

REPORT

Afghanistan under the Taliban: Regional Recalibrations, Challenges, and Ways Forward

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Introduction

Despite the spectacular and unprecedented events following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the global spotlight steadily shifted away from the country. Because of the war in Ukraine, among other global issues, Afghans have been competing for attention from the international community and for media coverage of the multiple crises unfolding in Afghanistan. Some of the crises facing Afghans predate the Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021, such as unemployment, migration and displacement, natural disasters, weak governance, and infrastructural challenges.¹ Yet the profound loss of major gains of the past twenty years because of the Taliban's return to power cannot be underestimated.

As a landlocked country, Afghanistan connects to several regions: South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and the wider Middle East. Notwithstanding major global significance, the upheaval in Afghanistan has profound implications for the security, economic, and geopolitical landscapes across these regions. For Afghanistan to make progress and begin addressing its multiple crises, the roles of the regions and their interests need to be factored in. Meanwhile, the vacuum created by the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan provides opportunities for actors ranging from states to armed groups and non-state actors. A lack of clearly pursued and proactive policymaking by US-led Western countries does not mean that the vacuum in Afghanistan will remain untapped by a different set of actors. The US drone strike in July that killed Ayman Al Zawahiri in central Kabul highlighted the profoundly complex relations between the various factions of the Taliban—if not the entire movement—and transnational actors involved in terrorism. Such links will likely foment and multiply if the Taliban fails to transform from an insurgent group to a political and governing party.

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¹ For instance, Afghanistan ranked consistently at the bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Gender Development Index (GDI) in the years preceding its fall to the Taliban in 2021. For a brief analysis of HDI in Afghanistan in 2020, see: Lutfi Rahimi, "Thinking More Deeply About Human Development in Afghanistan," *Diplomat*, December 29, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/thinking-more-deeply-about-human-development-in-afghanistan/>.

The current US position is non-recognition of the Taliban regime, which largely prevents international legitimization. The Taliban has been interacting with several neighboring and regional countries, but there is an absence of a coherent regional stance on Afghanistan under the Taliban, disproving earlier estimations that the full US departure would lead to regional engagement in the country. The lack of regional coherence could well serve the interests of the Taliban, which could continue to lobby individual countries for recognition and present the image of a united and stable government in waiting, despite the movement's known internal fissures and emerging evidence of its inability to govern effectively.

The lack of a coherent approach to Afghanistan at the regional level, however, should not be seen as states in the region lacking the desire or tools for engagement with the Taliban regime. There is currently a recalibration of policies toward Afghanistan under the Taliban, which has implications for Western policy. This recalibration is informed by a combination of three main factors: the unfolding situation in Afghanistan (including humanitarian, security, terrorism, socioeconomic, and governance issues), shifting geopolitics and the security context beyond Afghanistan, and the direction of US-led Western policy toward Afghanistan.

Research Methodology and Rationale

The analysis presented in this report builds on the research undertaken as part of the Atlantic Council's project *Afghanistan Strategic Dialogue Part II*. This project aimed to engage with a broad range of experts, policymakers, scholars, and practitioners to examine strategic alignments on Afghanistan at the regional level. In addition to drawing on the project team's substantial expertise and conducting extensive desk research, the author conducted fifteen off-the-record, in-depth interviews and conversations between February and June 2022; interview and discussion participants included, among others, senior US and European policymakers and diplomats who met with the project lead. By acknowledging the lack of US policy regarding Afghanistan after the country fell to the Taliban in August 2021, the research explored how regional dynamics impact Afghanistan, and whether US-led Western policy could promote regional engagement and focus.

The research raised a number of questions underlining the need for deeper analysis and understanding of the regional dynamics impacted by, and which impact and shape, Afghanistan. For example, where India no longer maintained a functioning diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, what role could Central Asian states play in maintaining a regional equilibrium by supporting Afghanistan? How is the emerging prominence of regional states, such as Qatar and Turkey, shaping new dynamics for international engagement, but also impacting the Taliban's attempts for a rapprochement with the international community? What are the implications of the Taliban takeover for terror groups in Afghanistan and the region?

A key objective of the research is to move away from posturing and a reductionist analysis of Afghanistan, and toward a regional-centric focus that underlines both shifts and dilemmas as the Taliban grapples with establishing power in the country. Crucially, it examines and traces the evolution of dynamics between the Taliban and key regional stakeholders before and after the Taliban takeover, to inform and enable solutions-oriented policy discussions; the overall objective is to explore ways to engage with Afghanistan that do not undermine the security and human rights of Afghans.

Challenging the Assumptions

"Everything in the US is a Delayed Reaction."

One expert interviewed in March 2022 commented on the US reaction to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban seized power: "Everything in the US is a delayed reaction [to Afghanistan]; there is a sense that the US policymakers assumed they would be able to respond to any unforeseen challenges in Afghanistan after the full military withdrawal."² This assumption seems unchanged despite the over-the-horizon targeted attack against Al Zahwahi. It is still unclear whether the drone strike was a one-off or part of the continued—or medium to longterm—US approach to Afghanistan.

President Joe Biden's announcement in April 2021 of a full and unconditional US military withdrawal from Afghanistan before the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in September 2021—which naturally included a full NATO military withdrawal—precipitated the fall of the Islamic

2 Expert interview, March 2022.

Republic of Afghanistan.³ In July 2021, the president defended his decision to end “the nation’s longest war” and confirmed that the United States would maintain a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan.⁴ However, as the final stages of troop withdrawal began, questions remained regarding the viability of providing support to the Afghan Security and Defence Forces (ANDSF) after a full US military departure. President Biden had requested \$3.3 billion for security assistance to Afghanistan in 2022—a modest increase from the previous phase—but it seemed the administration had assumed that ANDSF would remain unaffected by the seismic consequences that a military withdrawal would entail.⁵ The May 2022 report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) confirms what some analysts long argued: the US-Taliban Doha Agreement in February 2020 marked the beginning of a collapse of morale across ANDSF; the report also underlines that “ANDSF never achieved self-sustainability milestones,” remaining heavily dependent on US military support.⁶ Importantly, this included the airstrikes that functioned as a force multiplier. Interviews for this research reinforce SIGAR’s findings and challenge any notions that ANDSF might not have wanted to fight the Taliban.

“Winner’s Remorse” in Pakistan?

In September 2021, following the Taliban’s triumphant claims of victory and return to power in Afghanistan, a national poll in Pakistan found that 55 percent of Pakistanis were happy with Taliban rule in Afghanistan.⁷ Support was highest in urban areas and among older

people. Part of this phenomenon is perhaps explained by the prevalent populist narratives that enabled former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan to take the helm of civilian power in Pakistan. Khan, who was unseated after losing a no-confidence vote in April 2022, had long advocated against the so-called “War on Terror”; his anti-US rhetoric mobilized millions beyond the Islamist elements in Pakistani society.⁸ A day after the Taliban seized the Arg Presidential Palace in Kabul, Khan said the group had “broken the shackles of slavery.”⁹ In December 2021, Khan tried to justify the Taliban’s ban on girls’ education, arguing that “human rights and women’s rights are different in every society.”¹⁰ His remarks attracted a flurry of critical reactions, including from Malala Yousufzai, who hails from a Pashtun region in Pakistan.

Unsurprising to many analysts, the Taliban’s return to power was celebrated by the long-term backers of the group within the deeper corridors of Pakistan’s security establishment, including the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the country’s main intelligence agency.¹¹ Less than a week after the Taliban gained control of Afghanistan, Faiz Hameed—the ISI’s chief at the time—visited, dressed casually and sipping tea at the lavish Kabul Serena Hotel.¹² This was as much a confidence statement as it was a symbolic affirmation of the Pakistani security establishment’s leverage over the Taliban. Yet, the Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan offers ostensibly the biggest confidence to the Pakistani Islamist parties and the Sunni religious clerics, whose ability to mobilize masses in urban areas is undeniable.¹³ A considerable

3 Terri Moon Cronk, “Biden Announces Full U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan by Sept. 11,” DoD News, April 14, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2573268/biden-announces-full-us-troop-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-by-sept-11/>.

4 Eleanor Watson and David Martin, “Biden Announces U.S. Military Mission in Afghanistan Will End August 31,” CBS News, July 9, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/biden-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-2021-07-08/>.

5 Anne Gearan and Missy Ryan, “As the Last American Forces Prepare to Leave Afghanistan, Biden Says the Country’s Fate Is in Its Own Hands,” *Washington Post*, June 25, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-ghani-afghanistan/2021/06/25/78cc2d86-d5df-11eb-ae54-515e2f63d37d_story.html.

6 “Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors that Led to Its Demise,” Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, May 2022, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-22-22-IP.pdf>.

7 “55% of Pakistanis Are Happy with the Taliban Rule in Afghanistan,” Gallup and Gallup Pakistan, September 14, 2021, <https://gallup.com.pk/post/32195>.

8 “Pakistan PM Imran Khan Gone after Losing No-Confidence Vote,” Al Jazeera, April 9, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/9/pakistan-prime-minister-imran-khan-no-confidence-vote>.

9 “PM Imran Talks About Overpowering ‘Shackles of Slavery’ at Single National Curriculum Launch,” Dawn, August 16, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1640988>.

10 “PM on Education,” Dawn, December 22, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1665123>.

11 Bruce Riedel, “Pakistan’s Problematic Victory in Afghanistan,” Brookings, August 24, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/24/pakistan-problematic-victory-in-afghanistan/>.

12 “A Win for Pakistan: Imran Khan Gambles on Taliban Ties,” *Financial Times*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/257853d9-acb6-432b-92d4-a1b45335a388>.

13 “Religious Parties Hail Afghan Taliban’s Reconciliation Policy,” Dawn, August 17, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641051>; Islamic Emirate Afg (@TalibanUpdates), “Special and pleasant meeting between the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Mr. Amir Khan Muttaqi with the Amir of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Pakistan Mr. Maulana Fazlur Rehman Sahib,” Twitter, December 18, 2021, 9:33 p.m., <https://twitter.com/TalibanUpdates/status/1472409645373399042?s=20&t=7v5GNFy1GWgkLSe95Hzqg>.

number of these clerics hold prominent roles in managing the madrassah networks in Pakistan, which include thousands of unregistered religious seminaries.

While the Taliban has played a mediatory role between the Pakistani government and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), so far there are limited signs, at best, of any tangible gains from the Taliban's control of Afghanistan for resolving the security, economic, and geopolitical issues confronting Pakistan. While the overall mechanisms and the nature of Pakistan's relations with the Taliban are likely to remain unchanged, Khan's departure from power means the Taliban's de facto government has lost a key public ally in its quest for regional and international recognition.

Taliban leaders—particularly those of the Haqqani faction but of other Taliban factions too—maintain strong ties with Pakistan for their and their families' mobility, economic interests, and residence in major Pakistani cities. However, the reputational cost of being viewed as a tool of the Pakistani security establishment is unpalatable, even to a Taliban government. Since late 2021, Taliban fighters manning Afghanistan's borders have clashed with the Pakistani border and military forces along the Durand Line. Although it is internationally considered to be the boundary between the two countries, Afghan governments have disputed the Durand Line as the border since the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. The Taliban held a similar view on the Durand Line in the 1990s.¹⁴

After returning to power, the Taliban has attempted several times to prevent Pakistan from erecting a fence along the Durand Line. While Pakistan downplays such incidents, the dispute has been a major factor in the reduction of goodwill and trust between different regimes in both countries in the past several decades. Symbolically, tensions along the Durand Line enable the Taliban to project itself as an ostensibly nationalist entity that is standing up to Pakistan, but such clashes also increase anxiety within Pakistan, where a historic anti-India sentiment plays a major role in issues of border security with Afghanistan. More recently, the Taliban administration raised the price of coal exports to Pakistan,

upsetting its counterparts in Islamabad and among businesses. While this certainly underlines the Taliban's desperate need for increased revenues, the decision was partly a response to an earlier announcement by Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif claiming that importing cheap coal from Afghanistan in local Pakistani currency would save Pakistan's depleting foreign reserves.¹⁵ It is likely that the Taliban would continue to pursue a similar course of action, with decisions aimed at self-preservation even at the cost of goodwill with patrons like Pakistan.

Analysts interviewed for this research highlighted Pakistan's eagerness for a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan as the most desired outcome for wider Pakistani aspirations in South Asia; they noted that Pakistani policymakers were cognizant of the humanitarian and security burdens that a US withdrawal would put on the shoulders of Afghanistan's neighbors—primarily Pakistan. The global perception of Pakistan's support for a repressive Taliban regime does not help the current authorities in Pakistan, especially in terms of reassuring international financial institutions. Pakistan is in the midst of spiraling inflation and an economic storm that has propelled a serious cost-of-living crisis. This realization of reputational damage partly explains why Pakistan has resisted the urge to recognize the Taliban regime—not least from domestic Islamist quarters. This is in spite of Pakistan maintaining an active embassy in Kabul, hosting Taliban representatives in Islamabad, and acting as a “bridge” for the Taliban with China and other countries.

On the security front, Pakistan witnessed an increase in attacks by the TTP after the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan. Early in 2022, this was estimated to be an 80-percent increase compared to the same period the previous year.¹⁶ For many years, the Pakistani establishment and media outlets blamed the former Afghan governments for supporting the TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban. However, the resurgence of the TTP since August 2021 underscores that the deep-rooted relationship between the Taliban and the TTP extends beyond personal friendships to sharing tactics and territory on both sides of the Durand Line. In June 2022, reports from Kabul claimed that the Taliban had mediated

14 Asfandiyar Mir, et al., “Afghanistan-Pakistan Dispute Heats Up,” United States Institute of Peace, January 12, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/01/afghanistan-pakistan-border-dispute-heats>.

15 Charlotte Greenfield, “Afghanistan Lifts Coal Prices as Exports to Neighbouring Pakistan Boom,” Reuters, July 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-conflict-coal-idUSL4N2YN2MF>.

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

between Pakistan and the TTP, and that they had agreed to an “indefinite” ceasefire.¹⁷ It is unclear what concessions Pakistan made to the TTP and whether the TTP could ultimately use negotiations as a tactical pause to regroup, akin to what the Taliban did while engaging in the Doha Process with the former Afghan government.¹⁸

Pakistan’s socioeconomic challenges are likely to increase as a result of the ongoing floods in the country at the time of writing. The floods, submerging vast parts of Pakistan, also underline the impact of climate change on South Asia. The security and political implications are likely to be considerable too.

China’s Ambivalent “Friendship” with the Taliban

For years, analysts have written, and policymakers have argued, that China would capitalize on the economic opportunities Afghanistan offers, and that Chinese interests converged with those of the United States in building stability in Afghanistan.¹⁹ It is doubtful whether these assumptions were ever entirely accurate. China’s primary interest in Afghanistan has been the security situation. China has a largely inaccessible border with Afghanistan, and there is limited evidence of Chinese interference in Afghanistan’s domestic political landscape. Rather, there are long-established trade ties between the two countries, including when the Taliban was last in power.

Over the past two decades, Beijing has been keen to work with Afghan authorities to prevent Uyghur and other groups from threatening Chinese interests. In recent years, China has pragmatically kept an open channel of communication with the Taliban.²⁰ When Mullah

Abdul Ghani Baradar visited Beijing in June 2019, it was viewed as China’s attempt to forge better relations with stakeholders in Afghanistan and deepen economic ties, while addressing security concerns.²¹

Since August 2021, delegations of senior Taliban have visited China, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Kabul in March 2022.²² Thus far, the Taliban regime has not been able to reap sufficient financial and diplomatic rewards from China to demonstrate any meaningful gains. China maintains a diplomatic presence in Kabul and recently agreed to host a Taliban representative at the Afghan embassy in Beijing, but it has not recognized the Taliban regime. The assumptions that China would recognize the Taliban in power, or that it was ready to invest billions once the United States left Afghanistan, have so far proved unfounded.²³ China has been credited with investing in the Mes Aynak copper mine and the oil field in Amu Darya, but the investments in Afghanistan failed to deliver railway lines, power stations, or oil refineries, demonstrating China’s risk-averse approach.²⁴ Other such indicators include signs of concerns in Beijing about the security of its investments in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as jihadist and other threats against Chinese interests have become widespread. There are reports that China, weary of Pakistani authorities’ lack of ability or willingness to protect its investments and interests, is keen to deploy Chinese personnel to provide security for the CPEC. Given this context, it is fair to conclude that the Taliban is highly unlikely to possess the capacity to secure any envisaged Chinese infrastructural or other major investments in Afghanistan when a formidable army and security apparatus have struggled with the same task in neighboring Pakistan.

17 Aamir Latif, “Afghan Taliban Confirm Pakistan-TTP ‘Indefinite’ Cease-Fire,” Anadolu Agency, June 18, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/afghan-taliban-confirm-pakistan-ttp-indefinite-cease-fire/2616980>.

18 Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, *Negotiating with the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan*, Atlantic Council, June 10, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/negotiating-with-the-tehreek-i-taliban-pakistan-ttp-is-a-bad-idea/>.

19 For example see: Mat Nashed, “The Road to Peace in Afghanistan,” OZY, September 9, 2019, <https://www.ozy.com/the-new-and-the-next/the-road-to-peace-in-afghanistan-passes-through-china/95969/>.

20 Ryan Hass, “How Will China Seek to Profit from the Taliban’s Takeover in Afghanistan,” Brookings, August 18, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/18/how-will-china-seek-to-profit-from-the-talibans-takeover-in-afghanistan/>.

21 “Taliban Delegation Holds Talks in China as Part of Peace Push,” Reuters, June 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-afghanistan-idUSKCN1TLOV9>.

22 “Wang Yi Talks about China’s ‘Three Respects’ and ‘Three Nevers’ on the Afghan Issue,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, March 24, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220325_10655537.html.

23 Derek Grossman, *China and the Taliban Begin Their Romance*, RAND, July 22, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/07/china-and-the-taliban-begin-their-romance.html>; Syed Fazi-E-Haider, “China Has a BIG Plan for Post-U.S. Afghanistan—and It’s Worth Billions,” *Daily Beast*, July 4, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/china-has-a-big-plan-for-post-us-afghanistan-and-its-worth-billions>.

24 Raffaello Pantucci, “The Myth of Chinese Investment in Afghanistan,” *Nikkei Asia*, August 16, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/The-myth-of-Chinese-investment-in-Afghanistan2>.

Experts interviewed for this research agreed that China's role in the economic situation in Afghanistan is overstated in the short-to-medium term, and aspirational at best in the long term. The hasty US and NATO departure from Afghanistan might have provided timely public-relations material for China to highlight its growing role as a new hegemon, and to paint the United States as a tired one. However, financial investments in Afghanistan are unlikely to materialize while the Taliban remains heavily sanctioned. Beijing is not expected to push the boundaries of US sanctions in the case of the Taliban, as it did when importing embargoed Iranian oil.²⁵

Iran and the Taliban: a Balancing Act

The Taliban's relations with Iran have evolved considerably from the 1990s, when they were fraught with divergent interests and alliances with one another's opponents. Notwithstanding the sectarian and ethnic differences between "Shia, Persian-speaking Iran and Sunni, Pashtun-dominated Taliban, Tehran spent at least a decade" fostering ties and building trust with a network of contacts across the Taliban.²⁶ Iran has historical ties with Afghanistan, but also remains concerned about the country's conflict and political landscape. Iran's main concerns include: geopolitical and geostrategic developments in Afghanistan that could threaten Iranian interests; the flow of refugees and narcotics into Iran; sectarianism; and violent Sunni extremism that threatens Shias in Afghanistan and may spill over into Iran. A water-sharing agreement, signed with Afghanistan in 1973, provides the basis for Iran's transboundary relations—though, in recent years, Tehran vehemently opposed the construction of dams by the previous Afghan government. In July this year, Iran warned Taliban's foreign ministry that relations between Tehran and Kabul would be affected if the Taliban did not respect Iranian water rights from Helmand River. The adverse effects of climate change in Afghanistan and its region could deepen such tensions over water management and water sharing arrangements.

While the United States and Iran might have had instances in which their interests in Afghanistan converged, tensions

over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the Donald Trump administration led to further Iranian mistrust of the US military presence in Afghanistan. In the months preceding August 2021, Tehran had reportedly put resources into expanding the capacity of camps for Afghan refugees at its border with Afghanistan.²⁷ There is also evidence of Iran taking an active role in brokering deals for the Taliban with Tehran's Afghan proxies and contacts.²⁸

Like Pakistan, Iran has maintained a diplomatic presence in Kabul. Furthermore, flights operate between Kabul and major Iranian cities. Afghans can apply for Iranian visas, although obtaining a visa is a laborious and uncertain process. Tehran has continually argued it would only recognize a government in Kabul that is inclusive of all ethnic groups and reflects Afghanistan's religious diversity. In January 2022, Tehran hosted the main, Tajik-dominated opposition leaders in Tehran for dialogue with the Taliban's visiting delegation. However, the talks did not prove fruitful. There were reported incidents of Taliban forces clashing with Iranian border guards near Nimruz province in Afghanistan, but both sides downplayed the tensions.

Iran-Taliban relations can best be described as a series of balancing acts; both need each other to maintain stability along the border and avoid further complications of their respective geostrategic challenges. This is an evolving relationship, with both Iran and the Taliban having tools to leverage against the other. Iran hosts millions of Afghan refugees (a large number undocumented); it presumably has the ability to mobilize factions such as the Fatemiyoun Brigade and its affiliates in defence of Shias in Afghanistan, which would present a major problem for the Taliban; Afghanistan relies on Iran for imports, and on the Iranian ports as a transit route for international trade.²⁹ The Taliban, meanwhile, controls border crossings into Iran and has years of experience in insurgency warfare and narcotics trading. If unleashed, a brigade of Taliban suicide bombers and a generation of young fighters educated in, or influenced by, hardline anti-Shia Sunni madrassah systems in Pakistan can seriously compromise

25 Natasha Turak, "China's Rumored Ambitions to Dive into Afghanistan Are Overstated and Unrealistic, Experts Say," CNBC, September 9, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/09/chinas-rumored-aims-to-dive-into-afghanistan-are-exaggerated-experts.html>.

26 Borzou Daragahi, *Afghanistan: Where US-Iranian Interests May Yet Intersect*, *Atlantic Council*, May 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/AC-Talibans-IB-v4.pdf>.

27 Ibid.

28 Antonio Giustozzi, "Alliances Were Key to the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan," *Newlines Institute*, September 9, 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/afghanistan/alliances-were-key-to-the-taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan/>.

29 Afghanistan also relies on Karachi port in Pakistan as a major transit route.

the equilibrium with Iran. For now, the Taliban does not enjoy diplomatic recognition from Iran, but relations with Tehran form part of the wider lens through which the Taliban aims to project its regime's legitimacy at the regional level.

Russia and the Taliban: a Tale of Guarded Accommodation

Moscow did not recognize the Taliban regime in the 1990s, and labeled the Taliban a terrorist group in 2003. But in 2007, Russia became one of the first countries to pursue clandestine contacts with the Taliban to address the growing concerns around drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Central Asia.³⁰ Russian and US agents subsequently collaborated in 2010 to destroy drug labs inside Afghanistan.³¹ In 2015, Zamir Kabolov—President Vladimir Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan—claimed that Russian interests in Afghanistan “objectively coincided” with those of the Taliban, as both were keen to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).³² Prior to the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Moscow hosted a number of intra-Afghan conferences to ostensibly support the reconciliation efforts. However, the Russian ambassador to Afghanistan, Dmitry Zhirnov, was one of the first officials to echo his country's satisfaction with the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan: “The situation in Kabul now under the Taliban is better than it was under [President] Ashraf Ghani.”³³

In the months following the Taliban's consolidation of power, including its announcement of an interim government in September 2021, Sergey Lavrov and other Russian officials have expressed that Russia would only recognize a Taliban government if it were inclusive of all Afghans—particularly of Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek ethnic groups.³⁴

Russian officials and the Taliban have continually held meetings in Kabul, where Russia's embassy remains functional, although it is unclear if Afghans can apply for visas. There are recent reports that the Russian Foreign Ministry has accepted the credentials of a Taliban-appointed chargé d'affaires to run the Afghan embassy in Moscow.³⁵ The Taliban leadership is keen to procure essential consumer items from Russia as wheat and other food supply chains have experienced a severe disruption due to the war in Ukraine.

In the delicate balancing act of engaging with the Taliban and mitigating any unforeseen risks, Moscow is likely to seek regional reassurances from countries such as Pakistan. Moscow is also likely to strengthen its security-coordination mechanisms with Russia's Central Asian allies. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), led by Russia, held military exercises in Kyrgyzstan in September 2021 in response to the previous month's collapse of the Afghan government.³⁶

Discussions with the experts for this research reiterated the improbability of Russian formal recognition of the Taliban regime in Kabul. The war in Ukraine has placed Moscow under heavy international sanctions. Even though Russian recognition of the current authorities in Afghanistan is not imminent, the Taliban may find itself in more intricate isolation vis-à-vis Western nations if it is perceived to have joined a Russian sphere of influence.

Tajikistan's Unrelenting Unease with the Taliban

Following the Taliban's takeover of power in Afghanistan, Tajikistan put hundreds of thousands of its troops on alert and sent at least twenty thousand soldiers to the Afghan border. Like other countries in the region, Tajikistan calls for inclusivity—mainly of the Tajik ethnic group—in the formation of any government in Afghanistan before

30 Samuel Ramani, “Russia and the Taliban: Potential Partners?” RUSI, September 14, 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-and-taliban-prospective-partners>.

31 “Russia and US Collaborate in Afghan Drug Raid,” BBC News, October 29, 2010, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11651469>.

32 “Russia's Interests Coincide with Taliban's in Fight Against ISIS: Agency Cites Diplomat,” Reuters, December 23, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-taliban-idUSKBN0U61EQ20151223>.

33 Andrew Osborn, “Russia Says Kabul Seems Safer under Taliban than It Was under Ghani,” Reuters, August 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-conflict-russia-idAFKBN2FH2AB>.

34 Kamal Joshi, “‘Russia May Attend Taliban's Govt Formation Ceremony if It's Inclusive’: FM Sergey Lavrov,” Republic World, September 6, 2021, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/russia-may-attend-talibans-govt-formation-ceremony-if-its-inclusive-fm-sergey-lavrov.html>.

35 Ayaz Gul, “Russia Says ‘Inclusive’ Afghan Government Key to Recognizing Taliban,” VOA News, June 15, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-says-inclusive-afghan-government-key-to-recognizing-taliban-/6618812.html>.

36 “Russia-Led CSTO Starts Military Drills in Kyrgyzstan Due to Situation in Afghanistan,” Gandhara, September 7, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/russia-military-drills-kyrgyzstan-afghanistan/31447728.html>.

Dushanbe considers formal recognition; it was the only neighboring country that openly opposed the Taliban's return to power.

Nonetheless, Tajikistan does not seem to want a direct confrontation with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Analysts argue that Tajik President Emomali Rahmon has increasingly capitalized on the chaos in Afghanistan under the Taliban to present himself as a guardian of peace in Tajikistan, and to boost his leadership more widely.³⁷ Dushanbe has provided shelter or visas to anti-Taliban Afghan resistance elements such as Ahmad Masood, who heads the National Resistance Front (NRF).³⁸ In a gesture of support for prominent Tajik figures from Afghanistan, Tajikistan posthumously awarded the country's highest civilian honor to the late Ahmad Shah Masood and former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, Tajikistan inherited one of the most securitized borders with Afghanistan. After 2001, though, Tajikistan-Afghanistan relations flourished. Yet, despite increasing cultural and people-to-people ties and cross-border connectivity, fears over insecurity from Afghanistan loomed over Tajikistan's Afghan policy. These concerns were often real, but also occasionally a convenient excuse to portray internal Tajik issues as externally linked—for instance, in the case of growing Islamist extremism.

In May 2022, there were reports of clashes on the Tajik-Afghan border in Sher Khan Bandar, near Afghanistan's Kunduz province. Separately, suspected IS-KP attackers allegedly launched rockets from Afghanistan into Tajikistan. Such clashes with Tajikistan are not unexpected, and they reflect the Taliban's inability to position better trained and professional border forces—and to secure borders. However, Tajikistan's open refusal to engage with the new Taliban regime, and its insistence on Tajik inclusivity in the new Afghan political setup, provides the basis for mutual antagonism. This antagonism is complicated, as the Taliban needs Russian goodwill—and even tacit support—and regional endorsement of its regime. The Taliban cannot afford

the costs of cross-border clashes that force Moscow's intervention in support of Tajikistan. In addition, Tajikistan has an improved army and border force compared to those in the 1990s. The Taliban regime will find itself highly vulnerable if it engages intendedly—or inadvertently—in clashes against Tajikistan or any other neighboring state.

Uzbekistan Maintaining Goodwill with the Taliban

As a doubly landlocked country, Uzbekistan is highly sensitive to its relations with its neighbors and the region. Tashkent has so far succeeded in fostering amicable ties with the Taliban, while also ensuring good relations with Western countries. Since August 2021, Tashkent has played on its important role as a hub for the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. But Uzbekistan desires connectivity with South Asia, mainly Pakistan, which cannot happen without access through Afghan territory. Uzbekistan recently confirmed it was drawing the roadmap for a connectivity corridor to Pakistan by constructing the Trans-Afghan Railway despite the lack of international recognition for the Taliban regime. The railway project is envisaged to extend from Termiz in Uzbekistan to Afghanistan's Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul, Jalalabad, and Torkham, eventually extending into Peshawar, Pakistan.³⁹

Senior Uzbek delegations have visited Kabul several times since the Taliban's return to power. In recent years, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has insisted that Afghanistan must be treated as an integral part of Central Asia, and has continued with this pragmatic approach since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. Ismatulla Irgashev, a senior advisor to the Uzbek president on Afghanistan, says: "We see a common future with immense common interests [in Afghanistan], no matter who is in power there."⁴⁰ Yet Tashkent is withholding formal recognition until the international community takes a clearer stance on the Taliban regime's legitimacy. This reservation is notable in light of Uzbekistan's efforts to ostensibly push for a collective regional and international

37 Temur Umarov, "Why Tajikistan Is Taking a Stand against the Taliban," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 26, 2021, <https://carnegie Moscow.org/commentary/85649>.

38 Vinay Kaura, "Tajikistan's Evolving Relations with the Taliban 2.0," Middle East Institute, December 1, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/tajikistans-evolving-relations-taliban-20>.

39 "Afghanistan and Uzbekistan Draw Roadmap for Corridor to Pakistan," RailFreight.com, May 20, 2022, <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/05/20/afghanistan-and-uzbekistan-draw-roadmap-for-corridor-to-pakistan/?gdp=deny>.

40 Navbahor Imamova, "Uzbekistan Seeks to Engage Taliban without Alienating West," VOA News, May 4, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/uzbekistan-seeks-to-engage-taliban-without-alienating-west/6557338.html>.

normalization of relations with the Taliban regime. The Tashkent Conference in July this year was attended by 30 countries' delegations—including the United States—and was the largest multilateral event where the Taliban participated after seizing power. Yet, it is unclear if the Taliban delegation achieved any positive results. The US drone attack, killing Al Zawahiri, that followed days after the conference also put a spotlight on the Taliban's contradictory claims of severing ties with transnational terrorist networks.⁴¹

Qatar, Turkey, India: the Regional Trio

Qatar has hosted the Taliban's political office in Doha since 2013, and played host to the US-Taliban agreement (the so-called Doha Agreement) in February 2020. Qatar also played a key role in facilitating and supporting evacuations from Afghanistan after the collapse of the Afghan Islamic Republic. Doha is a regular venue for consultations between the Taliban and Western interlocutors. The US embassy and other Western diplomatic missions responsible for Afghanistan were relocated from Kabul to Doha, raising the profile of Qatar as a major arena for consultations, mediation, and policymaking on Afghanistan.

In May 2022, Qatar's foreign minister called on the international community to "step up engagement" with the Taliban regime in Kabul beyond focusing on humanitarian responses.⁴² Doha has highlighted the risks of rising extremism and radicalization spurred by the worsening economic situation in Afghanistan. More broadly, Qatar's involvement in Afghanistan forms part of its cooperation with the United States and its ambition to be viewed as a peace mediator globally—a "small state" that can punch above its weight regionally and internationally.

Turkey's initial prominence following the collapse of Afghanistan to the Taliban seems to have waned in recent months. Turkey's interests in the Afghan context have shifted, although it has firm relations with a number of figures among minority Uzbek and Turkmen ethnic groups—such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former warlord

and vice president in Afghanistan. In recent years, Ankara has attempted to use Afghanistan as leverage in improving relations with the United States.⁴³ A second objective has involved positioning Turkey as a "border guard" against outward migration from Afghanistan to Europe; by doing so, President Recep Erdogan has sought leverage against Europe. Lastly, Ankara's desire to be perceived as a regional and Islamic hegemon informed its initial enthusiasm to carve out a role for Turkish engagement in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Turkey has kept its embassy in Kabul open, and its ambassador and other diplomatic staff have remained in Afghanistan. Turkey is one of the few countries—in addition to Afghanistan's immediate neighbors—deporting thousands of Afghans to a Taliban-controlled country. This is likely to decrease any goodwill among Afghans, as Turkey has been welcoming Ukrainian refugees at the same time. The issue of hosting refugees will likely be a significant matter in next year's elections. Polls carried out in 2021 indicated that more than 70 percent of the Turkish population would vote for the political party with the toughest stance on refugees.⁴⁴

Keen to avoid repeating the complete disconnection from a Taliban regime, India has kept some humanitarian channels open to Afghanistan. This has included direct humanitarian flights to deliver essential items to the victims of a recent devastating earthquake in eastern Afghanistan. Attacks on Afghan Hindus and Sikhs—whose numbers have drastically dwindled—are of continuing concern for India. The last remaining group of Afghan Sikhs will likely leave for India soon, following a recent attack by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-KP) on a gurdwara in Kabul that forced Delhi to facilitate expedited electronic visas. In the past twenty years, Delhi enjoyed strong ties with Afghan administrations and a wider array of political elites and institutions in Afghanistan. There are areas of mutual engagement and cooperation with the Taliban regime—such as the supply of grains, wheat, and medicine from India—but hostilities with Pakistan will not abate, as Islamabad's firm influence in Afghanistan has been stark since August 2021. India's

41 Navbahor Imamova, "Nearly 30 Nations Engage With Taliban at Tashkent Conference", Voice of America, July 22, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/almost-30-nations-engage-with-taliban-at-tashkent-conference-/6676107.html>.

42 Andrew England and Benjamin Parkin, "Qatar Urges West to Engage with Taliban to Stem Crisis in Afghanistan," *Financial Times*, May 29, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/0a9f41c3-b3ab-4c2d-81a2-c7b40169683d>.

43 Galip Dalay, "Will Turkey's Afghanistan Ambitions Backfire?" Chatham House, October 6, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/10/will-turkeys-afghanistan-ambitions-backfire>.

44 Kelly Petillo, "Turkey's Open Door Closes: How Europe Can Better Support Syrian Refugees," European Council on Foreign Relations, May 9, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/turkeys-open-door-closes-how-europe-can-better-support-syrian-refugees>.

geopolitical competition with China will likely also impact Delhi's approach to forging relations with the Taliban. But to what extent Chinese-Taliban relations have matured remains open to debate.

Indian officials are reported to have engaged with the Taliban in back-channel dialogues often hosted in Qatar or in Russia. In a first and unexpected trip by an Indian diplomatic delegation, Joint Secretary J. P. Singh traveled to Kabul to meet with the Taliban's acting foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, in June.⁴⁵ This was followed by reports that India is considering reopening its embassy in Kabul after sending a "technical team" that includes diplomats to assist in the delivery and monitoring of India's humanitarian assistance.⁴⁶

What to Watch?

The Taliban seizing power in Afghanistan, or the country falling from frontline international headlines, should not lead to underestimating the size and nature of challenges that remain in the country. These challenges and threats have the potential to deepen, foment, overlap, and spill over at both the regional and global levels. Crucially, the implications of these challenges and risks impact Afghans in many profound ways. In no particular order, the following are some of the key challenges and potential threats that the current research identified.

- 1. Growing armed resistance, insecurity, and fragmentation that threaten the Taliban's grip on power.** These range from attacks by the IS-KP to armed resistance by the NRF and other groupings. The potential breakup of former Taliban loyalists, particularly among non-Pashtun elements, is an area of concern. In all these instances, it is crucial to examine Taliban responses and how levels of violence could increase across the country. The emergence of ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan will be a key determinant in relation to the strength and incubation of the various anti-Taliban elements, with significant consequences for the levels of violence. If NRF or IS-KP succeed in gaining control over any key provincial centres or districts, particularly those in the north or bordering neighboring states, it will create a substantial challenge to the Taliban regime's grip and narrative on full territorial control. In addition, it
- 2. The Taliban's inability to govern and transform from an insurgent group to at least some form of a political movement.** This relates to the inability of the Taliban to theorize a state that is functional for Afghans and can also establish international relations. There has been limited evidence that the Taliban is able to achieve governance without operationalizing the institutions, and the skeleton, of the previous Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. As the Taliban continues to struggle in establishing effective governance, meager and nascent indigenous structures and institutions that have survived would face a complete erosion, leading—among other things—to the loss of much-needed human capital. The failure of Afghan state institutions would have dire consequences for the healthcare, education, and other services that are desperately needed but already under significant strain.
- 3. Internal disputes and fragmentation within the group have been a consistent element of the Taliban since August 2021.** The biggest dispute emerged in March 2022 as schools began preparations to reopen for the new academic year. Despite repeated assurances that girls would be allowed to go to secondary school, a last-minute reversal prompted widespread international condemnation. It also brought to the surface intense internal disagreements between the more "progressive" senior Taliban members—some of whom were previously based in Doha—and the more hardline leaders based mainly in Kandahar. A clerics' gathering in Kabul was initially flaunted as an opportunity to address these concerns, but the event ended with the Taliban leader threatening his regime would not comply with international and internal pressures. It is also plausible that internal fissures explain why some Taliban expressed unawareness about Al Zawahiri's presence in Kabul, while there is reported evidence that he was staying at a house belonging to a key aide of Sirajuddin Haqqani, Taliban's interior minister and the leader of the Haqqani faction in the group.

45 "Aid on Agenda, Indian Envoys Meet Afghan Leaders," *Tribune*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/aid-on-agenda-indian-envoys-meet-af-leaders-400482>.

46 Nayanima Basu, "India Reopens Embassy in Kabul, Sends 'Technical Team' with Relief Material for Afghanistan," *Print*, June 23, 2022, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-reopens-embassy-in-kabul-sends-technical-team-with-relief-material-for-afghanistan/1009400/>.

4. **Repression against women in particular, but also against other sections of society, should remain a key area of concern.** It is important to note that there may be varying perspectives among the different groups of the Taliban on girls' education and the role of women beyond households. Nonetheless, the way in which the international community has so far engaged with the Taliban at the political level has allowed the Taliban to provide superficial assurances on the issues of women's rights and education, while simultaneously claiming that a women's-rights agenda is a Western notion—or a Western imposition.
5. **Border clashes with neighbors and cross-border attacks from Afghanistan by actors other than the Taliban (such as IS-KP) could risk unleashing a major conflict.** The Taliban's inability to deploy professional border guards, maintain border crossings, and establish cross-border communication channels for crisis management increases the risk of border conflicts with neighboring states.
6. **The Taliban's repressive attitude toward Afghan media and journalists while allowing access, even if limited, to Western journalists risks masking the overall blackout on information, media freedoms, and journalism in the country.** The quality of reporting from Afghanistan has direct consequences on the needs assessments and understanding of the humanitarian and human-rights conditions on the ground.
7. In the absence of financial flows, a banking crisis, and liquidity issues, **the increase in potentially illicit economic activities—especially terrorism finance, illicit mining, and the drugs economy—could become a serious problem.** This also relates to a lack of focus and current data on Taliban expenditures, and how it has spent the financial revenues it claims to have raised.
8. **Environmental degradation, droughts, and water shortages—for both agriculture and drinking water—in rural and urban areas are going to be extremely important factors impacting livelihoods and stability.** These challenges are compounded by weak or nonexistent policy considerations in the past twenty years by the Afghan and international institutions. The recent earthquakes and floodings in the country highlight the vulnerability of large swathes of Afghanistan to natural disasters. They also demonstrate the crucial role of Western donor nations in providing financial support for Afghans affected by natural disasters, which has not been matched by regional countries, including China.
9. While outward migrations become key headlines and are important indicators of a brain drain (among other issues) facing Afghanistan, **a growing internally displaced population** must also remain at the forefront of concerns. Internal displacements increase pressure on humanitarian actors, but can also transform into local disputes over land and other resources, creating opportunities for manipulation by spoilers and factional elements as political tools.
10. The well-being, safety, and progress of resettled **Afghan evacuees**, in the region and beyond, remain major issues.

Ways Forward

There is no “quick fix” for the overall situation in Afghanistan. The US and NATO withdrawal has undoubtedly left a vacuum in the country. This is in addition to the profoundly difficult situation confronting Afghans, in which an internationally isolated Taliban regime governs Afghanistan without external political or diplomatic recognition. As stated, the absence of proactive US-led Western policymaking on Afghanistan does not lead to a similar course of action for neighboring and regional countries.

Addressing the multiple crises in Afghanistan requires US-led Western engagement that draws lessons from the past twenty years, but is also informed by the complexity of the current context, including Afghanistan's regional dynamics. To begin confronting this task, the current research makes a set of recommendations primarily aimed at US and Western policymakers, international actors, and regional and other stakeholders currently engaged in seeking solutions to Afghanistan's challenges.

1. **Understanding the multidimensional nature of Afghanistan's crises requires innovative approaches that go beyond emergency humanitarian aid.** For instance, Afghanistan's deepening poverty—which now spreads into urban areas—cannot be addressed without a fully functioning economy and active indigenous institutions that can address

socioeconomic problems.⁴⁷ The revival of the Afghan economy must become a top priority for US policy toward Afghanistan. The role of the private sector is paramount, but continuing paralysis of the entire country's economy decreases—and can potentially destroy—the resilience of the private sector. Reviving Afghanistan's connectivity with international financial systems must be prioritized, with the aim of empowering the nascent private sector, Afghan businesses, and trading mechanisms.

2. **To ensure that international aid and humanitarian assistance do not end up funding the Taliban security apparatus and repressive arms, international actors on the ground should revive civil-society actors such as the Community Development Councils (CDCs) in a meaningful way.** This would allow working at the local level and ensuring some level of local oversight for the delivery of international support.
 3. **To revive civilian institutions in Afghanistan and preserve institutions of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan that are currently active in some form (such as healthcare, education, tax and revenue collection, disaster response, and so on), there is an urgent need to explore modalities of engagement that go beyond the humanitarian realm into developmental interventions.** The international community needs to be transparent that, at present, any engagement in addressing the humanitarian crises, by default, requires a level of engagement with the Taliban's de facto government. It is imperative that developmental interventions and support for the people of Afghanistan are revived, to break the cycle of growing dependency on aid and humanitarian handouts.
 4. **Regional solutions should be sought for challenges that are truly regional and long term: basic healthcare, education, environmental issues, energy shortage, urbanization, youth unemployment, and so forth.** Training and capacity building on these long-term challenges must expand to prioritize sustainability and environmental-protection issues, and early-warning systems. This will ensure that Afghans can develop resilience—and indigenous
- capacity—in areas such as disaster response, agricultural food-security measures, and challenges related to expanding urbanization.
 5. **The US State Department and other foreign policy institutions in the United States and Western-allied nations need to invest in regional expertise on South Asia.** Collaborations with evidence-based research projects across research organizations provide one avenue to address any ostensible shortage of capacity within the government departments. Experts interviewed for the current research highlighted that there was a desire in some US foreign policy circles for a shift from South Asia to the Indo-Pacific; our research contends that the United States and its Western allies would develop stronger and better expertise, resources, and research partnerships on South Asia for the evolving policy priorities around the Indo-Pacific region.
 6. **Continually monitoring and examining the nature, dynamic, and scope of relationships between the Taliban and China, and the Taliban and Russia, should become a key policy priority.** This needs to begin by supporting credible, evidence-based analysis on understanding the current Taliban regime and its group dynamics. Taliban-Pakistan and Taliban-Iran relations have been scrutinized, to some extent, by existing research. However, the Taliban's reliance on resources—or at least political support—from China and Russia can strengthen the movement's position against the United States and Western stakeholders, and can strengthen the Taliban's repressive practices against Afghans. This scrutiny should also extend to examining any potential engagement of the privately or government owned Chinese and Russian firms currently seeking investment in Afghanistan's natural resources and other sectors of the country.
 7. **The international community continues to grapple with the question of leverage against the Taliban.** Some experts interviewed for this research argue that the United States still holds a powerful position. For instance, one expert argued that Pakistan would have most likely recognized the Taliban regime in 2021, but Islamabad has been careful because of the non-recognition of the Taliban by Washington. The

47 For a deeper analysis of multidimensional poverty and resilience issues, see: Mark Bowden, Hameed Hakimi and Ben Ramalingam, "Confronting New Realities: Actions and Priorities for the International Community in Afghanistan," Chatham House, May 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/2022-05-26-confronting-new-realities-actions-priorities-afghanistan.pdf>.

US formal institutions hold a key role in easing—or expanding—financial and liquidity restrictions against the Taliban regime. The United States also holds leverage because of the vote at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)—which, among other issues, plays an active role in facilitating the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) mandate and enacting travel bans, sanctions, and other restrictions against the Taliban. **The United States and its allies need to explore leverage against the Taliban within such mechanisms, and should move away from seeking leverage through humanitarian interventions and aid conditionality, which have so far clearly failed to influence Taliban behavior and policies.**

8. Recent experiences have highlighted that the Taliban—especially its hardliners—can use the issue of Afghan women’s rights against Afghan women and their international backers. **There is an urgent need to empower women leaders inside Afghanistan, and Afghan women leaders outside with credible networks within Afghanistan, so the Taliban cannot disregard women’s rights as merely a Western agenda.** The international community should work together with prominent female figures in Muslim-majority countries at the regional level to support Afghan women in defining their human-rights agenda. This should start immediately with meaningful dialogue with Afghan women leaders, including on their needs and how resources can best be made available to them.

9. **Independent media organizations in Afghanistan, even if limited in scope compared to before the Taliban takeover, should be allowed to access international financial support, especially at the local level.** This will prevent a brain drain, and ensure capacity for information gathering and information sharing is maintained within Afghanistan, which is critical for human-rights monitoring, verification, and accountability.
10. **Funding for organizations advocating for girls’ education, particularly at the secondary level, must be restored and continued.** The critical issue of girls’ access to education should be approached at the technical level, rather than the political, and at a national level. Donors should put conditionality on specific aid activities. Decoupling politics and technical issues from the conditionality questions would likely enable a reframing of donor conditionality overall.

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