

## Taliban 2.0 and Geopolitical Security Concerns in South Asia's Neighbourhood

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**ABSTRACT—** The emergence of Taliban 2.0 has raised significant security concerns in South Asia, particularly in India and Pakistan. The dynamics of South Asia's neighbouring countries are experiencing notable shifts due to the rise and consolidation of the Taliban 2.0's regime from 2021 to 2024. In Taliban controlled Afghanistan, there is a notable prevalence of anti-India and anti-Pakistan sentiments. Past analysis of Afghanistan has raised concerns regarding the capabilities and preparedness of these terrorists for attacks. The two long-standing nuclear powers have differing views on Afghanistan, while expressing concerns about each other's increasing influence. This discussion examines the relations between Pakistan, India, and the Taliban, while also addressing legitimate concerns about security issues in South Asia due to the situation in Afghanistan.

**Keywords :** War, Peace building, Afghanistan, Security, Taliban 2.0, India, Pakistan

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## **Introduction: Taliban 2.0**

Afghanistan has been severely affected by the consequences of successive wars for almost forty years. The Afghan conflict is heavily impacted by ongoing interference from external actors, which has contributed to the enduring state of instability in the country. The military interventions by the USSR from 1979 to 1989 and the United States from 2001 to 2021 had a significant negative impact on Afghanistan's stability and economic progress. Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasise that this situation presents substantial long-term prospects for the neighbouring governments of Afghanistan and regional states to increase their involvement in the internal affairs of the country, with the intention of leveraging Afghanistan's predicament for their own advantage. The collapse of the Afghan government, backed by the United States, has had far-reaching and negative effects on Afghanistan and the surrounding region in South Asia. The decision to consciously forego opportunities for long-term peace raises concerns about the potential consequences that may only become apparent in the future. In 2021, the emergence of the Taliban 2.0 after the departure of US and NATO forces had far-reaching consequences for Afghanistan. Taliban 2.0's rise post 2021 has triggered an abrupt economic crisis and a surge in instability (Calabrese 2021).

The reaction from the South Asian neighbourhood to the fall of the Afghan government at the hands of the Taliban was varied and included both positive and negative responses. Over the course of the past year, it is noteworthy that China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan have maintained operational embassies in Kabul, even after the Taliban assumed control. According to O'Connor (2021), there are embassies that have continued to maintain diplomatic relations with the Taliban. The consensus among them was that the United States, NATO, and the Afghan government had effectively addressed a major security challenge in the region during the last two decades. The presence of military forces from the United States and NATO in Afghanistan has faced opposition from regional powers like China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran. However, it is worth noting that India and the Central Asia

Republics (CARs) have been exceptions to this opposition. As a result, it can be observed that Pakistan, Russia, China, Iran, and certain countries in Central Asia have taken proactive measures to establish diplomatic relations with the Taliban. These countries have also welcomed and engaged with Taliban representatives, indicating a significant focus on safeguarding their economic and security concerns during the ongoing peace negotiations. However, it is important to note that the current situation in Afghanistan remains closely connected to the overall state of regional security. This article contributes to the existing scholarship by focusing on the production of new literature and highlighting recent developments in the field of security trends. The discussion highlights the regional security concerns that arose following the fall of the democratic government, which had enjoyed global support for a period of twenty years.

This study examines the security concerns of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. According to the perspectives of the two major powers in the South Asian neighbourhood, Afghanistan serves as a base for militants who are opposed to both India and Pakistan. They anticipate that this factor will gain significance in the future when it comes to the strategic planning of attacks. The two historic rival nuclear powers hold contrasting perspectives on Afghanistan and are simultaneously apprehensive about each other's growing involvement in the country. This study aims to analyse the 'Taliban takeover of Afghanistan' one year after the Taliban assumed control in the country and the larger spillage of security concerns in insecure neighbourhoods of South Asia. In this study, the term 'Taliban 2.0' will be used to refer to the current Taliban regime (2021-2024) in Afghanistan. The purpose of recognising the various incarnations and transformations of the Taliban over the years is to gain a deeper understanding of their evolution and the shape-shifting sense of fear, insecurities and collective apprehensions.

## **Taliban 2.0 and Geopolitical Dilemma**

The sudden and surprising collapse of the US-backed Afghan government to the Taliban on August 15, 2021, was a significant and far-reaching event that deeply affected the global community and the South Asian neighbourhood. Vock (2021) suggests that the Taliban's ability to declare victory over the US-NATO trained and equipped Afghan security forces in merely ten days of fighting is noteworthy. The conclusion drawn by various perspectives is that the results were primarily influenced by the US-Taliban Doha deal, which favoured the Taliban, and intentionally marginalised the Afghan government in the Afghan Peace Process. Multiple researchers have confirmed this finding. Following the takeover by the Taliban, Afghanistan faced substantial economic challenges. The administration of President Joe Biden promptly froze Afghanistan's Central Bank assets, which amounted to \$9.5 billion and were held in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Several countries, including the European Union, Germany, and Britain, have decided to suspend their involvement in several aid for development programmes in Afghanistan. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank halted their funding for development projects in Afghanistan due to the country's currency crisis. According to Calabrese (2021), the IMF took measures to prevent the release of emergency currency reserves.

Despite the initial efforts of the United Nations, regional countries, and western nations to provide humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, they continue to face severe economic challenges. According to agencies affiliated with the United Nations (OCHA), there is a significant number of over 22 million individuals who are currently in dire need of assistance and are experiencing severe hunger. The crisis has resulted in the displacement of nine million people, with millions of children unable to attend school and one million children facing the risk of malnutrition. The United Nations responded to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan by issuing a substantial appeal in January 2022. They requested \$5 billion in funding (United Nations 2022). The relief effort in Afghanistan is primarily led by western countries, although China,

India, and other regional countries have also contributed food and medical supplies. The United States' decision to ease some of the sanctions imposed on Afghanistan has resulted in donor countries providing nearly \$1.6 billion to the UN appeal. In October 2021, the European Union pledged to support the Afghan economy by offering a financial aid package of one billion dollars. From February onwards, the United States of America has emerged as the leading contributor to Afghanistan, providing a significant sum of \$421 million in financial aid. The European Union has contributed \$227 million, making it the largest contributor. Germany follows closely behind with a contribution of \$182 million. The United Kingdom has contributed \$113 million, while France has contributed \$82 million. Denmark has contributed \$74 million, Japan has contributed \$60 million, and Sweden has contributed \$53 million. The Netherlands has contributed \$30 million, and Canada has contributed \$27 million (Menon 2022). The provision of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan remains ongoing, facilitated by the United Nations. Afghanistan has received approximately \$1.8 billion in humanitarian assistance, with the United States contributing \$1.1 billion to support the Afghan population amidst the current challenging circumstances (Masomy 2022c).

The response from the from neighbouring countries as well as in the wider region to the Taliban's takeover of the Afghan government was varied. China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan continued to maintain their embassies in Kabul, indicating their ongoing diplomatic relations with the Taliban over the past one to two years. All individuals shared a common perception of a notable void in regional security that was effectively addressed by the presence of US-NATO forces and the Afghan government over the course of the last twenty years. Regional powers like China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran have consistently expressed opposition to the military presence of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, with the exception of India and the Central Asia Republics (CARs). According to O'oconor (2021), it can be observed that Pakistan, Russia, China, Iran, and certain Central Asian countries have established diplomatic connections with the Taliban and have welcomed Taliban representatives as part of the peace process.

This indicates a significant focus on security and economic concerns. Russia has increased its military presence in Central Asia to provide security to the region. This is being done through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) framework, which aims to prevent any potential movement of terrorist and extremist groups across borders. The situation in Afghanistan, where the Taliban has gained control, has contributed to the need for this heightened mobilisation. (Gupta, 2021) In August, Russia and Uzbekistan conducted military exercises near the Afghan-Uzbek border. Additionally, they held military drills in Tajikistan along the Afghan border, which involved the participation of Russia, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (Moscow Times 2021).

The presence of foreign terrorist organisations in Afghanistan has raised significant concerns, particularly as the United States and NATO forces have initiated their withdrawal from that country according to President Joe Biden's new deadline. The situation took place during a period of escalated conflict between the Taliban and the remaining elements of the former Afghan government. According to the twelfth report of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the estimated number of foreign terrorist fighters is approximately 8,000 to 10,000. According to the UNSC (2021), a significant number of these individuals are thought to originate from Central Asia, the Caucasus region of the Russian Federation, Pakistan, and Xinjiang, specifically the Uighur autonomous region of China. The presence of foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan has been a topic of contention, with the Taliban consistently denying their existence. However, former Afghan President Mohammed Ashraf Ghani provided explicit confirmation of their presence during an international conference held in Uzbekistan in July 2021. The conference had participants from different countries, represented by regional representatives. President Ghani claimed that the number of jihadist fighters in Afghanistan exceeded 10,000, and they are collaborating with the Taliban in their efforts to overthrow the Afghan government (Pajhwok 2021). Pakistan was held responsible for undermining the prospects for peace in Afghanistan.

China, being one of the powers keens on expanding its influence in South Asia, has openly expressed its discontent with the withdrawal of United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan, both before and after the fall of Kabul. China is widely recognised as a formidable competitor to the United States in terms of global power and influence. The Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, criticised the sudden withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan during a phone call with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, emphasising the negative consequences it had on the situation in the country (Patranobis 2021). The recent suicide bombings in Kabul airport, Kunduz, and Kandahar provinces targeted Shia Mosques and resulted in the loss of many innocent lives. These attacks highlight the emergence of the *Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP)* as a significant threat to both the Taliban government and neighbouring countries (Masomy, 2021). According to a report from UN News on July 20, 2022, there have been a significant number of casualties, with approximately 700 innocent lives lost and 1,406 individuals injured since the Taliban assumed control. It is worth noting that most of these attacks have been attributed to the ISKP, a rival faction to the Taliban.

China and the Taliban have significantly improved their diplomatic relations in recent years, marking a notable development. The current development is being regarded as a significant achievement for China's foreign policy. Additionally, China's apprehension regarding potential security threats originating from Afghanistan under Taliban rule is widely acknowledged. Based on the June 2021 United Nations report, it has been observed that a significant number of fighters affiliated with the *East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)* and ISKP are actively present in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. This province shares borders with both China and Tajikistan. (UNSC 2021) China has consistently expressed its security concerns to the Taliban, emphasising that these concerns primarily revolve around anti-China military groups that specifically aim to attack Chinese territory or disrupt China's economic assets. China has raised concerns about the alleged links between Uighur Muslims and the Taliban during their discussions with the Taliban. The Taliban has provided China with

assurances that Afghan territory will not be utilised for military activities targeting China or any other nation (Calabrese 2021). Furthermore, China is actively cultivating strong diplomatic links with its neighbours to strengthen its security concerns in Afghanistan, especially since the Taliban took power. China's security role in Central Asia expanded with the building of a military base in Tajikistan near the Afghan border. This action reduces security risks from Afghanistan's instability (Schulz, 2021). Tajikistan has used deteriorating relations with the Taliban to justify enhanced border surveillance with Afghanistan. Tajikistan maintains strong connections with Russia and China to effectively fight possible threats.

Following the Taliban's assumption of power on August 15, 2021, countries in the region have encountered numerous complex challenges. The coordination of policies has become necessary for them to address the complex situation in Afghanistan, which includes a humanitarian crisis, economic instability, and an influx of refugees. The inaugural regional conference took place in Moscow in October, following the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan. The conference included delegates from the Taliban as well as representatives from other countries. During the meeting, representatives from China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and five Central Asian Republics (CARs) joined forces to exert pressure on the Taliban. Their objective was to encourage the formation of an inclusive Afghan government that respects human rights and avoids becoming a sanctuary for terrorist organisations. According to Simmons (2021), there was a preference for engaging in dialogue with the Taliban, irrespective of the government's official recognition of the group. Iran has proposed a second conference on Afghanistan, scheduled for the end of October 2021. The conference aims to gather representatives from six neighbouring countries of Afghanistan. A joint request was made to the Taliban, urging them to address security concerns and establish an inclusive government (RFE 2021). India and Pakistan have recently organised several meetings focused on Afghanistan, aiming to preserve their influence in the region.



## **Insecurity, Collective Fear, and Global Concerns**

The prevalence of insecurity, collective fear, and global concerns is a pressing matter that necessitates thorough analysis and thoughtful deliberation. Before delving into the theoretical framework surrounding the emergence of collective insecurity, it is imperative to establish a clear and concise definition of the term. When individuals lack defences, they are susceptible to both internal stress and external danger, which can leave them vulnerable. The contemporary interpretation of the term 'insecurity' incorporates the notion of being 'not adequately protected,' whereas its original connotation referred to a state of anxiety, fear, lack of confidence, or uncertainty. Both terms suggest a deficiency in security measures, but the former places a greater emphasis on feelings of mistrust or uncertainty compared to the latter. This study provides a definition of 'insecurity' as the negative emotions that arise from a sense of imminent threat, regardless of whether the threat is actual or perceived. The presence of insecurity within a community can be attributed to the influence of constructed social and political systems. The concept of the "social and political construction of reality" is used to describe how a collective group of individuals interprets and understands the world (Glassner 1999; Altheide 2002; Furedi 2002; Barber 2003). Contrary to common perception, this statement does not suggest that our reality is akin to a fictional realm where every aspect is a result of cunning psychological manipulation. Collective insecurity refers to the phenomenon where the ordinary worries and concerns of individuals or communities are magnified and transformed into social or political problems. Fear and anxiety, on the other hand, are common emotions that people regularly encounter in their daily lives (Glassner 1999; Altheide 2002; Furedi 2002; Barber 2003; Robin 2004). Collective insecurity emerges when individuals and groups develop interpretations of risk through learning and acquisition processes. When we identify the sources of insecurity as problems that affect a large portion of the population, we can then consider including them on the policy agenda. This framework illuminates agenda shifting and political actors' role in resolving communal fears that policymakers often miss.

India and Pakistan's actions, reactions, and silences imply they are concerned about regional securitization and militarism, as well as the Taliban's growing visibility.

## **India and Pakistan's Security Concerns: Then and Now**

Political tensions have persisted between India and Pakistan in South Asia since 1947. The ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan has drawn Afghanistan into its midst. The strategic depth of Afghanistan is utilised as both an advantage and a weapon in proxy conflicts. Both nations have consistently made efforts to enhance their influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan has developed strong relationships with different Jihadi factions, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which occurred over the last forty years. According to Fraser (2019), the Taliban has been perceived as having a more favourable relationship with Pakistan than with India, particularly during the 1990s when tensions between Pakistan and India over Kashmir were high. Additionally, it is important to note that their policies towards Afghanistan appear to be contradictory. India expresses optimism regarding the prospects of Afghanistan achieving stability and economic self-sufficiency. Pakistan has expressed a desire for Afghanistan to establish a dependence on Pakistan. Both nations have a history of having interests and concerns in Afghanistan and the surrounding region. The recent return of the Taliban to power requires them to reassess their policies towards the country.

## **India's Security Concerns**

India's role in Afghanistan has been crucial in the last twenty years. They have provided support in various areas to promote the establishment of a just legal system and democratic values within Afghan society. India's main objective in Afghanistan was to strengthen its historical connections with the Afghan people,

prevent the Taliban from regaining power, and minimise Pakistan's impact in the region. The return of the Taliban to power has significant implications for India's ability to exert influence in Afghanistan and for its national security, given the long-standing distrust between India and the Taliban. In 1999, militants based in Pakistan hijacked an Indian IC-814 aircraft during its journey from Kathmandu to Kandahar. The event had a notable effect on how India viewed the Taliban's initial regime, which lasted from 1996 to 2001 (Sharma & Patil 2022). In the post-9/11 world, it became evident that India's engagement with the Afghan government, supported by the United States, was notably more proactive than other countries in the region. In contrast Pakistan took a reactive position to the Taliban groups that were previously inactive and offered them a safe haven within its borders. According to Ganguly and Howenstien (2009), the Taliban carried out attacks on India's consulates in various Afghan provinces and its embassy in Kabul. The motivation behind these attacks was attributed to the rivalry between India and Afghanistan.

India's role in the Afghan peace process was limited, but it had valuable insights to offer regarding the Taliban's conduct, their rigid ideology, their connections with terrorist organisations hostile to India, and their relationship with Pakistan. Concerns started to escalate in India due to the forceful overthrow of Ashraf Ghani's government by the Taliban. India has long argued that the Taliban is aligned with Pakistan and serves as a proxy for Pakistani interests. Furthermore, the extensive network of militant groups that the Taliban is affiliated with poses a significant risk to both India's national security and the overall stability of the region. The conflict in India administered Kashmir involves the presence of anti-Indian militant groups such as *Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM)* and *Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)* (Ellis-Peterson 2021). Over a span of multiple years, the two organisations have conducted attacks on Indian forces in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) regions that fall under Indian administration but are situated within Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. The United Nations report states that *Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM)* and *Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)* had an estimated 6,000 to 6,500 active fighters engaged in combat in Afghanistan

(Ellis-Peterson 2021).

India's stance towards the Taliban in multilateral relations remains unyielding, as there have been no indications of India's willingness to engage with them. Following the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, diplomatic channels were effectively shut down, resulting in a cessation of construction activities on ongoing development projects. The presence of anti-India armed groups, including *JeM* and *LeT*, which are affiliated with Pakistan, is a significant cause for worry for India. India expresses concern over the potential of these groups to initiate offensives in the Kashmir Valley. After the Soviet Union's defeat in Afghanistan in 1989, there was a noticeable emergence of militant groups in the Kashmir Valley. Pakistan strategically directed militants, comprising both Kashmiri militants and foreign fighters, towards the Kashmir Valley with the objective of promoting the notion of a 'fight for Islam.' According to Wani (2021), there were approximately 400 Afghan insurgents affiliated with the *Hezb-e-Islami Party* of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Kashmir, originating from the tribal areas of Afghanistan. Indian politicians and policymakers have expressed concerns about the potential utilisation of Afghanistan's 'strategic depth' by Pakistan, as they fear that Pakistan might exploit Afghanistan's territory as a strategic rallying point by deploying insurgents to Kashmir following the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In the initial diplomatic encounter between India's ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, and a prominent Taliban representative, Sher Mohammed Abbas Stanikzai, India emphasised the crucial point that Afghanistan's territory must not be utilised in any manner that poses a threat to India's interests. Stanikzai assured Mittal that the Afghan government would actively work towards finding a positive resolution to the issue. The spread of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is believed to be a consequence of the Taliban's recent triumph in Afghanistan. This has occurred despite India's border troops intensifying surveillance along the Line of Control (LoC). According to a recent statement by an Indian military general, American weapons and night vision

devices were found in the possession of terrorists who were killed in Kashmir (Khalid 2022). India has chosen to limit its engagement with the current government in Afghanistan due to concerns that have been raised. However, there have been specific instances where India has sent its technical and diplomatic team to Kabul to establish its embassy under the Taliban's rule. Additionally, a high-level delegation led by joint secretary JP Singh met with the Taliban's foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. India has taken diplomatic measures to establish trust with the Taliban. They have also provided assistance to the Afghan people by sending 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat, covid-19 vaccines, medicines, and winter clothing, aiming to support them during the economic challenges they are facing (Masomy 2022b).

India continues actively to engage in Afghanistan's political climate, despite the Taliban's recent takeover of the country. The continued utilisation of the 'watch and wait' approach reflects the ongoing assessment of the Taliban's behaviour in Afghanistan. India, recognising its significance as a regional actor, has actively involved itself in the unstable circumstances in Afghanistan following the Taliban's seizure of power. Up until now, three distinct regional forums have been held, during which participants have emphasised the need for collective action in addressing the situation in Afghanistan. The India-Central Asia First Summit, the third India-Central Asia Dialogue at the Foreign Minister's Level, and the India-Central Asia Dialogue at the Foreign Minister's Level have collectively played a significant role in strengthening India's position in the region. National security advisors from Russia, Iran, and five Central Asian Republics (CARs) participated in the meeting. The individuals worked together to present a comprehensive analysis of important topics, such as the efforts to combat counterterrorism, the proliferation of radical ideology, and the problem of drug trafficking. The participants emphasised the importance of the Taliban adhering to human rights and ensuring that the government in Afghanistan is genuinely representative of the Afghan population. In addition, the request was made for the Taliban to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghan soil as a base for launching attacks against any nation (Masomy 2022a).

India and its regional partners, collectively referred to as CARs, have reached a consensus to form collaborative working groups focused on Afghanistan. The primary objective of these groups is to enhance regional agreement on the most effective approach to engaging with the Taliban in relation to regional matters such as security, trade, transit, and connectivity objectives.

### **Pakistan's Security Concerns**

Due to Pakistan's extensive involvement in Afghanistan's affairs over time, a significant number of Afghans hold the belief that Pakistan is the main contributor to the multitude of issues faced by their country. The coup led by Sardar Dawood Khan, a member of Afghanistan's royal family, resulted in the overthrow of King Zahir Shah and the royal regime in 1973. Since then, there has been a covert infiltration of Afghanistan's affairs. Pakistan played a significant role in the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union's illegal invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. It strategically aligned its policy with the United States, providing assistance to Afghan Mujahideen fighters based in Pakistan. This support aimed to aid the Mujahideen in their resistance against the Soviet Union. The success of Pakistan's mission can be attributed to this factor. The security situation in Afghanistan presented numerous opportunities for Pakistan's military regime to exploit, allowing them to gain support domestically and internationally, notably from the United States (Nasreen 2008). Over the course of the last forty years, Pakistan's intelligence agencies and army have developed and reinforced connections with Afghan Jihadi groups, factions, and other armed groups. This strategic approach has been employed to further Pakistan's regional objectives. Pakistan has actively pursued closer relationships with various armed groups. In the 1990s, Pakistan strategically supported the Taliban with the aim of leveraging Afghanistan's location to advance its 'strategic depth' in the South Asia. This trend continued even after the events of 9/11. Pakistan emphasised its intention to combat western forces and the Afghan government, with the aim of reinstating

the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and establishing a government that aligns with Pakistan's interests (Fraser 2019).

Throughout the 'West's War on Terror,' Pakistan has maintained a stronger alliance with the United States compared to its relationship during the Cold War. Furthermore, it is worth noting that it played a crucial role in facilitating the peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban. The Soviet Union's illegal invasion of Afghanistan has had significant implications for the West, particularly the United States, as it has fostered a dependable strategic alliance with Pakistan. The organisation has faced criticism for its inconsistent policies on the Afghanistan conflict, leading to a decline in its international reputation. The victory of the Taliban is seen as a significant success from Pakistan's perspective due to its impact on the dissolution of an elected government and a well-equipped security and military force of around 350,000 troops.

The current situation can be seen as a significant achievement for Afghanistan in terms of its geopolitical influence and its efforts to secure strategic advantages over India. The occurrence was met with enthusiasm from different factions within the nation's military, Islamist community, religious community, and political community. In contrast, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan expressed the view that the Afghan people have achieved liberation from subjugation due to the United States' defeat in Afghanistan. The Taliban's victory has garnered congratulations from various religious parties, such as *Jamiat-e-Ulema-Islam-Fazal* and the *Jamiat-e-Islami*. The flag of the Afghan Taliban being flown over the *Jamia Hafsa Seminary* in Islamabad, instead of the flag of Pakistan, is a particularly intriguing observation (Abbas and Ahmed 2021). Following the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government and the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, Pakistan has been asserting its success in the situation from multiple angles. To a certain degree, there is validity in this claim. Pakistan has taken the initiative to promote the Taliban regime at both regional and extra-regional platforms. They have been actively encouraging

state actors to participate in discussions with the Taliban caretaker government. The Pakistani diplomatic strategy has consistently focused on leveraging each stage of diplomacy to garner global attention and ensure that all matters related to Afghanistan are channelled through Pakistan. This approach has effectively bolstered Pakistan's geopolitical standing. The efforts made by Pakistan have resulted in a stronger and more favourable position for the country on the global stage. The 17th Extraordinary Session at the level of foreign ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) and the Troika Plus meeting between US, China, and Russian envoys, both held in Pakistan, discussed the Taliban rule and the severe economic crisis in Afghanistan. These meetings highlight Pakistan's diplomatic support for the new entity in Afghanistan (Afzal 2022).

Despite the relief felt by many people in Pakistan upon the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, the subsequent increase in armed attacks against the Pakistani army and other security forces in tribal areas has raised fresh concerns. One possible explanation is that different regional Jihadi factions found inspiration in the remarkable success achieved by the Taliban in their conquest against the US-backed Afghan government in Afghanistan. The success of this victory has motivated individuals to advocate for the implementation of *Sharia law* in the surrounding area. For an extended period, the Pakistani establishment has consistently asserted that the previous Afghan government provided refuge to militants with anti-Pakistani sentiments within their borders. After the Taliban takeover, the Pakistani establishment had expectations that the Taliban would either compel the TTP insurgents to surrender or effectively deter them from launching attacks on Pakistan. According to Mir (2022), the Taliban recently released numerous prisoners who were being held by various groups, such as the ISKP, Al-Qaida, and criminals apprehended by the previous Afghan government. Among those released were TTP fighters and Maulvi Faqir Mohammed, the deputy leader of TTP. Meanwhile, the Afghan government has been actively pursuing suspected terrorists. The TTP is a Pakistani Taliban group established in 2007. This group poses a significant risk to the internal security of Paki-



stan. This group has been actively opposing the establishment of Pakistan for over a decade, with the aim of implementing *Sharia law* in the country. The TTP is predominantly operational in the tribal regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, situated along the Durand Line. According to Sayed (2021), this organisation has established and sustained a long-standing affiliation with the Afghan Taliban. Upon assuming power, the Taliban in Kabul and the political leadership of Pakistan promptly initiated negotiations and proposed a general amnesty for the TTP. Their objective was to persuade the TTP to relinquish their weapons and embrace the constitution of Pakistan (Sayed 2021). In November 2021, Pakistan and the TTP reached a monthly ceasefire agreement after engaging in negotiations. As part of the agreement, Pakistan committed to releasing over 100 TTP prisoners, including their prominent leaders. This was a new experience for both parties involved.

According to Mir (2022), Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is the Interior Minister of the Taliban's caretaker government and a co-founder of the Haqqani Network, played a role as a mediator in various discussions held in Afghanistan. The cessation of hostilities between the Pakistani side and TTP was not prolonged due to the lack of tangible actions taken by Pakistan to facilitate the release of TTP prisoners. Consequently, the ceasefire concluded. Pakistan's dissatisfaction with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan stems from their perceived lack of significant action against the TTP within Afghanistan. In response, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has raised this concern with the international community. During his address at the United Nations General Assembly 2022 (UNGA), the speaker expressed his country's apprehensions regarding the existence of terrorist organisations operating within Afghanistan. However, these concerns were dismissed by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Yousaf 2022). After Lieutenant General Asim Munir was appointed as the new army chief in November 2022, the TTP decided to end the informal five-month ceasefire. They also issued a warning, stating their intention to carry out widespread attacks on Pakistani targets. In the specified time frame, there were instances of conflict between Pakistani security forces and TTP insurgents. Both sides

engaged in these conflicts in an effort to defend themselves and exact revenge for past transgressions (Kaura 202).

The Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), an Islamabad-based think-tank, has reported a significant increase in attacks in Pakistan since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021. The data shows a 51% rise in attacks between August 2021 and August 2022, indicating a worsening security situation in the country. These attacks have resulted in the loss of 433 lives and injuries to 719 individuals in 250 different incidents. In comparison, the period from August 2020 to August 2021 witnessed 294 fatalities and 598 injuries in 165 attacks (IANS Business Standard, October 20, 2022).

According to a recent report published by the United Nations, the estimated number of TTP fighters ranges between 3,000 and 5,500. The report also states that these fighters are led by Noor Wali Mehsud in Afghanistan. The provided information pertains to armed groups that are currently active in the region. Several terrorist organisations, including Al Qaeda, ISKP, ETIM, TIP (Turkestan Islamic Party), and Jamaat Ansarullah, have formed alliances to coordinate their efforts and strategize attacks in Pakistan and Central Asia. According to Iqbal (2022), the attacks primarily target China's interests in the region. According to reports, the Taliban have responded to claims and reports by assuring countries, both within and outside of Afghanistan, that they will not use Afghanistan's territory to launch attacks on any country.

The frequency of attacks by the TTP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan has increased, and the Pakistani security forces have also faced a series of assaults in Balochistan. Following the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan, there has been a notable surge in the frequency of both minor and major attacks. The attacks in three provinces of Pakistan, including Punjab, were claimed by the Baloch Freedom Fighters and the TTP. The Balochistan Liberation Army, a group of Baloch freedom fighters, recently carried out attacks on two military bases in Pakistan. These bases, located in Panjgur and Nushki in southwest Balochistan, were targeted in large-scale raids. According to a statement from

Baloch Separatists, these attacks resulted in the deaths of over one hundred Frontier Corps (FC) soldiers (Yousafzai & Shahzad 2022). The TTP and the BLA pose significant challenges to Pakistan, leading to instability within the country and potentially affecting other regions like Sindh and Punjab. According to reports, the Pakistani establishment has accused the previous Afghan Government and India of allegedly supporting anti-Pakistan armed groups, specifically consisting of TTP fighters and Baloch Separatists.

Despite the Taliban's victory in August, Pakistan continues to hold the belief that terrorists are utilising Afghan territory as a launching pad for their operations. Contrary to this, the Taliban argue that the issue at hand is an internal matter specific to Pakistan (Siddiqui 2022; Yousafzai & Shahzad 2022). The possibility exists that Maulvi Faqir Mohammed, a prominent member of the TTP, could have been the intended recipient of a drone strike conducted by Pakistan in December 2021 in the Kunar province. However, it is important to note that the missile failed to explode upon impact in the vicinity of his residence (Mir 2022). According to Khan (2022), Mohammad Khurasani, the senior leader and spokesperson of the TTP, was assassinated in a targeted attack in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province in January 2022. The statement implies that Pakistani intelligence agencies have been closely monitoring the TTP leadership and affiliated fighters, operating on both sides of the Durand Line. The emergence of ISKP, also known as Daesh, poses a significant security threat to Pakistan. Reports have been released concerning the activities conducted by ISIS in the volatile states of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. The ISKP has asserted accountability for the two most fatal suicide attacks of the week. The initial attack took place at a Shia mosque in Peshawar, resulting in the tragic loss of 64 lives and leaving numerous others injured. According to Aljazeera (2022), the second attack occurred in the Sibi district of Balochistan, resulting in the tragic loss of seven paramilitary troops and leaving numerous others injured. Pakistan could potentially face a significant increase in violence in the future due to the aforementioned factors. Multiple terrorist organisations have formed alliances and coordinated their strategies effectively to ad-

vance the Jihad agenda in the region. The attempts at negotiations between Pakistan and TTP, facilitated by the Afghan Taliban in Kabul, were unsuccessful. The Pakistan government rejected the demands put forth by TTP, which included the complete withdrawal of the military from tribal areas and the implementation of *Sharia law* in those regions.

Several key observations derived from this discussion include:

1. Recent events involving the Taliban 2.0 have posed significant challenges to how regional security is perceived.

2. The recent shift in leadership within the Taliban highlights the transformation of a once violent group into a governing body that now holds power over Afghanistan's government and administration. The Taliban have come to understand that in an increasingly interconnected world, acts of terror and uncivil behaviour are no longer tolerated. They recognise that engaging in such behaviour is unlikely to receive backing from religious institutions and could potentially lead to dissatisfaction among their followers.

3. Given the economic crisis in Afghanistan, the influx of refugees, and various other challenges, it is imperative for regional security to be bolstered through active participation in multiple areas of cooperation.

4. It appears that Taliban 2.0's Afghanistan is currently experiencing the infiltration of

various armed factions seeking a secure operating base amidst the unstable conditions.

This discussion presents a new perspective on the Taliban's regional positioning, suggesting that it may be influenced by the changing global political landscape.

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