

A man with a long grey beard, wearing a white turban and glasses, is walking through a crowd. He is wearing a light pink button-down shirt with a brown patterned band across the chest. He is looking slightly to his left. In the foreground, a woman with long dark hair is holding a smartphone up to film him. In the background, another man is also holding a red smartphone up to film. The setting appears to be an indoor event or conference with other people and lights visible in the background.

DEEP DIVE: **Afghanistan Under the Taliban:** **One Year On**

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Introduction



After 19 years and 9 months and at a cost of over \$2 trillion, the US backed regime in Afghanistan collapsed after the Taliban surrounded the capital, Kabul in August 2021. The collapse was swift and remarkable, sealing an embarrassing defeat for the US, the worst since the fall of Saigon. The Afghan war lasted four US presidents with the last American soldier boarding a military jet on the night of the 30th of August 2021. The US occupation in the graveyard of empires, like empires before it, had come to an acrimonious end. It was then followed by another fiasco, as Western countries and their allies struggled to evacuate foreign nationals and tens of thousands of Afghans who were trying to flee from the Taliban takeover.

The world looked on as the Taliban were back in power after a two decade hiatus. The claims began straight away that a strict, autocratic system of rule would strip the Afghan people of all rights and the brutal rule of the Taliban of the 1990s was back. The Taliban went to great pains to highlight that it had learnt many lessons from the 1990s and didn't intend to return back to its methods from that decade.

Whilst analysing one year of any government is a relatively short period, this deep dive intends to look at the challenges the Taliban government has faced and its attempts to tackle them. For this deep dive we did contact the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, who kindly provided answers to our numerous questions.

12 August 2022

Adnan Khan

Mohibullah Wali Mohammad

From Insurgents to Rulers

Just days after Kabul fell, the Taliban held their first press conference. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid made his first official public appearance and took questions and answered in English. This itself was shocking for many around the world as the Taliban have usually been a secretive group with there being virtually no images of many of its leaders and founders. The spokesmen summarised the situation in the country: *"We have expelled the foreigners and I would like to congratulate the whole nation on this. This is pride, not only for a limited number of people. This is a proud moment for the whole nation. This kind of pride is rare when it can be achieved. The whole nation, after the whole history of the nation and therefore, on the base of this I would like to congratulate the whole nation and I would like to welcome you."*¹

But the odds were against the Taliban as the country had for two decades been run into the ground due to a foreign occupation and those that worked with the foreign occupier funnelled aid, loans and grants into vanity projects and to their own supporters. The claims by the Western media also went into overdrive. Lack of respect for women's rights, human

rights violations, Taliban reprisals and oppression were the claims being labelled against them.

The Taliban were required, literally overnight, to convert from long-term insurgents to their new lives as government officials. In an International Crisis Group interview a Taliban official explained after emerging from the countryside where they fought for decades *"It's better here than in the mountains. But we did not imagine the government would be this big. We thought it was a few thousand people, but we got here and discovered that it's hundreds of thousands."*

The Taliban had already attained territorial control prior to its 15th of August takeover of Kabul and immediately set about appointing an interim central cabinet. As the Taliban defeated the occupiers they took on all the cabinet positions. Then over further months the cabinet was expanded with an additional 27 members, (today its 30) including ministers, deputy ministers, heads of departments and senior military positions. The Taliban maintained the inherited government structures but dissolved, created, or restructured several government ministries.





The Old, But New Government

The Taliban announced a new interim government on the 7th of September 2021 declaring the country an Islamic Emirate. The Supreme Leader, Amir al Mumineen (Commander of the faithful) Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, didn't take up an official role in the interim government but he remains the movement's ultimate authority over political and military affairs. The interim government consisted of an acting Prime Minister and two deputy Prime Ministers. Mohammad Hassan Akhund, who was close with the movement's founder and long-term leader Mullah Mohammad Omar was announced as the acting Prime Minister. Akhund was one of the four men that established the Taliban back in 1994, where he held several senior roles. He remains under UN sanctions for his role in the government during that period.

His two deputies were Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who headed the Taliban's political commission and Abdul Salam Hanafi who was a member of the Taliban's political commission that negotiated in the Qatar peace talks and the subsequent peace deal with the US.

The Taliban's broader government included men who were on the US terrorist list and the UN's sanction list. Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of Jalaludeen Haqqani the former head of Haqqani network, became interior minister. The US Department of State has for years offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the arrest of Haqqani. Mullah Muhammad Yaqoub, Mullah Mohammad Omar's son, became defence minister.³

Taliban officials said they retained all staff who wanted to keep working, keeping the existing roster of 440,000 personnel with about 4,000 new appointees. This now means Afghan institutions are now hybrids of old and new. Cooperation is not always easy between officials who until recently served on opposite sides of what was the world's deadliest war. But it would seem after the toll of the conflict, it's astonishing these officials can work side by side.

There was speculation the Taliban might reach out to former Afghan government officials such as former President Hamid Karzai, who held some meetings with senior Taliban figures after the August 2021 takeover or to others from outside the movement

as part of their promise to establish an "inclusive government." The subsequent additional lists of acting deputy ministers and officials announced by the Taliban included some members of some minorities but remained predominantly Pashtun.

The government structure in Afghanistan looks remarkably similar to the previous foreign backed regime. There has not been any explanation or outlining of the principles or philosophy of Islamic governance or how the Taliban plans to transition to Islamic rule. The composition of the Taliban's government indicates the group has prioritised internal cohesion over reaching out to other parts of Afghan society. This approach will secure Taliban rule in the short term. But reports do indicate continued dissension in the Taliban ranks, largely between those who advocate for greater inclusion of diverse elements from within Afghan society, with an eye toward international recognition and those that oppose such compromises.⁴ It would seem this was what led to the reported brawl at the presidential palace in the capital Kabul in early September.^[5] Disputes have continued amongst members of the Taliban who believe their new structure and government hasn't changed enough from the previous government, who they fought for two decades. It would seem one internal chasm has clearly become those who want international recognition and gain international legitimacy and those that oppose this.

The Afghan information ministry confirmed their priorities for the first year of government as the following:

1. The creation and improvement of the government structure.
2. The maximum development of foreign relations.
3. Measures for economic improvement despite global sanctions and tight foreign exchange reserves, to enable the country to prepare its annual budget from its own resources without dependence on any external aid by restructuring local sources of revenue and bringing transparency to it.
4. Establishing peace and order to stamp out robbery, mafia extortion, kidnapping for ransom and other crimes against ordinary citizens

Selected Taliban Cabinet Members



Emir
Hibatullah Akhundzada
From: Panjwai, Kandahar
Sanctions: None
Background: Leader since 2016

INTERIM GOVERNMENT



Deputy Prime Minister
Abdul Ghani Baradar
From: Dehrawood, Uruzgan
Sanctions: U.N.
Background: Arrested in Pakistan, 2010; led U.S. negotiations after 2018 release



Prime Minister
Mohammad Hassan Akhund
From: Panjwai, Kandahar
Sanctions: U.N.
Background: Former Foreign Minister, Kandahar governor



Deputy Prime Minister
Abdul Salam Hanafi
From: Darzab, Faryab
Sanctions: U.N.
Background: Only non-Pashtun in leadership (Uzbek)

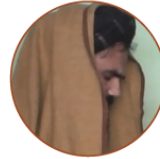
MINISTERS



Director of Intelligence
Abdul Haq Wasiq
From: Khogyani, Ghazni
Sanctions: U.N.
Background: Detained at Guantanamo (2001-2014)



Defense Minister
Mohammad Yaqoob
From: Unknown
Sanctions: None
Background: Son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar



Interior Minister
Sirajuddin Haqqani
From: Unknown
Sanctions: U.S. and U.N.
Background: Son of Haqqani Network founder Jalaluddin; wanted by U.S. State Dept., up to \$10m reward



Foreign Minister
Amir Khan Muttaqi
From: Unknown
Sanctions: U.N.
Background: Former Minister of Education



Minister of Refugees
Khalil ur Rahman Haqqani
From: Paktia
Sanctions: U.S. and U.N.
Background: Uncle of Interior Minister Sirajuddin



Minister of Finance
Hidayatullah Badri (aka Gul Agha Ishakzai)
From: Maiwand, Kandahar
Sanctions: U.S. and U.N.
Background: Former head of Taliban finance commission



Minister of Information and Culture
Khairullah Khairkhwa
From: Argistan, Kandahar
Sanctions: U.N.
Background: Detained at Guantanamo (2001-2014)

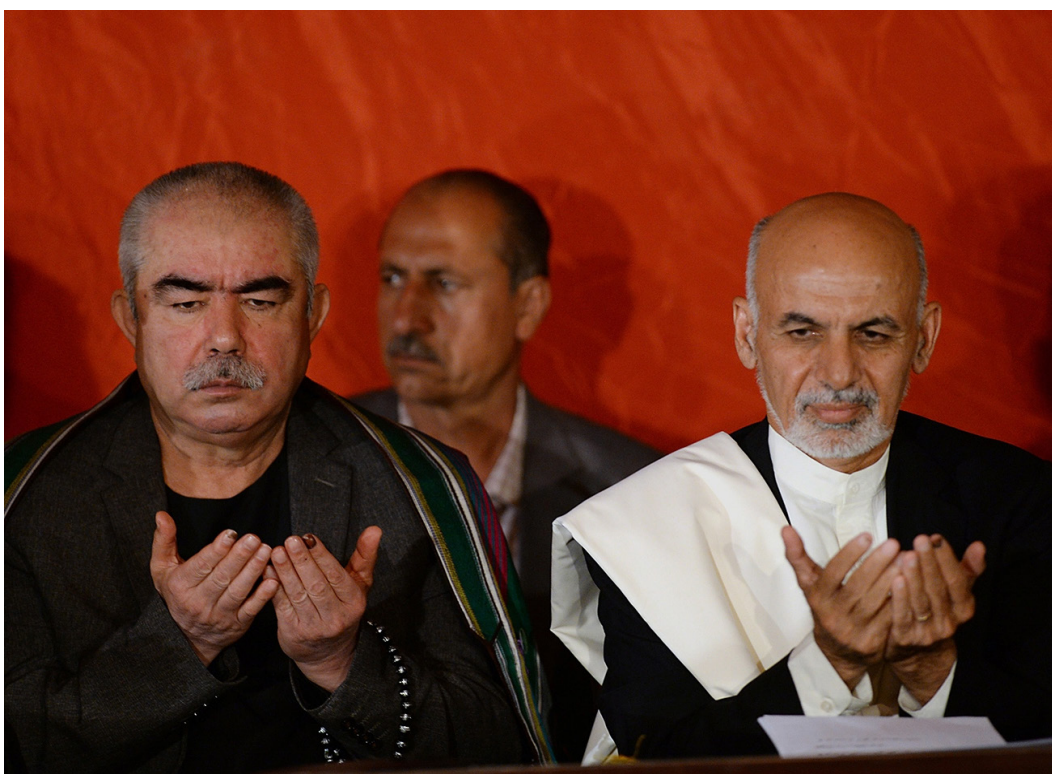
Bringing Peace to the Jungle



Despite Western claims of a safe and stable Afghanistan during the American occupation, the truth was instead of bringing stability and peace, the US built a corrupt, dysfunctional Afghan government that depended on US military power for its survival. To compound this the US worked with the worst of the people in Afghanistan. In December 2006, the advocacy group Human Rights Watch publicly urged Afghanistan to confront its tumultuous past by creating a special court to investigate warlords suspected of committing atrocities during the country's civil war in the 1990s. The New York-based organisation named and shamed a list of ten alleged war criminals who were still at large. Several warlords on the list held senior posts in America's Afghan government and enjoyed close relations with the US government and their brutal records were common knowledge in Afghanistan. Despite the list embarrassing the Bush administration it served as a reminder that the US had teamed with an ugly cast of characters in Afghanistan.

As the Taliban settled into power, there were no sectarian or ethnic massacres as the West claimed. Predictions of mass killings from the West turned out to be wholly wrong. The Afghan information ministry confirmed the Islamic Emirate announced a general amnesty for all its opponents, big or small. This includes those who took up arms, Daesh or members of the resistance front of Panjshir. The Taliban government invited everyone to a peaceful life under the shade of the Islamic system. The ministry outlined how a large number of opponents surrendered and a commission for contact with Afghan personalities was established, on the invitation of which the important ministers and members of parliament of the previous regime are returning to their homeland by trusting the Islamic Emirate. One year on, Afghanistan feels safer and less violent than it has been in decades. Graeme Smith, a senior consultant for the International Crisis Group's Asia Program, noted that this round of Taliban rule *"...probably ranks as the most peaceful six-month period that Afghanistan has*

The Afghan regime the US established and the security forces it tried to establish and train in the end were ineffective as they were largely composed of ghost soldiers. The endemic corruption created a landscape where highway robberies, attacks by different tribes to settle scores and safety and security was completely absent during the two decades. This was something confirmed in the 'Lessons learned' project carried out by the US federal agency, the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR.



enjoyed in four decades.”

For the first time in decades people are not dying every day because of violence. In an interview Mawlawi Burjan said that Afghan history was a continuous cycle of violence and that it had to stop. *“The Taliban have learned that they mustn’t behave as they did in their previous government. That only pushes people to resist and fuels the opposition.”*⁶ Regarding the ISIS attacks the information ministry explained that those of Daesh who tried to disrupt law and order could not escape the gaze of the government’s security forces. Today, ISIS lacks the power to take any major action and is struggling to defend itself despite the support of external powers. A January 2022 UN security report found a 91% decrease in violence from the previous year. The degree of stability the Taliban have brought to Afghanistan after decades of violence and corruption is astonishing. The international Crisis group’s senior Afghan consultant on a trip to Kabul in June 2022 highlighted the situation: *“The first thing is the remarkable degree of calm that has settled over Kabul, despite recent attacks. The relative quiet is something you feel almost every*

moment of the day. I slept with the windows open and the only sounds I heard at night were the calls to prayer, a contrast with previous years when I grew accustomed to gunfire or the roar of low-flying helicopters in the darkness. Body searches at the entrances to many buildings have been downgraded from intense screenings to quick pat-downs or a desultory shrug..... nothing like the carnage of previous years.” Today, Kabul resembles the rest of Afghanistan, it is conservative and peaceful and quiet and the Afghan people are relieved the war is over.

The amnesty the Taliban gave to all officials of the previous regime was a major departure from Afghan history and almost unique in Afghan culture. Getting revenge and settling scores has been the norm in the many bloody regime changes that have taken place in Afghan history. Despite Western claims the Taliban would undertake reprisals, they did not transpire. The breaches of amnesty that have occurred have been with former special forces, those that were the hammer of the previous regime who committed atrocities against the Taliban and their supporters.





Looming Economic Challenges

The Taliban inherited an economy that was built upon a pack of cards that was waiting to collapse. Prior to the Taliban's August 2021 takeover, a severe humanitarian crisis already existed in Afghanistan, due primarily to the two decade conflict. The World Food Programme reported in early September 2021 that the proportion of Afghans reporting insufficient food consumption was 80% even before the Taliban takeover.⁸ The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that *"...at least 1 million..." Afghan children are "...at risk of dying due to severe acute malnutrition without immediate treatment."*

Afghanistan faces an economic crisis, not due to the Taliban but due to a two decade occupation where a rump government was set up to serve the US agenda. When the US got up and left and took its contractors and officials with her the sand castle that was built in Afghanistan also collapsed and this is what the Taliban inherited. With largely imported staple foods and the imposition of US sanctions and restrictions, the humanitarian crisis accelerated from bad to worse. The formal banking system that did exist left with the US withdrawal and this meant Afghan businesses and the government were unable to move funds. The Taliban were successful in providing broad territorial access to humanitarian agencies, but their inability to move funds and withdraw cash from the banking system has led UN agencies to establish a program of physical cash shipments,[9] whereby US dollar notes are flown into Kabul for use in meeting salaries and other domestic payment needs. Such shipments have now reached substantial volumes, with up to \$150 million being flown into Afghanistan every month. This development aid is what Afghanistan is now living on.

The freezing and then outright seizure of the Afghan central bank funds by the US further hurt the Afghan economy. The announcement that half of these funds

would be used for lawsuits of 9/11 victims led the Taliban to claim that Western powers have betrayed the movement, walking back commitments made previously, and making more demands without offering anything substantial in return. Such perceptions are growing even as outside powers scale up what is already the world's largest emergency relief operation in Afghanistan. This is because the Taliban view the hunger crisis as a result of Western economic restrictions. The sense of betrayal appears to be strengthening arguments among Taliban leaders for adopting a hardened stance and going back on some of their own commitments.

The US backed regime depended so much on foreign money it will take a long time for Afghanistan to become self-reliant. The Afghan ministry confirmed that after the global economic sanctions and ban on banking, the Islamic Emirate has only the border trade routes left. The Islamic Emirate focused on enabling trade and transit with all its neighbouring countries. Afghanistan is now becoming a trade route connecting South and Central Asia. The ministry officials confirmed for this deep dive: *"...due to the Taliban's balanced foreign policy, none of our borders are closed anymore. Convoys of trucks come and go daily from each port."*

The information ministry also highlighted Afghanistan's imports and exports have increased compared to the past. There is now transparency in the financial system, resulting in revenue received by the national exchequer increasing compared to the previous government. The new government in Kabul first presented a quarterly mini-budget and then an annual budget at the beginning of the 2022. Government employees are now receiving regular salaries, something the previous regime was unable to achieve.¹⁰

The Afghan information ministry highlighted that

many new projects had begun in Afghanistan, from small and large dams and roads. Kandahar, the second largest city in Afghanistan, was supplied with electricity from the Kajki Dam in Helmand. The second phase of Kajki Dam was inaugurated recently. The repair and construction of a 900km long highway connecting the major cities of Afghanistan, which was damaged due to the transfer of heavy military equipment for two decades has been started with the cooperation of the private sector.

The Taliban government also started the Qashtipa Canal, which takes water from the Amu River to irrigate the desert areas of the country that span three provinces. This six-year project is being run by Afghan engineers and Afghanistan's funds with no external support.

Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum announced on Tuesday the 2nd of August that it collected 13.2 billion Afghanis in revenue in the past year. Speaking at a press conference as part of the new ministerial accountability program, Shahabuddin Delawar, acting minister of mines and petroleum, said that the ministry signed contracts for the extraction of 158 small mines over the past year. *"There has been full transparency in mining contracts and the tender process [is done] openly,"* Delawar said. He said that work is underway on 11 major mining projects including some which were contracted by the previous government. *"These projects can take the country out of the economic crisis and some local and foreign investors are very interested in investing in them."* He said that the ministry is committed to counter corruption and will never allow corruption to permeate the mining sector.

Afghanistan has also settled its multimillion-dollar debt owed to Uzbekistan for electricity, the Uzbek Ministry of Energy has announced. According to a statement issued by the ministry, Afghanistan's power company, Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), has fully settled what was owed to Uzbekistan for 2,151.3 kilowatt hours of electricity supplied in 2021. DABS is reportedly also paying on time for this year's supply. The ministry did not specify how much had been paid but reports earlier this year indicated that DABS owed Uzbekistan about \$100 million.

Whilst the Taliban government is being restricted in accessing the global economy and financial system it's clearly made some headway in some areas to maintain economic development and growth.

Whilst claims of economic collapse continue from the Western media the Taliban in its first year in power has tried to work around Western sanctions and restrictions. As far as the Afghan information ministry was concerned, if sanctions were lifted, the frozen funds restored and the world recognised the Taliban government the world would see Afghanistan develop. Afghanistan's location makes it the centre of the world. It shares a border with China, South Asia and Central Asia, as well as Iran and the Arabian Sea is not far from the country. The information ministry recognised that energy pipeline projects such as TOPI and TOP can reduce the economic problems of the Afghan people.



Women and Education

Nothing has gained more Western attention than women and the education of young girls. When the Taliban took power on the 15th of August 2021 they reiterated their commitment to protecting women's rights within the framework of the Shari'ah. *"The issue of women is very important. The Islamic Emirate is committed to the rights of women within the framework of Shari'ah. Our sisters, our men have the same rights; they will be able to benefit from their rights. They can have activities in different sectors and different areas on the basis of our rules and regulations: educational, health and other areas. They are going to be working with us, shoulder to shoulder with us. The international community, if they have concerns, we would like to assure them that there's not going to be any discrimination against women, but of course within the frameworks that we have. Our women are Muslim. They will also be happy to be living within our framework of Sharia,"* said Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid in the Taliban's government's first press conference.

In the immediate aftermath of the takeover, Taliban leaders called on female government employees to return to their posts, as long as they were wearing the hijab (headscarf), and granted "amnesty" to all men and women who worked with foreign powers. Shortly after the Taliban called for women to stay home temporarily, citing concerns over new Taliban forces who *"...have not yet been trained very well..."* and who may mistreat, harm, or harass women.¹¹ But in May 2022 the Taliban reversed the decision to re-open girls schools and this for many confirmed the Taliban was never serious about women's rights. But on closer examination of this issue it reveals a more complex picture.

The announcement the day before secondary schools were to re-open came from Taliban supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, rather than the government in Kabul. The Kabul government itself was surprised as all officials were constantly saying secondary schools would reopen and were making arrangements for them to restart. The announcement surprised the Kabul government who themselves were taken aback. Whilst girls education gets much Western media coverage the Taliban is a vast movement consisting of multiple different shura's with multiple, often competing views.

This struggle, much like the Taliban's past, continues today within the movement, with rank and file of the movement grumbling over issues such as the Kabul government looking much like the previous republican government which the Taliban long fought. This faction has therefore focused on issues such as girls' education,



women travelling across the nation, their attire and women driving. Due to this, government employees were forced to wear hats and music was banned. The other area of major difference is the 1990's Emirate is a failed model and the restrictions the Emirate imposed at the time cost them goodwill of the population and now there is a desire to tread a new path, despite there being no clear alternative or vision. This is why the Taliban government in Kabul was reassuring foreign donors about opening schools.

The announcement from Akunzada came after the Orezgan tribe demanded in a jirga with the Taliban's supreme leader that they suffered for decades whilst fighting against the enemies of the country. They lost loved ones and demanded secondary schools not re-open for girls. This is a common view held by rural Afghanistan as they see the schooling system education, rather than the madrassa system as the Westernisation of the country. The madrassa system has for long dominated Afghanistan, the Western schooling system is less than 100 years old in the country. This is why the modern schooling system is viewed as a Westernisation effort that impeaches the nation's culture.

Intra-movement concerns drove the policy reversal rather than foreign relations. Maintaining the cohesiveness of the movement mattered more to the Taliban, the need to maintain unity was more important, even if it meant millions of girls don't go to school. Therefore the policy U-turn on girls' education was an internal matter in the direction of the Taliban movement. Reflecting on this, the New Yorker said: *"The question of women's rights is perhaps the greatest unresolved issue in the new Afghanistan. After taking power, the Taliban leadership announced that*

girls up to the sixth grade could resume schooling, but for the most part older girls had to wait until "conditions" were right. When I talked with Mujahid, the spokesman, he was vague about what those conditions were, and about whether women would be allowed to work. The impediment was funding," he said. *"For education and work, women need to have separate spaces,"* he explained primly. *"They would also require special separate means of transportation."* But, he added, *"the banks are closed, the money is frozen."*¹²

The need to provide transport, Islamic uniforms etc when the government has little money was the primary justification for the U-turn on girls secondary education. But rather than education in Afghanistan getting worse, as Western media outlets continue to propagate, the most recent World Bank survey found the disparity in overall school attendance by gender remains high in Afghanistan, with survey results indicating that at the primary level, more girls are in school, with attendance higher overall for both boys and girls, compared to the situation in the fall of 2019. The increase in school attendance by girls is concentrated in rural areas, where baseline attendance rates were lower in 2019, likely due to high levels of insecurity. In urban areas, the proportion of households sending their girls to school stayed flat at 53 percent, but the share of households sending only primary age girls to school rose.¹³ Despite Secondary schools remaining closed the stability the Taliban have brought to the country and the trust rural Afghans have in the Taliban has seen more girls, overall attending school, despite secondary schools not reopening. People remain confident the Taliban respect girls and their rights and honour, unlike the previous regime.





The Quest for International Legitimacy

The Taliban announced in its first press conference after taking over that “...we do not want to have any problem with the international community,” and that it wanted to have relations with all its neighbours.¹⁴ The prospect of renewed Taliban rule sparked major anxiety among the region’s powers. The Taliban have sought to boost diplomacy with countries in the region, China, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian countries. The Taliban have encouraged countries to keep their embassies open and foreign businesses to continue work in Afghanistan.

Russia - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov welcomed the possibility that the Taliban might form a new government, and while the US and most other countries evacuated their embassies, Russia’s remained open and under the group’s protection. Russia has always seen the Taliban as the enemy and officially seen them as a terrorist group, but in recent years Russia began engaging the Taliban when the US supported regime led the country. Moscow came to see engagement with the Taliban as a strategic necessity. Moscow has forged ties with the group’s political representatives in recent years. In July 2021, as the Taliban were rapidly gaining ground, the Kremlin hosted representatives in Moscow, where the Russian special envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, sought assurances that the group would not try to expand into the Central Asian states and would refrain from targeting Russian diplomatic missions.

China – Sino-Taliban relations have been evolving for decades and whilst China has maintained a low profile in Afghanistan, meetings between the two have increased in recent years. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s has made a number of trips to Kabul since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.¹⁵

Beijing’s traditional worry in Afghanistan has been regional instability and the prospect of cross-border aid to Uyghur militants in Xinjiang—or the provision of a safe refuge for Uyghurs fleeing Chinese oppression. But the Taliban appear to have learnt from the experience of the past two decades about harbouring

enemies of the surrounding nations. The Taliban’s reported ‘removal’ of Uyghur militants from the Afghanistan-China border area may reflect and presage closer ties, including security cooperation, between the two countries¹⁶

China has agreed to a number of mining projects but the lack of security stalled such ambitious projects. China has already built extensive transportation infrastructure through the Central Asian countries north of Afghanistan and continues to build both there and in Pakistan to Lahore and Gwadar.

For their part, the Taliban have indicated they intend to cooperate closely with China, with a Taliban spokesperson reportedly suggesting in one foreign media interview that China would be the Afghan government’s most important partner going forward.¹⁷

Pakistan - The military of Pakistan and the intelligence service – the ISI have relations that go back decades with the Taliban. As the Taliban is not one monolith, relations between the Pakistan military and the Taliban go through periods of strain. Pakistan played a central role in getting the Taliban to sit down with the US for peace talks. Abdul Gani Baradar was in a Pakistani prison and released to lead the peace talks. Despite some implicitly pro-Taliban statements from top Pakistani officials, Afghanistan and Pakistan have long had an ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile-long border – the Durand Line. Taliban leaders are having to deal with the same challenges as previous governments against Pakistani efforts to build fences along the Durand Line, which Islamabad sees as the formal Afghan-Pakistan border. Forty seven people were killed in air raids in Khost and Kunar reportedly carried out by the Pakistan military.[18] These attacks sparked protests and once again fueled the border tensions. There remains an uneasy alliance between the two countries, a deficit of trust on both sides. Pretences aside, as acknowledgement to Islamabad’s central role in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban’s

takeover both the UK and France sent their envoys to Islamabad to negotiate withdrawal arrangements.

India – The biggest loser in the region has been India as it invested fully in the American backed government in Kabul. India maintained an intimate relationship with the Northern Alliance regime and when they were overthrown in August 2021, India had no diplomatic relations with the Taliban.

This is why Indian officials eventually visited Afghanistan for the first time since the Taliban took control of the country on the 6th of June 2022. A delegation led by J.P. Singh — a secretary overseeing India's external affairs with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran — travelled to Kabul to discuss the delivery of humanitarian aid with Taliban leaders. The diplomatic visit reflects India's new policy of engagement with the Taliban government in Afghanistan, given the new geopolitical realities of the region now that the Pakistan-backed Taliban (in India's eyes) appears poised to retain control of the strategically important landlocked nation for the foreseeable future.

For India having a foothold in Afghanistan is necessary to counter Pakistan's presence and influence in Afghanistan. The close Pakistan-Taliban relationship poses a threat to Indian interests in the region because it gives Pakistan strategic depth and security against India. Mullah Yaqub — the Afghan government's acting defence minister and son of the Taliban's founder has hinted at Kabul's willingness to work with India and even send Afghan defence troops to India for training.

Central Asia - Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have responded in varying ways to the Taliban's takeover. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have prioritised economic ties, including the planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, and have had official engagements with the Taliban. Uzbekistan has been communicating with the Taliban and discussed trade, economic interaction, border security, cooperation in the field of energy and international cargo transportation. The Uzbek foreign minister' visited Kabul in October 2021.¹⁹

Tajikistan rejected the Taliban's government and emerged as the group's chief regional antagonist, a result both of Tajikistan's own historical struggles with militancy as well as ethnolinguistic ties with Afghan Tajiks (the country's second largest ethnic

group) who oppose the Taliban's rule. Tajikistan has reportedly offered refuge to prominent anti-Taliban Afghan leaders such as Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud, and its officials have criticised the Taliban government, prompting the Taliban to warn Tajikistan against interfering in Afghan affairs

Iran - The Iranian government welcomed the departure of US troops from Afghanistan, which President Ebrahim Raisi characterised as a “defeat” and has called for national unity in the country. Iran's interests in Afghanistan include preserving its historic influence in western Afghanistan, protecting Afghanistan's Shia minority (the Hazaras), and reducing the flow of refugees into Iran (Iran hosts millions of documented and undocumented Afghans).

From enthusiastically cheering the departure of the Taliban to grudgingly accepting their return, Iran's policy has pivoted to accommodate the geopolitical reality they find themselves facing. Iran has adopted a reluctant engagement despite clerical reservations, with Grand Ayatollah Lutfollah Safi Golpaygani, one of Iran's most senior clerics warning that engaging with the Taliban is a “...grave and irreparable mistake...” and urged the government and the international community to act with “...seriousness...” to avert further “...Taliban aggression against oppressed Afghans”. Despite the traditional hostility between Tehran and the Taliban, Iran has sought a more positive arrangement with the new Taliban administration's, primary concern being the inclusion of Shia elements in the new Kabul administration, which disappointingly for Tehran failed to materialise.²⁰



Conclusions

The leadership of the Taliban has been at pains to spread a very different message to avoid the same tragedy that took place 20 years ago. They have scrambled to order their ground forces to operate with restraint and to persuade all Afghans of their good intentions. The Taliban leaders immediately declared a general amnesty for anyone who worked for the previous regime and also asked government officials and journalists, including women, to return to work; and even reached out to minority groups to assuage their concerns.

But the West are not convinced and their media and officials have gone into overdrive to paint the Taliban in negative terms. Promises the Taliban have made concerning the rights of Afghan citizens, ethno-religious minorities, women, and the educated middle classes in general have been ambiguous and often contradictory. There are clear divides within the Taliban movement between those who are opposed to making any concessions and those that want to gain international legitimacy. The Taliban after a year of rule face immense security, economic and social challenges. These all take place while the US and its allies continue pressurising the Taliban on these issues in the hope the Taliban make compromises and concessions to Western demands.

The Taliban has not outlined how its Islamic system will work or detailed its shape and structure, yet. When we asked the Afghan information ministry about the new government structure looking very similar to the previous regime and western democracies we were told it was not un-Islamic to have an acting Prime minister and deputy Prime ministers, as they are all answerable to the Amirul Momineen, who the Taliban see as the head of the system.

After the first year of Taliban rule there has been no talk of reunification with Pakistan or Central Asia. The Taliban have always had a vision of an Emirate restricted to Afghanistan's borders and not beyond. Even unifying in some form with Pakistan, even for economic or trade purposes hasn't been pursued in the first year. The Taliban has completely focused on issues within Afghanistan and within the movement

Notes

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