely to face such a challenge. However, India, over the period of time, has tried for alternative routes for its trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia.

For connectivity and trade to flourish using Afghanistan as a land bridge, the first and foremost thing that is required is stability in Afghanistan. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the dramatic manner in which Taliban took control over Kabul created concerns in the region. While the countries bordering Afghanistan including India were concerned about the larger ramification of an unstable Afghanistan. The collapse of previous regime and attempt of Afghan officials to flee as the Taliban was taking control of Kabul created a sense of despair. Though all the countries have expressed their willingness to engage Afghanistan to overcome the humanitarian crisis and also to protect their multiple interests that is linked to stability in Afghanistan, none of the countries have yet recognised the Taliban regime. This recognition is contingent on the attitude of Taliban government towards other ethnic minorities and women, especially education of girls. These development has placed serious challenge to the concept of Afghanistan acting as a land bridge between the Central Asian Republics and South Asia⁷. Second, considering the fact that Afghanistan emerged as a stable country, the India-Pakistan relations to a very large extent will impact

7 Market access to central Asian countries series published by Pakistan Business Council, <https://www.pbc.org.pk/research/market-access-series-2021-22-the-republic-of-tajikistan/>, <https://www.pbc.org.pk/research/market-access-series-2020-21-the-republic-of-kazakhstan/>, <https://www.pbc.org.pk/research/market-access-series-2020-21-the-republic-of-uzbekistan/>

on the proposed energy and connectivity projects that could facilitate both trade in energy and goods. Such trade in energy and goods cannot remain limited to only Pakistan in the South Asian region. It has to go beyond Pakistan to include India and other countries of South Asia to attain its economic potential. Third, such facilitation can come through the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) MVA (Motor Vehicle Agreement) that proposes connectivity within the SAARC countries. Since Afghanistan is a member of SAARC, these connectivity links will expand to the door steps of Central Asian region. Interestingly, due to the bilateral problems, i.e. restricting trade to two points in the Pakistan border and Afghanistan insisting that it will allow trade if Pakistan allows India's overland trade with Afghanistan. Pakistan at one point of time expressed its preference to trade with Central Asia through China using the Karakoram Highway.⁸

Conclusion

Therefore the potential of Afghanistan to emerge as a land bridge is limited in the present context. Within the SAARC framework, since Afghanistan is a member, regional integration could have been facilitated by SAARC-MVA which was supposed to have been signed in the Kathmandu Summit. This could not happen as Pakistan was not willing to sign the MVA that could provide India connectivity to Afghanistan. Therefore when one discusses about the relevance and potential of Afghanistan to emerge as a land bridge, there is a need to examine the issue from the perspective of regional economic integration. The 'land bridge' will require multi-modal connectivity, trade integration, a

8 Khalid Mustafa, "Pakistan decides to have access to Central Asia for its products through China", The News, 10 September 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/712702-pakistan-decides-to-have-access-to-central-asia-for-its-products-through-china>. The route is: Karachi-Rawalpindi-Hassanabdal-Gilgit-Khunjerab (Pak/China Border)-Kashgar-Torugart (China/Kyrgyzstan Border)-Bishkek-Akjol-Kordai (Kyrgyzstan/Kazakhstan Border)-Almaty (Kazakhstan) = Length - 3710 Km Approx, See presentation given by Mohammad Sohaib, Director, Ministry of Communication, Government of Pakistan, at <https://www.carecprogram.org/uploads/2015-QTTA-06-PAK-Presentation-QATT-Workshop.pdf>

shorter negative list, elimination of non-tariff and para tariff barriers, better trade facilitation at the border and simplification of procedures that facilitate trade rather than inhibiting it. India and the Central Asian countries are part of UN TIR (The United Nations Customs Convention on International Transport of Goods under cover of TIR (Transports Internationaux Routiers) Carnets) and joined it in 2017.

In terms of cultural connectivity, Afghanistan is multicultural and multi-ethnic. People living near to the border share close socio-ethno-linguistic ties. For example: the pathans, the Hazaras, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hindus and Sikhs who have strong cross-border cultural ties will only strengthen the concept of Afghanistan as a land bridge. A monolithic Afghanistan as envisaged by Taliban cannot fulfil Afghanistan's potential as a land bridge. Trade and commerce can only flourish when there is people to people contact that has been nurtured through centuries.

Unfortunately, Afghanistan continues to be in turmoil. Hope of peace remains elusive. Taliban regime is yet to be recognised by international community and the regime also lacks domestic legitimacy given the nature of its takeover in August 2021. Stability in Afghanistan, however would help the prospect of connecting Central Asia with South Asia and would be a potential game changer for the region. Power rivalry between major powers, regional powers propensity to hedge and also the downturn in India and Pakistan relations also diminishes such prospect of integration of the two regions. Opening to the large market of South Asia will help the Central Asian countries to expand their trade. Some of the connectivity projects that are being proposed/developed in the region although hold promise, the prospect of Afghanistan emerging as facilitator of connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia and in the process the possibility of Afghanistan earning from transit fee levied on goods between South Asia and Central Asia at present appears dim. Yet, this prospect holds the promise of connectivity as geo-economics dominates and shapes relationship between states than geopolitics.

Terror Threat Challenges in South Asia

Maj. Gen. (retd.) Binoj Basnyat¹

In February 2021, President Biden unveiled his plans to change the US's foreign policy after years of unilateralism under Donald Trump. He said, "My message to the world today is that the US is back, diplomacy is back". The US interests and priorities have changed as a result of the constant change in global priorities. The US President's announcement on April 14, 2021, to withdraw US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces from Afghanistan raises questions about the potential impact on South Asia and world politics. The withdrawal is like accepting a "turn back" in succession that was formulated for the past 20 years. Furthermore, it is also likely to increase in security threats from Non-State Actors (NSA) like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. At the same time, a secure environment will be provided to more terrorist organizations for trying to conceive, devise, and train against adversaries. Similarly, tendencies of using violence by such groups for their political bargaining has also been observed and this trend might further increase in the years to come.

The US military, which had been stationed in Afghanistan since 2001 in the wake of the 9/11 attacks to prevent the country from being used as a staging ground for terrorist attacks, made an orderly withdrawal in 2021. As a result, South Asian nations, particularly those bordering Afghanistan, may face additional challenges and witness a rise in both dormant and active terrorist threats. Therefore, there is an expectation from other regional powers, particularly China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, and the Central Asian countries, to uphold regional security as the American and allied forces have left the region.

¹ Author is retired Maj. Gen. of Nepal Army

With US troop no longer in Afghanistan, the strategic environment of terror threat in South Asia is intensifying. The political debate about the withdrawal of the US forces had been around, particularly after the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Doha in September 2020. In exchange for the Taliban's promise to combat terrorism, the US agreed to withdraw combat forces. Therefore, the Taliban take-over of power did not come as a surprise but it has brought with it new difficulties for Afghanistan as well as the rest of the region. The New Caliphate or the new avatar of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) will likely advance to South Asia and the periphery.

After Al- Baghdadi's death in October 2019, a former Iraqi army officer named Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashemi Al-Qurashi also known as Mawla emerged in power. As of January 2018, ISIS had only occupied a small portion of Iraq-Syria border, and eastern Syria. Nevertheless, he has vowed to establish a new Caliphate to ensure that ISIS maintains its belligerence and horrifying stature in international politics. The US and Allies' presence in Afghanistan contained ISIS's movement in both South Asia and other regions. The likelihood remains that ISIS may recruit a huge number of fighters from the Middle Eastern region and radicalize them into fanatical jihadists. At the end of August 2020, the UN reported that over 10,000 fighters of the Islamic State (IS) were in force in parts of Iraq and Syria and they continue to utilize a diverse array of tactics for gaining precise information for potential targets. Numerous attacks in various parts of South Asia is an evidence that the IS is present throughout the region and is still actively operating. The rise in recent attacks in Afghanistan on strategic sites, the assassination attempt on Mohamed Nasheed, former President of Maldives, the 2008 November terror attack in Bombay, Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka, numerous attacks in Pakistan, the Gurudwara attack in Kabul, and the April 2020 attack on the Central Reserve Police Force in Jammu and Kashmir are a few horrid examples.

There are approximately 40 militant groups active in South Asia, which holds substantial reasons for anxiety within the security apparatus of our countries. The South Asian nations will have to live with the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other non-state actors that may be detrimental to domestic security and regional stability. It is essential to continuously monitor the envisioned strategy, plans, missions, and operations of ISIS and its links with the Islamic State Wilayah Hind (IS-WH) which was proclaimed in 2019 by the Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir (IS-JK) and the Islamic State-Khurasan (IS-K).

Afghanistan is one of the South Asian nations with a noticeable influence from ISIS and can jeopardize the development and stability of the broader region. Moreover, the current political turmoil and unpredictability in Afghanistan and its spill-over effects in neighboring states will put at risk some major infrastructure projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). With the political vacuum and divisional socio-religious complexities of the IS-K, the Afghan avatar of ISIS will have new grounds along the disputed Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is also evidence that people from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have joined ISIS ranks bordering Afghanistan.

Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, IS-WH, IS-JK, and IS-K will reposition in South Asia by taking advantage of Afghanistan's fragility, Pakistan's political compulsions, China's political and security sensitivities, India's serious security challenges as well as Iran-US inconsistency, Russia-US contention and Turkey and the Central Asian nations' policy ambiguity. As a result, maintaining the regional security order will be difficult in South Asia.

China has time and again shown inconsistent approach to US presence in Afghanistan and even blamed it to be the source of instability in Afghanistan. The chaotic withdrawal was criticized by China as an irresponsible behavior of Washington for severely affecting the peace process and contributing to the already deteriorating security.

Russia was overwhelmed at the hands of US-supported Mujahideen and withdrew from Afghanistan three decades ago. Russia is again at the forefront in the quest for peace in Afghanistan but it is not trusted by the Taliban. The March meeting known as the expanded “Troika” of China, Pakistan, Russia, and the US along with the Taliban and Afghan delegates came out against the establishment of an Islamic Emirate and urged the Taliban to abandon plans on the spring offensive - leaving the Taliban annoyed.

Iran as a neighbor of Afghanistan also has security threats if the country slides into disorder and chaos. Iran has links with the Hazaras. In July 2022, a border fight in the province of Nimroz erupted between the border guards of Iran and the Taliban which left one dead.

Present Context

Collaboration and cooperation of South Asian nations to counter extremism, terrorism and the flow of refugees is imperative. The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy which agrees on a common framework with a four-pillar plan of action offers a collective outline for this. Now is the best time for South Asian nations along with concerned regional organizations to reassess and re-examine regional security risks, threats, and challenges. In addition to the international frameworks, existing regional structures and plans of organizations including the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) present workable documents for regional collaboration on issues related to border security, mutual legal assistance, and law enforcement. Furthermore, there is also a Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism 1987, and August 2008 additional protocol for “combatting terrorism”, SAARC Terrorist Offensive Monitoring Desk (STOMD) and the SAARC Drug Offensive Monitoring Desk (SDOMD), and an Expert Group on networking amongst police authorities. However, in the absence of the SAARC’s smooth operation

in recent times, the strategic significance of the BIMSTEC has proven to be more pertinent.

The August 2018 fourth BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu stressed the fact that terrorism and transnational organized crimes continue as a great threat to international peace and security and requires sustained efforts and cooperation and a comprehensive approach. The Summit concurred and agreed to cooperate and adopt a comprehensive approach to combat terrorism and transnational organized crimes with an initiation of a joint military exercise to address common challenges. Moreover, the fifth BIMSTEC Summit in Colombo saw the signing of the BIMSTEC Convention on mutual legal assistance on criminal matters.

A regional military exercise “MilEx” kicked off to create synergy, better understanding, and evolution of an institutionalized mechanism for regional consensus over strengthening interoperability in countering terrorism, radicalization, and the best measures to counter them. The second Joint Military Exercise ‘PANEx 21’ focused on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) intending to foster joint planning and preparation to institutionalize regional cooperation and inter-governmental efforts to respond dynamically to natural disasters in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future Context

With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan, the security situation in the region will be uncertain throughout South Asia. Terrorism in South Asia is based on militancy stemming from extremist ideology and fundamentalism, and risks to terrorist acts include illegal immigration, falsely documented settlement, poor governance, political unrest, economic difficulties, discontented population, and institutional corruption. Overall, given that the region is becoming unpredictable and that South Asia appears increasingly exposed to political instability

and terrorism, it is time to review current international and regional frameworks for security. Strict measures must be implemented to strengthen the law enforcement community, manage borders effectively, and review documentation such as citizenship and other national identification and immigration mechanisms.

Structural Amendment

There is also a need to establish a politically appointed strategic body of security professionals in the BIMSTEC Secretariat to identify common strategies, requirements, and measures for confronting challenges like environmental security and counter-terrorism from the mountains to the ocean.

Prospect of other nation states (Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, and Vietnam) boarding BIMSTEC need to be explored which would supplement and promote regional security.

The National Security Advisors meetings address security diplomacy, but it is also crucial to start political conversations at the Defense Ministers' level under both SAARC and BIMSTEC. It is necessary to take steps to ensure that the chiefs of the law enforcement and paramilitary forces, as well as the home ministers, meet on a regular basis.

Insecurity and threats emanating from the Taliban takeover will impact the whole region. The Taliban and its practice of harboring other criminal organizations inside Afghan territory will continue to be a problem. To deal with this challenge, nation states must discuss among themselves more often, work together and forge a coordinated approach.

Lessons from Afghanistan

Yuba Nath Lamsal¹

On August 30, 2021, the United States withdrew its final contingent of troops from Afghanistan, bringing an end to the two decade long “war on terror.” In terms of protracted nature and the eventual outcome, analysts and historians frequently compare the American war in Afghanistan to the Vietnam War. In contrast to other wars, the United States humiliating withdrawal from Vietnam and Afghanistan allowed its adversaries to seize power. Washington fought hard to prevent communists in Vietnam from seizing power, but after 20 years of fierce battle, the US was forced to withdraw paving the way for the same communists to come to power. Afghanistan is also a repetition as the Taliban whom the US and NATO troops fought for 20 years, came to power as a result of the withdrawal of American troops.

In response to the terrorist attack in New York and Washington, which left 2977 people dead and 6,000 people injured, the United States declared war on terror, holding the Al-Qaeda terrorist group and its leader Osama bin Laden accountable. Exactly two weeks after the September 11 terrorist attack, on October 7, 2001, America launched ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ to kill Laden and other members of Al-Qaeda.

Congress passed a law authorizing the war against Al-Qaeda and countries that supported the terrorist network. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also joined the bandwagon of the US global war on terror. The United Nations Security Council not only

1 Author is former Nepalese Ambassador to Denmark and former Editor of ‘The Rising Nepal’ daily.

condemned the terrorist attack but also urged all nations to work together to hold those responsible for such attacks accountable. Even countries like Iran, Russia and China expressed solidarity with the United States.²

Initially US President George W. Bush anticipated that the mission in Afghanistan would be accomplished in a couple of years but ultimately US was stuck so severely that it ended up being one of the longest and most destructive wars in US history. Starting merely targeting Al-Qaeda, the war finally came to be a war against Afghanistan and a large number of Afghans, from which it became difficult to withdraw gracefully. Four American Presidents, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden had to be preoccupied with the Afghan war, using up trillions of dollars that could have been used to boost the country's economy instead.

Graveyard of Empires

Afghanistan has a reputation for being a graveyard of empires throughout history. Afghanistan historically was an unconquerable country and one who enters with enmity is destined to be defeated. From Alexander the Great to Genghis Khan, from Babar to British, Russians, and recently the Americans; external invaders have met with fierce resistance by Afghans. Due to their ignorance of Afghan tribal culture, its geographic complexity, and strong nationalism, invaders such as the British and Russians suffered humiliation in the hands of the Afghan people. Aware of this and also learning a lesson from the Vietnam fiasco, the Bush administration had initially applied some diplomatic manoeuvrings and pressure tactics on Taliban through different channels including Pakistan to hand over Bin Laden and his associates to the United States. Bush, who had recently been elected President wanted to deliver a message to the voters that America is

2 Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers, A Secret History of the War*, Simon and Shuster

safe under the Republican Party by adopting a tougher stance against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. President Bush wanted to accomplish his mission and get out of Afghanistan at the earliest thus he stated that the mission's limited objective was to 'disrupt Al-Qaeda's use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime'. Although the US action crippled Al-Qaeda's ability to strike the United States, it took eleven years to kill Laden and the spectre of the Taliban continued to rule the roost which prolonged the US presence in Afghanistan for two decades until August 2021.

Convergence of Interests

Bin Laden's sanctuary in Afghanistan goes back to the mid-1980s during the Soviet occupation as he arrived with a charity mission to support Afghan refugees in Pakistan and later founded Al-Qaeda intending to launch global jihad against 'infidels'. He recruited, trained, and encouraged Afghan and foreign Mujahideen to fight against the Soviets. Before the 1970s, the United States showed little interest in Afghanistan, but after the Soviet Union invaded the country in 1989, its strategic interest increased. At the height of the Cold War, two superpowers vied to expand their influence across the world and contain one another in places of vital strategic interests. Soviet presence in Afghanistan was considered a geopolitical threat to US interest in South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. Pakistan considered Afghanistan as its backyard or under its sphere of influence and did not want the military presence of its arch-rival India's ally the Soviet Union. Soviet Union and India were Cold War era allies and India had recognized the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan while the rest of the world had condemned it. While working together in Afghanistan, Washington and Islamabad benefited from Al-Qaeda's resistance to the Soviet invasion. In the course of the conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States came closer to Al-Qaeda, and together they were successful in driving out the Soviet troops.

The Taliban took advantage of the power vacuum when the United States abandoned Afghanistan after losing interest in the country. The oil-rich Persian Gulf became more important for the US than Afghanistan and thus it concentrated on Iraq war making Saudi Arabia a base for military action against Iraq. Al-Qaeda took military action in the Middle East as outright aggression and declared jihad against America. The September 11 terrorist attack was its aftereffect.

The US targeted the Taliban basically because it provided shelter to Bin Laden, who resided in a camp in the Afghanistan mountain region of Tora Bora. The Taliban, however, contend that Americans targeted them because of mistakes made by others. The Taliban was a domestic Islamic extremist organization with no goals beyond the Afghani border and no desire to enflame relations with the US. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban did not get along either because of Al-Qaeda's terrorist activities particularly targeting the United States. During a face-to-face meeting with Bin Laden, Taliban chief Mullah Omar also instructed Al-Qaeda to refrain from attacking the United States and from engaging in terrorism in Afghanistan. Laden, however, disregarded the Taliban's request and persisted in his terrorist attacks against the United States. Carter Malkasian writes in his book, 'The American War in Afghanistan: A History' that Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, foreign minister under the Taliban government in 2001, said the Taliban sympathized with Bin Laden and the Arabs but questioned his attacks on other countries from Afghan soil³.

Strategic Blunders

The Soviet Union was America's principal geopolitical and ideological rival during the Cold War. Outside of the Western Hemisphere, Washington's primary interests were in the Middle East, South East Asia, and Europe. The rapid spread of communism in South East

3 Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers, A Secret History of the War*, Simon and Shuster

Asia, particularly in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and China, as well as North Korea, were also significant geopolitical challenges. US's primary concern in the Middle East was oil and its strategic location. The core strategic goal of the United States worldwide was to contain the Soviet Union and check the advancement of communism. The strategic significance that Afghanistan during the Cold War was due to its proximity to the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and the border with the Soviet Union. Washington considered the south-western frontier with predominantly Muslim dominated areas of the Soviet Union as one key fault line that can be useful to penetrate Soviet Russia, for which Afghanistan could be a great pivot.

When Moscow dispatched troops and fully annexed Afghanistan in 1979, the United States abruptly awoke from its strategic slumber and joined forces with Pakistan to support Afghan Mujahedeen warriors with weapons and ammunition in their fight to drive the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan's strategic value decreased following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the US also lost interest in the country. Washington then completely washed off its hands from Afghanistan which created a power vacuum ultimately setting the stage for the Taliban. The dramatic rise of the Taliban in religion and politics interrupted the power equilibrium and disrupted political stability, social cohesion, and religious and cultural harmony in Afghanistan thereby creating a chaotic society that turned out to be a fertile ground for terrorism.

Afghanistan has difficult geography and gross ethnic divide. With challenging topography, Afghanistan is a massif of the Hindukush and Himalayan mountain ranges. Due to their ignorance of Afghanistan's complex geography and tribal sentiment, major powers like Russia and Britain in the past were drawn to the country because of its geopolitical pivot. In the first place, the US strategy failed to achieve its goal of flushing out Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. Although the Taliban were pushed out of Kabul, the US did not have any clearly

defined exit strategy. US politicians and military strategists entered Afghanistan without proper planning about how and when they will leave Afghanistan. Contrary to its earlier position, the US became involved in Afghanistan's "nation-building" project in 2009 during the Obama administration, which not only wasted valuable resources but also further damaged the US presence. The Taliban only benefited from the growing hostility with the warlord-dominated Afghan government. The situation occasionally got to the point where Americans had to wonder who was an ally and who was an enemy inside Afghanistan. The warlords who amassed money and revenue by 'illicit means, such as drug trafficking and collecting bribes' made corruption a defining feature of the new Afghan government⁴. As a result, the Taliban gained the support and sympathy of more Afghans, mostly Pashtuns, as a better alternative to the US backed Afghan government, and young Pashtuns were drawn to the insurgency. The security forces that Americans built and trained to protect Afghanistan was inept and ineffective against the Taliban's relatively fewer numbers of forces. Given that they were fighting for both religious freedom and national liberation from "infidel invaders," the Taliban was certain of victory and believed that "God and time were on their side." The Taliban's adage that "Americans have watches, whereas Taliban have time" gave fundamentalists strength to fight on.

Propaganda Machine

When the Bush administration declared war on Afghanistan in 2001, it promised to prevent a disaster similar to the one in Vietnam and had prepared for an early withdrawal once its two main goals of destroying the Al-Qaeda network and overthrowing the Taliban had been accomplished. The war, however, was making no progress, and public opinion in America was also gradually shifting against the war. Even though some sectors in Afghanistan experienced positive changes such as women empowerment and empowering the civil society; the

4 IBID

widespread corruption, trafficking in illegal drugs, and violence dwarfed the gains. Finally, security experts and even politicians realized that the war was a waste of resources and a losing project and they sought a face-saving device to come out of Afghanistan seeking to focus on other strategically more important fronts. It was eventually realized that the entire strategy was fundamentally flawed from the beginning as the dominant stakeholder and political force in Afghanistan was excluded from the political process and political stability was not possible without the engagement and involvement of the Taliban. President Obama, although half-heartedly, initiated attempts for a dialogue with the Taliban in 2010. However, it made little progress because the US persisted in its demand that the Taliban cut ties with Al-Qaeda and give up violence, while the Taliban insisted on the release of its top leaders. In response, the US released five Taliban leaders from Guantanamo prison to initiate dialogue but this process was derailed as Hamid Karzai's government scuttled the process.

Ashraf Ghani after being elected as President in 2014, promised to recognize the Taliban as a political force and offered to hold unconditional peace talks. But the Taliban turned the tables stating that they would negotiate only with Americans upon the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan⁵. Finally, in 2018 high-level negotiations with the Taliban took place in Qatar, where both parties came to an agreement on a compromise that saw the Taliban sever ties to Al-Qaeda and the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. As a result, a final agreement to end the protracted war was signed by both parties in February 2020. Soon after NATO troops' withdrawal, Afghanistan once again went to the hands of the Taliban as the elected Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani could no longer hold on to power despite the establishment of security forces with a combined strength of almost 300,000 that included the Afghan National Army, police, and intelligence agencies. Taliban having less than 75,000 fighters, a fraction

5 Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, 'YOU Have The Watches, WE HAVE THE TIME' Newsweek, October 10, 2011

of what government security forces comprised, took over. President Ghani fled Afghanistan even without informing his aides and security. Only after the President boarded the helicopter did the chief of staff for the President learn that he was leaving Afghanistan.⁶ This marked the disgraceful end of the two-decade-long Afghanistan war setting stage for the Taliban to take charge of Kabul.

On the surface, the situation in Afghanistan appears to be stable but deep down in the heart of the Afghan nation, complex problems still abound. The international community has not recognized the Taliban regime while their past atrocities and hobnobbing with the terrorist groups continue to haunt. Afghanistan is politically ungovernable, financially in a mess, and socially chaotic. If the ethnic divide is not addressed, new conflicts between various ethnic groups are likely to emerge in Afghanistan. One key lesson from Afghanistan is that solutions imposed from the outside are often temporary. All sides working together to frame a home-grown solution leads to long-term peace, stability, and development.

6 Brian Brivati, *Losing Afghanistan: the Fall of Kabul and the End of Western Intervention*

Humanitarian and Fiscal Crisis in Afghanistan: Role of South Asia

Abigail Miriam Fernandez and Akriti Sharma¹

Afghanistan has plunged into one of the world's worst humanitarian crises as a result of the forty years of war, natural disasters, chronic poverty, drought and the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the Taliban takeover in 2021, the country was facing one of the largest crises and most complex humanitarian emergencies (CHEs), however, the situation worsened following the Taliban takeover. Over 3.4 million people were displaced due to conflict, fundamental rights of women and girls threatened and the country on the brink of a famine.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 was a major turning point for the country and its people. Afghanistan's conflict has become one of the major conflicts of its time owing to the magnitude of catastrophe'. The humanitarian and economic fallouts of the Afghan crisis are interlinked.

Humanitarian Crisis

The major crisis at hand is the acute food insecurity that has plagued the country. A statement by Dr. Ramiz Alakbarov, Deputy Special Representative for the Secretary General, UN Resident Coordinator

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and Humanitarian Coordinator, on the Continued Food Insecurity and Malnutrition Crisis facing people in Afghanistan reported that Afghans are facing food insecurity and malnutrition crisis of unparalleled proportions, with those experiencing acute hunger increasing from 14 million in July 2021 to 23 million in March 2022.² Similarly, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported that a staggering 95 percent of Afghans are not getting enough to eat, with that number rising to almost 100 percent in female-headed households.³

More children are facing the brunt of the conflict. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) stated that over one million children under five could die by the end of the year because of the country's food crisis and the lack of water and sanitation services. Acute malnutrition rates in 28 out of 34 provinces are high with more than 3.5 million children in need of nutrition treatment support.⁴

The acute food insecurity in the country has been intensified by the terrible drought across the country, the worst in the last two decades. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has reported that severe drought has hit more than 80 percent of the country, crippling food production with a warning of the possibility of another bad harvest in 2022. According to the Afghanistan Drought Risk Management Strategy, annual droughts are likely to be the norm

2 Alakbarov, Ramiz. "Statement by Dr Ramiz Alakbarov, Deputy Special Representative for the Secretary General, Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator, on the Continued Food Insecurity and Malnutrition Crisis Facing People in Afghanistan [EN/Dari/PS ...]" ReliefWeb, 15 March 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/statement-dr-ramiz-alakbarov-deputy-special-representative-secretary-general>. Accessed 12 April 2022.

3 Qayoumi, Hasinullah, and Andrew McConnell. "Afghanistan: Food insecurity and malnutrition threaten 'an entire generation.'" UN News, 15 March 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113982>. Accessed 12 April 2022.

4 "Half of Afghanistan's children under five expected to suffer from acute malnutrition as hunger takes root for millions." UNICEF, 5 October 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/half-afghanistans-children-under-five-expected-suffer-acute-malnutrition-hunger>. Accessed 12 April 2022.

by 2030, and by 2050 nearly 90 percent of Afghanistan will be drought-affected.

Apart from the food insecurity, Afghans have lost access to shelter and healthcare. Following the Taliban's takeover, major funding for the programme has been withdrawn from the government's *Sehatmandi* programme, which provides essential primary care services including for maternal, new born, and child health. The lack of funding in turn has resulted in hospitals and clinics facing a shortage of medicine and supplies, with patients unable to access the essential health services. Dr. Luo Dapeng, WHO Representative in Afghanistan said, "The recent funding pause by key donors to the country's biggest health programme (Sehatmandi) will cause the majority of the public health facilities to close. As a result, more mothers, infants and children will die of reduced access to essential health care. WHO is determined to work with partners in identifying a sustainable solution with the support of donors to maintain and scale up the lifesaving interventions when needed in the country."

The conflict has also intensified the displacement crisis in the country. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 670,000 people were internally displaced by conflict in Afghanistan in 2021, of which 80 percent were women and children. This brought the total number of IDPs to 3.6 million.⁵ Further, over 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees are living in exile, mostly in Iran and Pakistan. Meanwhile, nearly 5.3 million Afghan refugees have voluntarily returned back through assisted repatriation programmes since 2002. As a result of the displacement, Afghans have been exposed to several vulnerabilities as only the only basic emergency assistance has been provided following initial displacement.⁶

5 "Afghanistan emergency." UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan-emergency.html>. Accessed 12 April 2022.

6 "Enhanced Voluntary Return and Reintegration Package for Afghan Refugees (EVR-RP)." UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/562defe26.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2022.

The section of society most impacted by the conflict has been women and children. Both the humanitarian and economic crisis has resulted in malnutrition for pregnant women, increasing child marriages for girls, and increased the risk of gender-based violence. While the Taliban government has assured that women would be allowed to exercise their right within Islamic law, women and children are witnessing a rapid deterioration of their rights. Women across the country are unable to enjoy their freedom due to the restrictive gender norms and practices in places of employment, education and other services. Particularly, equal access to education has changed drastically for girls since the Taliban takeover, with girls prohibited from attending school from grade 7 to 12. Thus, although the Taliban claimed to guarantee protection of women's right, the discrimination and oppression continues.⁷

Fiscal Crisis

Apart from the political and humanitarian crisis, the country is facing a major fiscal crisis. Inflation, currency depreciation, and lack of public services has brought the economy on the brink of collapse. According to a report by the United Nations Development Programme, in the worst case, a 10-13 percent reduction in GDP could happen which can bring about 97 percent poverty rate by June 2022.⁸

The major setback to Afghanistan's financial system was due to the freezing of foreign assets by the US. It resulted in the collapse of the Da Afghanistan bank (DAB) which had USD 9.5 billion with the New York Federal Reserve and other American financial institutions⁹. Freezing

7 "WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN: WHERE ARE WE NOW?" *UN Women*, 3 December 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Gender-alert-Womens-rights-in-Afghanistan-en.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2022.

8 Garmer, Lance W. *Afghanistan Socio-Economic Outlook 2021-2022: Averting a Basic Needs Crisis*. UNDP, 2021. *UNDP*, <https://www.undp.org/library/afghanistan-socio-economic-outlook-2021-2022-averting-basic-needs-crisis>.

9 Mohsin, Saleha. "US freezes Afghan central bank's assets of \$9.5bn." *Al Jazeera*, 18

of such a sizable amount of Afghani assets by the US halted the dollar flows to the country resulting in a major banking crisis and resulted in a liquidity crisis.

Additionally, international aid was halted in Afghanistan which was a backbone of the economy. The IMF suspended USD 440 million in special drawing rights allocation¹⁰ and Germany suspended USD 430 million in aid.¹¹ According to the World Bank, Afghanistan's 40 percent share of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 75 percent of public spending was covered by international aid.¹²

About four percent of the Afghan economy was based on remittances making it one of the highest dependent economies on remittances.¹³ With many money transferring companies suspending their operations, it is difficult for the Afghani people to withdraw cash. With the halt of aid by major countries and freezing of assets, the cash flow into the economy and the citizens are struggling to withdraw cash from the banks.

The unemployment rates are high and citizens have lost jobs.¹⁴ The

August 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/8/18/us-freezes-afghan-central-banks-assets-of-9-5bn>. Accessed 11 April 2022.

10 Lawder, David. "IMF blocks Afghanistan's access to SDR reserves over lack of clarity on government." *Reuters*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/biden-administration-seeks-block-taliban-accessing-reserves-imf-new-york-times-2021-08-18/>. Accessed 11 April 2022.

11 Mertens, Kevin. "Germany suspends development aid to Afghanistan." *DW*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-suspends-development-aid-to-afghanistan/a-58889002>. Accessed 11 April 2022.

12 Afghanistan Overview: Development news, research, data | World Bank." *World Bank Group*, 8 October 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>. Accessed 11 April 2022.

13 "Remittances to Afghanistan are lifelines: They are needed more than ever in a time of crisis." *Migration Data Portal*, 6 September 2021, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/blog/remittances-afghanistan-lifelines>. Accessed 11 April 2022.

14 "Remittances to Afghanistan are lifelines: They are needed more than ever in a time of crisis." *Migration Data Portal*, 6 September 2021, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/blog/remittances-afghanistan-lifelines>. Accessed 11 April 2022.

former Afghani government was the biggest employer in the country, employing one million people. Employment demand has decreased and the people are leaving their private jobs. Due to the collapse of the central bank and liquidity crunch, salaries of the government employees were halted or reduced giving rise to unemployment in the country. It has become difficult for the Taliban to sustain even with the reduced salaries. Medium and small enterprises are on the verge of extinction. Due to the ongoing political, humanitarian and fiscal crisis, the citizens have lost their trust in the banking system.

Role of South Asia in Rebuilding Afghanistan

Afghanistan needs more than just humanitarian aid to avert the economic and humanitarian crisis. It is imperative for the international community to go beyond humanitarian aid. The Afghan crisis has more implications for South Asia than any other regions of the world. However, so far, the South Asian countries have emphasized more on the security implications of the Afghan crisis. The fiscal and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan calls for regional cooperation. As a region, South Asia has much to offer in rebuilding Afghanistan, both individually and collectively. With the emphasis on rebuilding, South Asian countries can assist Afghanistan individually in the following capacities.

To address the fiscal crisis, the role of Bangladesh and its expertise in microfinance can be tapped into. Given that microfinance is considered to be an important tool for poverty eradication and reductions of vulnerability to poverty in the developing world, it is also an effective tool in the reconstruction of post-conflict societies. The Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA) initiated by the Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development had previously catered to the unmet demand for credit. However, with the conflict spiralling since 2021, programmes such as the MISFA have not been able to function. Thus, with the assistance and expertise from

Bangladesh, a plan on reviving microfinance can be initiated.¹⁵

Additionally, the fiscal crisis in Afghanistan can be addressed by other South Asian countries in several ways including establishment of direct relations with the Afghan central bank. It is imperative for the South Asian countries to work directly with the Afghan Bank and inject liquidity for the citizens to avail basic services. Multilateral organizations can help banks establish correspondent relations with the banks in Afghanistan. The humanitarian aid can be provided to the country through alternative mechanisms including commercial banks which can assist in the liquidity crisis. Central bank needs sound monetary policy to lower inflation and address the current crisis. South Asian countries can assist the central bank in making a sound monetary policy to build resilience.

When it comes to Afghanistan's deteriorating healthcare system, expertise and assistance from India can be an area of collaboration. Over the years, India has tried to rebuild the Afghan health system by rebuilding hospitals, providing medicine, and conducting training for Afghan doctors. However, India's assistance has been limited. Given the inferior quality of Afghanistan's healthcare and health crisis at hand, a medical partnership between the two countries can help assist public health and nutrition, communicable diseases, medical research, indigenous system of medicine, medical equipment and pharmaceutical products, hospital management, nursing and midwifery.

To address the refuge and displacement crisis, Pakistan's role is inevitable. According to the UNHCR, more than 300,000 Afghans have fled to Pakistan since the Taliban took over in 2021. Prior to this, Pakistan hosted more than 1.4 million registered Afghans who have been forced

15 Greeley, Martin & Chaturvedi, Mohit. (2007). "Microfinance in Afghanistan: A Baseline and Initial Impact Study for MISFA."
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/48265077_Microfinance_in_Afghanistan_A_Baseline_and_Initial_Impact_Study_for_MISFA

to flee their homes. Pakistan has taken the initiative of verifying data of these 1.4 million Afghans through documentation renewal and information verification exercise known as DRIVE and providing the refugees with smart identity cards. This in turn has helped Afghan refugees gain access to faster and safer health and education facilities and to banking services. Given the influx of more refugees, Pakistan can help assist the movement and future repatriation of Afghan refugees.¹⁶

Other areas of assistance that can be provided are energy with assistance from Bhutan and Nepal. These two countries have successfully used off-grid renewables to electrify rural remote areas where grid extension is not feasible. This method can be replicated in Afghanistan with assistance from Nepal and Bhutan. Energy cooperation within the region would help address the energy crisis to a large extent.

South Asian regional institutions such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and South Asia Cooperative Environment Program (SACEP) can also help Afghanistan. Afghanistan joined SAARC in 2007 as the eighth member state. As an institution, SAARC can play an instrumental role in managing the crisis of such magnitude in its member nations. Cooperation amongst the member countries would prove to be an efficient way for aiding Afghanistan. SAARC Development Fund is one of the ways through which the South Asian countries can provide assistance. A collective effort is imperative to manage a catastrophe' of such magnitude.

The Afghan crisis is a complex of fiscal, economic, political and socio-economic failures. To address it, both governments and non-government actors have a huge role to play. Just like global non-governmental organizations like the UN are assisting Afghanistan in addressing the humanitarian crisis, regional non-governmental organizations can

16 McConnell, Andrew. "Pakistan: Smartcard registration drive for Afghan refugees ends." UN News, 4 January 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109062>. Accessed 12 April 2022.

provide assistance. Cooperation amongst the policy makers and INGOs can help in finding ways to address the crisis.

After the Taliban takeover, international aid was halted due to the lack of trust in the new Taliban regime and the fear of mismanagement of resources. The Afghan economy which was in a crumbling state before the takeover worsened after the takeover. However, international organizations like the UN have made efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in the country through aid, yet the fiscal crisis still remains. The South Asian countries, in turn, have tried to provide assistance to address the crisis unilaterally. But the Afghan crisis would be better addressed through a regional multilateral approach rather than a unilateral approach. The countries need to find alternative mechanisms to address the fiscal and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Lessons can be taken from the other conflict regions like Syria and Yemen where the international and regional actors have developed alternative mechanisms to ensure humanitarian aid and liquidity.

Afghanistan in SAARC

Veera Lamichhane¹

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in December 1985 (MFA, 2022). It began with the formal adaptation and signing of the SAARC Charter, by seven countries in the South Asian regions: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Since then, only one other country has become a member of the association, that being Afghanistan, who formally joined in 2007, gaining status as the 8th member state.

It wasn't until 2005 that Afghanistan applied to be a member as the country wasn't able to meet the required objectives due to the internal matters involving political instability. Looking into the reasons which had led for Afghanistan to have a late entry to the SAARC membership, Nextias, 2022 stated that when Afghanistan showed interest in being part of the SAARC, a debate spurred among the SAARC member countries regarding the developing status of Afghan democracy during the years and the perception or the recognition of a country as a Central Asian Nation. Afghanistan was originally an applicant for SAARC membership when the Association was formed, and again became an applicant in 2005. The said debate was unanimous and finally, an agreement was drawn among the member countries to accept Afghanistan into the SAARC once the country withholds a nonpartisan general election. Pakistan was earlier opposed to Afghanistan becoming a member of SAARC, but agreed in 2006 (Pattanaik, 2006). It was late 2005 that the country held the elections and SAARC formally welcomed Afghanistan as its 8th member country in the year of 2007. (DAWN, 2007) Afghanistan's entry into SAARC changed the region's

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geographical configuration, linking South Asia to Central Asia and beyond (Weerakoon, 2020).

SAARC Principles and Areas of Cooperation

At the core, five key areas for regional cooperation by SAARC were identified in the Integrated Program of Action (IPA) and with time other important areas were added. The first five areas of cooperation covered agriculture; rural development; telecommunications; meteorology; and health and population. Over the years, as understanding of growing economies became clearer, areas such as transport; postal services; scientific and technological cooperation; sports, arts, and culture were added to the IPA (NTI, 2007). The SAARC Social Charter (2004) lays out the principal goals of SAARC with clarity: to promote, accelerate and improve growth of the region in respect to quality of life, economic growth, social progress and cultural development. These areas are covered in order to create a conducive environment for the people of South Asia to live in dignity, and realise their full potential, essentially contributing to the said goals.

Article One of the Charter clearly sets out the eight objectives of the Association that includes the overall welfare of the South Asian citizens, at individual, regional and global level. It focuses not only on economic growth, but also social & cultural progress. Besides promoting and strengthening collective self-reliance among the member states, SAARC also provides a platform for its members to appraise and understand common issues and concerns in socio-economic, technical and scientific fields. SAARC also lays out an enabling framework for cooperation with other developing countries and discussing the matters of common interest in other international forums and regional organisations.

The Charter is based on respect for the “principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and mutual benefit” (SAARC,

2004). It was believed that the inclusion of bilateral issues would hamper multilateral initiatives, and thus should be left out of regional conferences. It also states that in this light, all decisions made must be unanimous, representing the whole of South Asia as a collective unit.

Chronology of Relevant Developments at SAARC:

Year	Description
1985	SAARC formally established in Dhaka
1987	Talks of Afghanistan's membership
2005	An agreement reached on Afghanistan's membership
2007	i) Consultations with the Afghan officials and finalization of Afghanistan's membership by the Council of Ministers ii) Afghanistan formally joins as a SAARC member iii) China, Japan, EU, South Korea, Iran & USA become SAARC observers
2008	Australia and Myanmar join as SAARC observers
2009	i) A division created at SAARC Secretariat for Afghanistan's integration ii) Mauritius joins as observer
2015	SAFTA Meeting in Kabul
2016	Cancellation of the scheduled SAARC Summit in Islamabad

Table 1: Ahmed and Zahoor, 2015

The SAARC Secretariat

The SAARC Secretariat currently has a total of 61 staff members. The Secretary-General is appointed by the Council of Ministers on the principle of alphabetical rotation, for a non-renewable tenure of three years. H.E. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon of Sri Lanka assumed office of the Secretary General of SAARC Secretariat on 1st March 2020, and his tenure is ongoing.

Under the Secretary General are eight Directors from each Member

Country, who are respectively assigned an area of cooperation. The Key areas of cooperation are listed as follows:

Human Resources Development and Tourism Division
 Agriculture, Rural Development and SAARC Development Fund
 Environment, Biotechnology and Natural Disaster
 Education Security and Culture
 Social Affairs
 Information & Poverty Alleviation
 Energy, Transportation, Science & Technology

Directors of Afghanistan in the Secretariat

Directors are appointed by the Secretary-General upon nomination by Member States. To assist Directors, General Services Staff are regionally recruited from the Member States too. In addition, local administrative staff are recruited to ensure smooth running of the Secretariat. (SAARC, 2013).

Mr. Fazulrahman Rahmani is the current Afghani Director of SAARC, overseeing the division of Human Resources Development and Tourism. Mr. Rahmani's has a rich portfolio of previous involvements, ranging from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Afghanistan, to lecturing at the Law and Political Science Faculty at Kunduz University (SAARC, 2022).

Before Mr. Rahmani served three other Directors of Afghanistan. After Afghanistan's signing into the convention, the first Director of Afghanistan, Mr. Azizuddin Ahmadzada served for a term of 4 years, between December 2007 to January 2012; he is currently retired. Next, served Mr. Mohamed Ibrahim Ghafoori, whose tenure was from January 2012 to September 2016; he is currently engaged as CDA, Embassy of Afghanistan, Bulgaria. He was followed by Mr. Maihan Saeedi (Ph.D) with a term-time from September 2016 to September 2019. Mr. Saeedi is currently the Director General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Afghanistan (SAARC 2020.)

As the country is a late joiner into the Association, so far, it has had the fewest Directors in active term time, among the total Directors of the eight member states. Furthermore, till date, no Secretary General from Afghanistan has yet served in the Secretariat, consequent to both the late joining, along with the 3-year rotation of Secretary Generals by the Council of Ministers.

Address by Former President Hamid Karzai

At the 14th SAARC Summit held at New Delhi, former President Karzai had called for an expansion of trade and economic ties within the region, addressing terrorism as a looming threat to the region. The speech seems farsighted in that the former President had noted Afghanistan's political and economic isolation, as has been in the past, should not be repeated in order to avoid regional threats from emerging. Karzai had further added that it was "common duty of all SAARC leaders to fight extremism and terrorism in all forms and sources, including political sponsorship and financing" (India Review, 2007). The speech echoes the current situation in Afghanistan, with the Taliban taking control post the withdrawal of foreign forces; while SAARC countries remain mum. Diplomatic talks have taken place despite no state formally recognizing the Islamic Emirate as the legitimate successor of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Karzai had noted Afghanistan to be a key market connecting the region to surrounding economies, and indicated the need for strong trade linkages. In the current situation of lack of political dialogue, there is hesitation from the region for discussions with Taliban officials about the nature of international engagement, allowing for no forward progress on international conditions and demands (UN University, 2021).

Involvement of Afghanistan in SAARC Bodies

All Directors of SAARC are assigned with a particular area of regional cooperation. In the 2nd Summit of 1986, all member states had agreed

that Tourism was an integral part of economic growth, and must be facilitated via actionable steps towards promotion. The Directors of Afghanistan, incumbent included, have been assigned with overseeing the area of Human Resource Development and Tourism.

Afghanistan has established the SAARC Division at the Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul. In the period between 2007 and 2009, all the communication with SAARC was conducted through the Afghan Embassy in New Delhi. During 2007–13, Afghanistan participated in roughly 82 SAARC meetings out of 180 annually. This demonstrates Kabul's growing interest in South Asian regionalism (Ahmed, 2013).

Afghanistan is the only member state which has not yet hosted a SAARC Summit, largely due to financial and security challenges. Nonetheless, various SAARC meetings have been hosted in Kabul, such as the meeting on the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), which was organised in October 2015 in Kabul (Ahmed, 2013). Given below is a comprehensive list of SAARC Activities held in Afghanistan:

No	Activity	Dates	Venues	Venues
1.	Fifth Meeting of the SDF Board	1 - 2 September 2009	Kabul, Afghanistan	Under SAARC Secretariat
2.	Fourth Meeting of the Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children	21 - 22 December 2009	Kabul, Afghanistan	Under SAARC Secretariat
3.	Third Meeting of the SAARC Food Bank Board	8 - 9 November 2009	Kabul, Afghanistan	Under SAARC Secretariat

4.	Fifth Meeting of the SAARC Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children	16 - 17 July 2011	Kabul, Afghanistan	Under SAARC Secretariat
5.	Fourth Meeting of the Regional Task Force to implement the SAARC conventions relating to Trafficking in Women and Children and Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia	25 - 26 November 2011	Kabul, Afghanistan	Under SAARC Secretariat
6.	Seventeenth SDF Board Meeting	3 - 5 December 2013	Kabul, Afghanistan	Under SAARC Secretariat
7.	SAARC Cultural Capital - Coordination Meeting	18 - 21 June 2014	Afghanistan	Under SAARC Secretariat
8.	Meeting of SAARC Cultural Capital for 2015	16-22 June 2014	Bamiyan, Afghanistan	By SAARC Cultural Centre
9.	SAARC Training Workshop on Power System Studies for Synchronization of Multiple Systems	20-22 Oct 2014	Afghanistan	By SAARC Energy Centre
10.	Workshop on Avalanche Risk Management	7-9 Sept. 2014	Afghanistan	By SAARC Disaster Management Centre

11.	Women Empowerment for Gender Equality in the SAARC Region	4-8 June 2015	Afghanistan Kabul	SAARC Human Resource Development Centre
12.	SAARC Cultural Capital - 2015	SAARC Cultural Capital - 2015	Bamiyan, Afghanistan	By SAARC Cultural Centre

Table 2 : Extensive List provided by SAARC Secretariat, 2022

There are two main SAARC bodies which Afghanistan hosts via transit of being under the section of Human Resource Development and Tourism:

SAARC Apex Body: South Asia Foundation (SAF)

The South Asia Foundation (SAF) is a secular, non-profit and non-political organisation, comprising eight autonomous chapters in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. SAF's core objective is to promote regional cooperation through scholarships in a number of UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institutions of Excellence in the eight SAARC countries. SAF was recognized as an Apex Body of SAARC in August 2006. Its headquarters is located in India. A lot of Afghan students have availed the SAF scholarships to study international relations, fine arts, water management and journalism in SAF institutions.

SAARC Recognized Body: SAARC Teachers Federation (STF)

STF is an umbrella organisation in the SAARC region. STF was granted recognition by SAARC in January 2002. At present 17 Education

International (EI) Affiliates, teacher organisations are affiliated to STF from six countries, namely India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. STF and its affiliates organise advocacy and lobbying on the common issues in the region. Education International financially assists STF in its activities.

Afghanistan's Notable Involvement in SAARC

- The 19th SAARC summit scheduled to be held in Pakistan was called off as India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Afghanistan decided to boycott it due to a terrorist attack on an army camp in Uri. For the first time in SAARC history, four countries boycotted a SAARC summit, leading to its cancellation with resumption uncertain. Afghanistan's actions were considered significant in deciding the fate of the 19th SAARC Summit. A SAARC Summit since then is yet to be held, with no promises in early sight.
- 31 Afghani Students, with thanks due to the SAARC Network, had been admitted to the South Asian University (SAU) in New Delhi, 2012 (Mishra, 2012).

Takeaways

After joining SAARC, Afghanistan has made significant accelerations in exports and trade relations with South Asia. Yet despite posing as a platform for regional cooperation among the South Asian nations, SAARC has remained sidelined and dormant since its 18th summit of 2014 in Kathmandu. With the lack of any other alternative platform for regional cooperation for the member states involved, SAARC is in need of a revival. Even though it is against the SAARC Charter to discuss bilateral issues at formal forums, SAARC summits "provide a unique, informal window for leaders to meet without aides and chart future courses of action. The coming together of leaders, even at the height of tensions, in a region laden with congenital suspicions,

misunderstandings, and hostility is a significant strength of SAARC that cannot be overlooked.” (Indian Express, 2021).

With the withdrawal of foreign forces and the Taliban taking over, the Islamic Emirate and its status internationally raises a lot of questions. Previously, SAARC meetings have been cancelled due to bilateral tensions and disagreements. There is still uncertainty as to who will represent Afghanistan on International forums, along with whether or not to formally acknowledge the Islamic Emirate (Zee, 2021).

Being a SAARC member, Afghanistan has to contribute 5 percent of SAARC’s annual budget, that is, US\$280,000–300,000 (Ahmed, 2014). The recent overturn and political turmoil of Afghanistan makes it unlikely that such contributions will be made. This brings to question the membership of Afghanistan in SAARC itself.

Furthermore, while SAARC’s fundamentals lay in women’s rights, education, and free speech, the new Emirate’s views (Amnesty International, 2022) may not align with those of the Association. UN Women (2014) and SAARC had signed a Memorandum of Understanding to implement a SAARC Gender Equality and Empowerment Programme, whose efficacy in the Afghan region today could be questioned. SAARC’s Revised Action Plan on Information and Media clearly states: “ensure free flow of information, newspapers, periodicals, books, and other publications” and speaks of establishing a Digital Technology Forum. (Human Rights Watch, 2021). As a contrast, the Taliban were reported to have stringent regulations that were restrictive of the rights of Journalists (Mullick, 2014). Furthermore, in the education arena, member states of SAARC, during the 12th Summit in 1997, further consolidated their commitment to ensuring free education to all children between the ages of 6-14 years (UN Women, 2014). Comparatively, education in the Taliban’s rule has still been reported as a ‘widely denied right’ (BBC, 2022).

These examples question whether the principles of the Association and the views of the new Emirati State align, and shine light into the need to question IF, and if so how Afghanistan, as a newly emerged entity, can be reintegrated into SAARC.

Final Notations

Afghanistan has had a rigorous journey in being accepted into SAARC, and it is unfortunate that today, once again the country faces political and economic isolation. While the international community juggles their attention towards the Russia-Ukraine war, the South Asian region timidly approaches attempts at redressing the flow of refugees, the humanitarian crisis and the violation of rights. SAARC itself is in need of a revival, with one of the many impediments to multi-lateral regional cooperation being unequal partners. The revival of regionalism in South Asia is largely dependent on states addressing and overcoming their political differences (Islam 2022).

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