



First press conference by the Taliban after the takeover of Kabul, August 17, 2021 (Kyodo)

Chapter 1

Great Power Politics over Afghanistan after the U.S. Withdrawal

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Summary

As U.S. forces were withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Taliban, an insurgent group in the country, took over its capital Kabul on August 15, 2021, leading to the collapse of the internationally backed democratic government of the country. With its forces withdrawn, the United States is pursuing measures for containing terror threats originating from Afghanistan through an “over-the-horizon” approach. The key stakeholders in the region favoring engagement with the Taliban are Pakistan, which has maintained close ties with the Taliban; China, which fears the spillover of terrorism and extremism to the neighboring Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; Russia, which worries about destabilization of its Central Asian allies; and Iran, which is concerned about the safety of Shia Muslims in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, India, which strenuously supported the former democratic regime, watches the Taliban takeover with wariness.

What these six countries call on the Taliban to do are not so far apart from each other: containing the threat of terrorism originating from Afghanistan, establishing an ethnically inclusive political structure, and respecting the rights of minorities and women—albeit with differences in order of priority and degree. Nevertheless, the six countries are not aligned in how to deal with the Taliban in practice. China, Russia, and Iran, the countries willing to embrace the Islamist group, have touted the rapid collapse of the western-backed democratic regime in Kabul and the Taliban’s return to power as a failure of the United States and criticize Washington’s reluctance to engage with the Taliban. However, at least to the point of writing, even the countries favoring engagement have not been able to secure what they demanded from the Taliban. The latitude for the Taliban to meet the demands of the key stakeholders is constrained in part by the growing presence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), an Islamist movement that challenges the Taliban.

There are some efforts to align the respective approaches toward the Taliban among the key stakeholders, including hosting multilateral meetings that transcend their differences in stance, which raises the hope for the emergence of cooperation involving all of the key stakeholders. In reality, however, the issue of how to deal with Afghanistan under the Taliban is more likely to become an additional source of conflict among the regional countries and between the United States and China and Russia, which are already in a strategic competition.

Keywords

Afghanistan Taliban Islamic State Khorasan Province United States
Pakistan China Russia Iran India

1. The Taliban's Takeover of Kabul

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban, an Afghan insurgent group ousted from power in 2001, seized control of the capital, Kabul, and President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, resulting in the unexpectedly rapid collapse of its internationally backed democratic regime. This happened as the Joseph Biden administration, having inherited the 2020 U.S.-Taliban peace agreement, was withdrawing the U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the deadline of August 31, 2021.

Since the takeover of Kabul, the Taliban have sought to set themselves apart from their previous reign from 1996 to 2001. The group announced respect for women's rights and amnesty for Afghans who had cooperated with the previous government, pledged to not allow anyone to use the Afghan soil for activities against other countries, and expressed its intention to form an inclusive government that would not be dominated by the Taliban and ethnic Pashtuns, from which most of the members of the group hail. Nevertheless, the interim government that has since been announced by the Taliban is far from inclusive, and the future of the Afghan state is becoming increasingly uncertain.

Meanwhile, the rapidly evolving situation brings attention to the moves of not only the United States but also the key stakeholders around Afghanistan.



U.S. Marine Corps deployed to the airport in Kabul (Balkis Press/ABACA/Kyodo News Images)

The actors that have a role in the Afghanistan issue are wide-ranging, with even small, geographically distant countries such as Qatar playing an important part. That said, the key stakeholders that can influence the course of the Afghan state are the five countries that U.S.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken mentioned when proposing a conference hosted by the United Nations (UN) on peace in Afghanistan. These countries are: Pakistan, China, and Iran, which share a border with Afghanistan; Russia, which backs the Central Asian Republics on Afghanistan's northern border; and India, which has historically had close ties with Afghanistan.

The questions here are as follows. How do the United States and these five countries view the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan? What interests do they have, and how are they responding to the developments in the country? Furthermore, what are the implications of the relationships and interactions among the key stakeholders for the future trajectory of the Afghan state and, conversely, what will be the impacts of the developments in Afghanistan on their relationships? This chapter addresses these questions.

2. U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan

(1) The Two Decades of War on Terror in Afghanistan

The history of U.S. engagement with Afghanistan traces back to the 1980s. In response to the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan to support its communist government in late 1979, the United States launched a proxy war against the Soviet forces in the country, backing Islamic militants in cooperation with its ally Pakistan. After the Soviet withdrawal, however, Washington lost interest in Afghanistan, which would be mired in civil war in the first half of the 1990s. In this process, the Taliban rose to power and declared establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996. The Islamist group ruled the country with their radical interpretation of Islamic law, including suppression of human rights, and sheltered Osama bin Laden, the leader of the international terrorist outfit al Qaeda, which fueled concern in the United States.¹

Against this backdrop, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States occurred in 2001. Washington demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden who masterminded the attacks, along with other members of the al Qaeda leadership,

but the Taliban refused. Consequently, the George W. Bush administration declared a “Global War on Terror” and launched military operations in Afghanistan in October. The United States and its allies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in collaboration with the Northern Alliance that had been resisting the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, quickly overthrew the Taliban government. In December 2001, an interim government was formed based on an agreement among the major factions in the country, excluding the Taliban. By 2004, progress was made in establishing a democratic regime, including adoption of a new constitution and the election of Hamid Karzai in the first presidential election.

The Taliban, however, did not simply disappear. Their leadership and fighters fled across the border into western Pakistan. They resurrected their organization under the protection and support of Pakistan’s Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) and gradually expanded their influence from southern Afghanistan through cross-border attacks. By 2006, the deterioration of security conditions in Afghanistan was evident.²

In an effort to push back the Taliban’s growing influence, the United States and NATO allies stepped up counterinsurgency operations and increased their troop strength. The most dramatic move was the 30,000-strong surge announced by the Barack Obama administration at the end of 2009. At this time, it was unveiled that the transfer of security authority to the Afghan government and the gradual drawdown of U.S. forces would begin in July 2011. In May 2014, it was announced that the U.S. and NATO combat operations in Afghanistan would be completed in the end of the year. It was also announced that less than 10,000 troops would remain to train the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and engage in counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda and allied groups. Most of these troops were to withdraw by the end of 2016. In line with this plan, the combat operations of NATO forces, including U.S. forces, ceased by the end of 2014. In the meantime, the United States killed al Qaeda leader bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011.

Since 2015, however, the Taliban gained further momentum, and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), a branch of the self-styled Islamic State (IS),

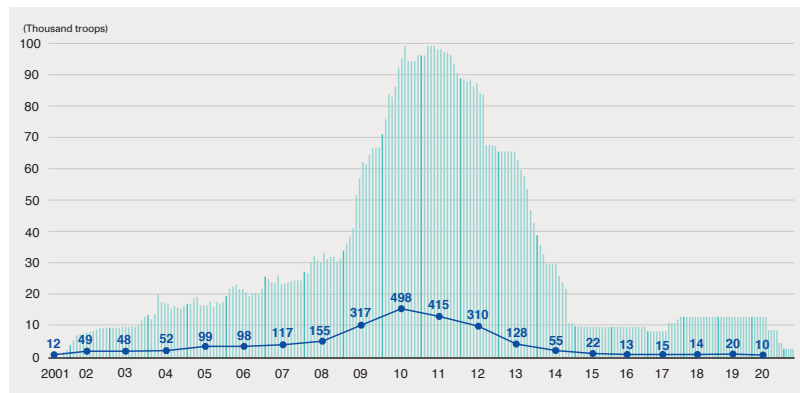
entered Afghanistan, negating the plan to withdraw U.S. forces by the end of 2016. Although U.S. President Donald Trump had championed during his electoral campaign to end the war in Afghanistan, he ordered a U.S. troop surge soon after taking office and stepped up military operations not only against al Qaeda and its affiliates and ISKP, but also against the Taliban.³

As it appeared that stabilization of Afghanistan was difficult, the United States began pursuing direct peace talks with the Taliban in 2018 brokered by Pakistan, a country with influence over the Islamist group. The talks culminated in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban peace agreement signed in Doha, Qatar. The agreement stipulated that the United States and its allies and partners withdraw their forces from Afghanistan within 14 months. Meanwhile, the Taliban promised to take steps to prevent any of its members as well as any group or individual, including al Qaeda, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies, and to start intra-Afghan negotiations with the government in Kabul on March 10. There were also classified annexes that included a commitment by the Taliban to refrain from attacking foreign military forces.⁴

However, a peace process based on this agreement was fraught with uncertainties from the beginning. The intra-Afghan talks between the Taliban and the government faced challenges even in their commencement. The Taliban did not slow their offensive against the ANDSF and were constantly reported as maintaining ties with al Qaeda. It was later suggested the agreement created a perception of abandonment among the Afghan government and the ANDSF, which in turn hastened their collapse.⁵

Nonetheless, the Biden administration, inaugurated in January 2021, continued the drawdown of U.S. forces, albeit with an extended deadline. Its position was clear: the goals that the United States had envisioned at the beginning of this war in 2001—bringing the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks to justice and reducing the threat of terrorism originating from Afghanistan—were already achieved, and it was the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people to choose how the Afghan state should be run, with all the necessary tools which had already been provided by the international community.⁶ Though U.S. forces continued to attack the Taliban

Figure 1.1. Number of troops and casualties of U.S. forces in Afghanistan



Note: The bar graph shows the number of troops (left axis), and the line graph shows the number of casualties.

Source: Compiled by the author based on Twitter, @AFP, July 6, 2021.

fighters to support the Afghan government during the withdrawal process,⁷ they did not militarily stop the Taliban from taking control of Kabul. Amidst the chaos that followed the fall of the capital, the withdrawal of U.S. forces was completed on August 30.

(2) U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan after the Taliban Takeover

President Biden explained that the U.S. military withdrawal was necessary because, while the threat of terrorism has spread across the world over the past two decades and can no longer be contained effectively through large-scale troop deployments in Afghanistan, other strategic challenges have emerged, such as the intensifying competition with China and Russia and the threat of cyberattacks and nuclear proliferation. Biden categorically stated that the sole vital interest the United States has in Afghanistan is to prevent the country from becoming a hotbed of terrorism again and serving as a launchpad for terrorist attacks on the United States and friendly countries.⁸

The shift in focus from the two-decade war on terror in the Greater Middle

East, including Afghanistan, to the great power competition with China and Russia is part of the long-term trend in U.S. security policy articulated in the 2017 National Security Strategy under the previous administration. Notwithstanding the mixed views on how the withdrawal process was handled, few Americans advocate for continuing to put significant energy and security resources into Afghanistan. Washington calls on the Taliban to not shelter terrorist organizations, respect human rights, especially women's and minorities' rights, and establish an inclusive government. It maintains, however, that they should be pursued "through diplomacy, economic tools, and rallying the rest of the world for support."⁹

The al Qaeda core has not abandoned its stronghold in Afghanistan despite U.S. military pressure. This is also why they have been contained by U.S. counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.¹⁰ In one to two years' time, however, al Qaeda is expected to resurrect itself up to the level of being able to attack the U.S. mainland.¹¹ Furthermore, ISKP, hostile toward the United States like al Qaeda, has resurged since 2020, albeit weakening from 2016 to 2020 under attacks by U.S. forces, ANDSF, and the Taliban. ISKP carried out a suicide bombing near Kabul airport in August 2021. There are indications that it has planned terrorist attacks in countries beyond Afghanistan for the past several years.¹² In congressional testimony in October 2021, a senior official of the U.S. Department of Defense said ISKP could acquire the capability to attack the U.S. mainland in around six months.¹³

The U.S. government attests that these threats can be dealt with through an "over the horizon" approach, without a military presence in Afghanistan. Many have, however, pointed out the difficulties involved.¹⁴ While counterterrorism operations using either drones or carrier-based aircraft in the Indian Ocean are not impossible, the deployment of aircraft carriers could hinder carrier operations in the Pacific. And while drone operations are seemingly promising, the United States does not have bases in neighboring countries to operate them. The option of borrowing bases in Central Asian countries, used in the early stages of the war on terror, has been met with strong opposition from Russia, which exerts influence on these countries. Although drones can be operated from U.S. bases in the Gulf states, they are geographically distant and doing so would be operationally inefficient. Above

all, the United States critically lacks the intelligence-gathering capabilities needed to carry out an attack, having neither a base in Afghanistan for U.S. intelligence operations, nor local partners, such as the Afghan government and military, intelligence agencies, and Afghan collaborators. Senior U.S. military officials and others acknowledge that the over-the-horizon approach will not be easy to accomplish at this time.¹⁵

A key question, then, is to what extent the Taliban are willing and able to fulfill their commitment to prevent international terrorist attacks originating from Afghanistan, as was included in the peace agreement with the United States. To examine this question, the responses to al Qaeda and ISKP need to be considered separately. The Taliban and ISKP are enemies and have engaged in fierce fighting with each other, which raises the expectation that the Taliban have willingness to dislodge ISKP.¹⁶

Even so, it is questionable what the Taliban can do alone against ISKP, which has been contained in part by the counterterrorism operations of the U.S. forces and ANDSF.¹⁷ Following the suicide bombing in late August 2021, ISKP has continued to wage attacks in Afghanistan targeting the Taliban and minorities, including bombings of Shia mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar and an assault on a military hospital in Kabul. In November, the UN special representative for Afghanistan expressed the view that the Taliban have been unable to contain ISKP, which has expanded its presence to nearly every province in Afghanistan and whose number of terrorist attacks in 2021 reached 334, more than five times the number in 2020.¹⁸ Although the Taliban conduct mop-up operations against ISKP and play up their achievements, the operations are said to be so crude that they may inversely help ISKP's recruitment.¹⁹ Furthermore, members of the military and intelligence agencies of the former government are reportedly joining ISKP fearing the Taliban's retribution.²⁰

Perhaps in light of the Taliban's shortcomings, Mark Milley, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, mentioned shortly after the withdrawal that U.S. forces may coordinate with the Taliban on campaigns against ISKP.²¹ U.S. forces and the Taliban have a record of effectively fighting together against ISKP.²² The hurdles

to U.S.-Taliban cooperation nevertheless remain high, considering the stated aim of the Taliban insurgency—driving out foreign troops from Afghanistan—and the propaganda war waged by ISKP, claiming the Taliban are a U.S. ally and not a true jihadist organization.²³ The Taliban, for their part, have refused to cooperate with

the United States, insisting they can deal with ISKP on their own. The commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command has said as well that the Taliban are not a partner in counterterrorism.²⁴

Meanwhile, the Taliban have maintained cooperative ties with al Qaeda, despite their commitments under the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement.²⁵ Underlying this are the Taliban's receipt of diverse support from al Qaeda and their view that cooperating with the group is essential for surviving the competition with ISKP and other potential adversaries.²⁶ A senior Taliban official has asserted that the agreement with the United States does not include an obligation to sever ties with third parties, and the Taliban have reportedly sent a notice to foreign militant groups, including al Qaeda, to register. In view of such information, the best that can be hoped for under the peace agreement is limited to the Taliban monitoring the activities of the groups while tolerating their presence in Afghan territory, and preventing international terrorist attacks.²⁷

It is unknown at this time whether such measures will be sufficient to address the threat of international terrorism by al Qaeda and its affiliates. Indeed, the Taliban do not share al Qaeda's goal of global jihad and, insofar as they seek international recognition of the Taliban-led government, there is some rationale for believing they have a motive to prevent the use of Afghan soil for terrorist attacks



Foreign Minister Qureshi of Pakistan visiting Kabul, October 2021 (Xinhua/Kyodo News Images)

on other countries.²⁸ Even then, it is doubtful that the Taliban, an insurgent group for the past two decades, can act as a governing entity and sufficiently curb international terrorism of not only al Qaeda but also other terrorist organizations in the territory. Moreover, al Qaeda's polarized chain of command is believed to make it difficult for the Taliban to monitor and control its activities.²⁹ Exercising excessive control may propel al Qaeda and its affiliates to turn against the Taliban and become a threat to the group.³⁰

Nevertheless, as long as difficulties are entailed in conducting an effective counterterrorism operation "over the horizon," the United States does not have the option of totally ceasing to motivate the Taliban to honor their pledge of preventing terrorism. The United States can use both stick and carrot to accomplish this, including recognizing the Taliban government, unfreezing the Afghan central bank's assets in the United States, imposing additional unilateral or multilateral sanctions or lifting them, and providing humanitarian assistance and economic aid.

These are, however, not necessarily easy tools to utilize. Many of them are subject to certain constraints given the increasingly serious and deteriorating humanitarian and economic situation in Afghanistan due to the collapse of the government. Since the tools are also used to encourage the Taliban to form an inclusive government and respect human rights, the necessary coordination among the different goals will be challenging. Above all, the effectiveness of these tools in motivating the Taliban to curb terrorism and, furthermore, form an inclusive government and respect human rights will largely depend on the approach taken by other key stakeholders, the majority of which are conspicuously positive about engaging with the Taliban compared to Washington.

3. Key Stakeholders' Policy toward Afghanistan

(1) Pakistan

Pakistan is arguably one of the countries with the greatest influence over Afghanistan under the Taliban, owing to the covert support it has provided to the group, despite

its official denial. In the West's proxy war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, Pakistan directly provided support to Islamist militants in Afghanistan, including those who later formed the core of the Taliban and al Qaeda.³¹ During the subsequent Afghan civil war in the 1990s, Pakistan helped the Taliban seize power. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Islamabad outwardly cooperated with the U.S. war on terror and severed ties with the Taliban, but clandestinely sheltered fleeing Taliban leadership and fighters and provided sanctuary along the border, training, financing support, and advice.³² This double-dealing led to the deterioration of its relations with Kabul and Washington; however, since 2018, Pakistan has leveraged its influence to help realize the U.S.-Taliban peace talks, at the request of the Trump administration.

Behind Pakistan's backing of the Taliban is the concept of "strategic depth" widely espoused in the country. While Pakistan has a longstanding and serious territorial dispute with India over the sovereignty of Kashmir, it has also faced border challenges from Afghanistan. This has raised concerns in Pakistan that its interests would be violated via Afghanistan if India and Afghanistan were to collude. In particular, Islamabad has fears about interference in the Pashtun and Baloch separatist movements in the western area bordering Afghanistan. To prevent this, Pakistan—especially its Army—has felt it necessary to intervene in Afghanistan to establish a pro-Pakistan regime and exclude India's influence from the country.³³

This foundation, coupled with the close ties developed with India by the Afghan democratic government under both Karzai and Ghani, led some Pakistanis to welcome its collapse.³⁴ After the Taliban takeover of Kabul, the Pakistani government said it would not rush to recognize the Taliban regime, but it has also urged the international community to "give Taliban a chance."³⁵

This longstanding close relationship with the Taliban is unique to Pakistan and may give the country an advantage over other key stakeholders in shaping the future of Afghanistan. Additionally, members of the Haqqani Network, who are particularly close to the Pakistani security establishment within the Taliban, hold key posts in the interim government announced in September 2021.

That said, Pakistan's influence over the Taliban is not so absolute as to steer it freely. The previous Taliban government refused to recognize Pakistan's border claims, as did successive Afghan governments. Nor did the Taliban agree to extradite bin Laden immediately after the 9/11 attacks, despite Pakistan's persuasion. Above all, as discussed below, the Taliban to this day have maintained ties with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a notorious militant group which has targeted the Pakistani government and military.

Pakistani influence over the Taliban, by no means absolute, is expected to decline further with the group's takeover of Afghanistan and the withdrawal of U.S. forces. During its insurgency, the Taliban were significantly dependent on Pakistan's support, especially its provision of a sanctuary across the border, which could be leveraged by Pakistan to influence the Taliban.³⁶ Besides, the Taliban leadership and their families were sheltered in Quetta in southwest Pakistan, enabling the country to put pressure on the Taliban.³⁷ Now that the group controls most of Afghanistan and has become its governing entity, however, Pakistan's backing will become less valuable to the Taliban. While they will continue to fight ISKP, the Taliban have little necessity for a sanctuary on the Pakistani side of the border if there is hardly any need to fear airstrikes by ANDSF and the U.S. forces. Once Afghanistan stabilizes under Taliban rule, the leadership will likely repatriate their families to the country. Furthermore, other countries have begun to provide some support to the Taliban that seized power.³⁸ The Taliban, for their part, do not wish to depend on Pakistan and have sought to diversify their international patronage.³⁹ If this is realized, Pakistan, which has hardly any comparative advantage in the field of statebuilding, will not be indispensable for the Taliban.

As its influence diminishes, Pakistan will be pressed to address two issues in its relations with Afghanistan under the Taliban. The first is the threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. Threat here refers to that posed by TTP and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). TTP, a terrorist outfit that campaigns for Islamic rule in Pakistan and has deep ties with al Qaeda, caused a havoc by conducting numerous deadly attacks in Pakistan from 2007 to 2014. Then it sustained great losses due to the counterterrorism operations by the Pakistani

military and U.S. forces and fled to Afghanistan; however, TTP resurrected itself there and has intensified cross-border attacks from Afghanistan to Pakistan since around 2019.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the extensive support they have received from Pakistan, the Taliban have maintained a close relationship with TTP, to which the Pakistani government and military are implacably hostile.⁴¹ Seeking to emulate the Taliban's "success," TTP has further stepped up its offensive in 2021.⁴² On the other hand, BLA advocates for the secession and independence of Balochistan province in southwestern Pakistan, and in recent years, has been known for conducting attacks on Chinese interests in the country. BLA has also carried out cross-border attacks from Afghanistan into Pakistani territory.

Since BLA seemingly does not have close ties to the Taliban, the Taliban are reportedly enhancing their crackdown on BLA in response to Pakistan's request.⁴³ However, it will not be easy to elicit an effective response to TTP from the Taliban, considering Pakistan's failure to force the Taliban to sever ties with TTP or adequately contain it even when the Taliban were more dependent on Pakistan's support to sustain their insurgency. After placing Kabul under their control, the Taliban stated that "The issue of the TTP is one that Pakistan will have to deal with" and opted for brokering peace talks between the Pakistani government and TTP rather than cracking down on or expelling the latter.⁴⁴ This effort resulted in the announcement on November 8 by the Pakistani government that a one-month ceasefire would take effect with TTP and that it was pursuing dialogue with the group, but the dialogue went nowhere and TTP announced the resumption of attacks on December 9, condemning the government for violating the terms of the dialogue.⁴⁵

The Pakistani government has reached a peace agreement nine times in the past with anti-state Islamist militant groups including TTP, none of which have lasted. Even if a new peace deal with TTP is materialized, some of its subgroups dissatisfied with the peace process are likely to break away and continue their attacks or join ISKP, given the highly decentralized nature of TTP.⁴⁶ Many TTP defectors have already joined ISKP, which conducts terrorist attacks also in Pakistan.⁴⁷ Given the loss of the U.S. military's counterterrorism operations that

had traditionally dealt significant blows to TTP and other terrorist outfits, Pakistan will face an increased threat of terrorism.

The second issue is refugees from Afghanistan. After the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, Pakistan has urged the international community for measures to prevent a humanitarian crisis. While Islamabad's desire may be to prevent the collapse of Pakistan-backed Taliban rule, it appears there is also an intention to avoid a large influx of refugees due to a worsening humanitarian situation. The number of refugees to Afghanistan's neighboring countries did not surge immediately after the fall of Kabul.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the number of refugees is expected to increase as the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan deteriorates.

Pakistan is already home to 1.4 million Afghan refugees and does not intend to host new refugees without the capacity to absorb more.⁴⁹ That said, if the situation devolved into a refugee crisis, the resulting chaos in the border region would force the Pakistani government to deploy significant military forces there to ensure stability. Such measures along the border between northwestern Pakistan and Afghanistan could, however, provoke a backlash from local Pashtuns, who have strong antipathy toward the federal government of Pakistan. This could increase support for the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which the Pakistani government has been trying to suppress in recent years.⁵⁰

Concerns over the refugee issue are thought to be one of the reasons why Pakistan, like the international community, is calling on the Taliban to establish an inclusive political structure. Despite its close ties with the Taliban, Pakistan has repeatedly called for the establishment of an inclusive government, stirring resentment among the Taliban.⁵¹ An Afghan government that is at least to some extent ethnically inclusive would be desirable for Pakistan, as it could bring stability to the country and prevent another civil war, thereby allowing Islamabad to avoid a refugee crisis.⁵²

Given these issues and the recognition of the limits of its influence, Pakistan has refrained from unilaterally recognizing the Taliban government and has urged the international community to continue engagement with the Islamist group. Moreover, Pakistan is working in tandem with countries that, though harboring

some concerns over the Taliban's Afghanistan with respect to counterterrorism and inclusive political structure, are more forward-leaning about engaging with the Taliban compared to the West. These countries are China, Russia, and Iran.

(2) China

Beijing's policy on Afghanistan has been strongly defined by its concerns on stability in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region adjacent to Afghanistan, not to say China has no economic interests in the country.⁵³ Chinese authorities have forcefully suppressed the smoldering separatist movement in Xinjiang where Muslims are the majority, which led to an Afghan policy prioritizing the insulation of Xinjiang against instability originating from neighboring Afghanistan—in particular, the prevention of Afghanistan's transformation into a base for Uyghur dissidents.

As part of this policy, China began to develop relations with the Taliban. During the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Uyghur militants joined the anti-Soviet jihad and established ties with other Islamic militant groups that later became active in Central and South Asia, including Afghanistan.⁵⁴ Knowing this connection, China reached out to those militant groups in the 1990s, through the intermediary of Pakistan's ISI, to prevent them from turning hostile toward China and to isolate Uyghur outfits from the network of Islamist militant groups. Among such groups are al Qaeda and the Taliban, the latter of which were sheltering the Uyghur separatist militant group, the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).⁵⁵ This effort resulted in the Taliban assuring the Chinese that they would not allow anyone to use the Afghan soil in a way that infringed on Chinese interests.⁵⁶

After the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001, China was cooperative toward the U.S.-led nation-building in Afghanistan. It quickly recognized the transitional government and, though refusing to join the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), offered aid and investment to the country.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Beijing continued to harbor ambivalence toward the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. While China feared that a hasty withdrawal of the U.S. forces would

destabilize the western neighbor, it also considered that the U.S. presence itself was a destabilizing factor that distorts Afghan politics and that the purpose of the United States stationing troops there was to control China's backyard.⁵⁸ In the 2010s, China started to strengthen relations with the Taliban, perceiving that much of Afghanistan would inevitably come under Taliban control and that cooperation between Afghan militant groups and Uyghurs must be thwarted. Eventually, China also began to use its relationship with the Taliban as leverage to facilitate peace talks between the Islamist group and the Afghan government.⁵⁹ In this process, Taliban officials started to visit China, and in late July 2021, Wang Yi, state councilor and minister of foreign affairs, met with the visiting Taliban delegation.

Due to this background, immediately after the fall of Kabul, the reaction from the Chinese Foreign Ministry was largely positive. It expressed hopes for continuing the development of cooperative relations with Afghanistan and an intention to play a role in the country's reconstruction, noting the Taliban said they hope to grow friendly relations with China.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, Beijing condemned the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, saying it had only left the country in chaos.⁶¹

That said, setting rhetoric aside, the terror threat from Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal is a great concern for China. ETIM, which China views with most hostility, was sometimes targeted by U.S. counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan because the group had worked with the Taliban and its affiliates.⁶² Going forward, however, there will no longer be such operations.

China, wary of the spillover of instability from the post-U.S. Afghanistan, has been preparing for dealing with the increased terror threat from before. In addition to strengthening surveillance of the Sino-Afghan border to prevent militant groups from crossing the border, Beijing has taken measures to protect against penetration via Tajikistan, with which it shares a far longer border than with Afghanistan. China installed a monitoring outpost in the border area in Tajikistan, conducted counterterrorism exercises with the country, and in 2016, launched a quadrilateral counterterrorism framework comprised of China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In October 2021, a senior official from the Tajik Internal Affairs Ministry said China is expected to build an outpost for the Tajik special forces unit near

Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan.⁶³ Joint counterterrorism measures have also been espoused with Russia and enshrined in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes both China and Russia. More recently, China and Russia jointly conducted an exercise based on scenarios related to terrorism in northwest China in August and the eight SCO member states staged a counterterrorism exercise in southwest Russia in September 2021.

In parallel with these measures, it is also essential for China to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a base for anti-Chinese terror groups. The Taliban reassured during their delegation's visit to China in July 2021 that they would not allow anyone to use the Afghan soil for activities against China.⁶⁴ Moreover, after the takeover of Kabul, a Taliban spokesperson told the Chinese newspaper *Global Times* that many ETIM members had already left Afghanistan.⁶⁵ He declined to say, however, whether the Taliban would hand over ETIM members if China were to request it in the future.

Regarding ETIM, a May 2021 report submitted to the UN Security Council states that the group has several hundred members in Badakhshan and other provinces and has ties to groups such as al Qaeda and ISKP.⁶⁶ There are also reports that ETIM had joined the Taliban's fight against ANDSF.⁶⁷ The authenticity of the Taliban's claim about ETIM leaving Afghanistan cannot be verified, and the Taliban spokesperson did not give the exact number of ETIM members who are believed to have left Afghanistan.⁶⁸ Furthermore, another news report suggests that the Taliban government did not expel Uyghur militants but merely relocated them from Badakhshan province neighboring China to different areas in Afghanistan.⁶⁹ In the late 1990s, the previous Taliban government, at the request of China, urged ETIM to cease its anti-China activities. This resulted only in ETIM members being subsumed into the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which was also active in Afghanistan.⁷⁰

For China, the terror threat originating from Afghanistan is not limited to ETIM. Since the late 2000s, China has become unable to deflect the hostility of Islamist militant groups, even with Pakistan's mediation.⁷¹ Al Qaeda has often expressed solidarity with anti-China jihad and Uyghur militants following the 2009 Urumqi

riots.⁷² The self-styled Islamic State has also viewed China as an enemy alongside the United States, India, and Israel, and in 2017, issued a message threatening retaliation for China's repression of Uyghurs.⁷³ In addition, unless Islamabad succeeds in containing the threats of TTP, it is highly likely that China-related targets in Pakistan will be attacked by the group. This has been the case in the past. In 2012, TTP killed a Chinese tourist, claiming it was a retribution for the killing of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In April 2021, TTP bombed a hotel in Quetta where the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan was staying. The recent growing attention on Chinese human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is likely to aggravate the hostility toward China from jihadist groups.

China is determined not to follow the footsteps of the United States and the Soviet Union, which became bogged down to a protracted, unwinnable war through direct military intervention in Afghanistan.⁷⁴ Neither do the Taliban plan to cooperate with other countries in counterterrorism and intelligence.⁷⁵ Thus, Beijing faces the question of how to get the Taliban to seriously address the anti-China terror threat.

One of the tools likely to be used as leverage is the provision of the economic benefits, in which China has comparative advantage, along with the well-established channels that Pakistan, China's foremost ally, maintains with the Taliban. China indeed announced \$31 million in humanitarian assistance right after the Taliban takeover, which was followed by the China-Taliban agreement in October 2021 to establish a working level mechanism to strengthen dialogue. A Chinese state-run newspaper reported that Chinese businesses are exploring investment opportunities in Afghanistan under Taliban rule.⁷⁶ The Taliban, for their part, have pinned high hopes on China in this respect.

However, the effectiveness of such an approach is debatable. As in the case of the United States, even if the Taliban wish to curb terrorist attacks from Afghanistan against China, it is doubtful that the Taliban have the capacity to accomplish this, including constraining the activities of its adversary, ISKP. The group has attempted to capitalize on the Taliban's cooperative stance with China. In its statement of responsibility for the October 2021 mosque bombing

in Kunduz, northern Afghanistan, ISKP stated that the perpetrator was a Uyghur and described the attack as a retribution against the Shia Muslims and the Taliban, alleging that they are expelling Uyghurs in response to demands from China. It is pointed out that ISKP is trying to position itself as a protector of Uyghurs and seek to attract Uyghur militants.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, the limits of Taliban's ability to contain the threat of anti-China terrorism raise another challenge for Beijing: the security of Chinese interests in Afghanistan. Unless their security is ensured, it is natural for China to be cautious about making actual investments. However, the conundrum here is that, in that case, China will not be able to use economic incentives as leverage to stir the Taliban.

The extent to which China is interested in Afghanistan's economic potential itself remains questionable. Due to security and corruption issues in Afghanistan, Chinese investment in the country has been exceedingly limited vis-à-vis its potential. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) memorandum signed in 2016 has not led to any concrete projects, and the copper mining and oil field drilling projects for which Chinese companies were awarded contracts around 2010 have made little progress.⁷⁸ This was when the Taliban had assured the security of the copper mining project.⁷⁹ The scarcity of China's contribution to Afghanistan's economic reconstruction has even attracted criticisms from the United States.⁸⁰

As investment projects under BRI in neighboring Pakistan typify, despite its willingness to launch eye-catching economic initiatives in an unstable environment, China is noticeably cautious about the actual implementation of investment projects under such circumstances. For the foreseeable future, a variety of investment proposals is likely to be put forward by China and used as tools for Beijing to court the Taliban. However, whether the proposals will actually proceed to implementation is another matter.

Meanwhile, China is pursuing cooperation and coordination on this issue with Pakistan, Russia, and Iran, countries which share the basic tenets of the policies toward the Taliban—urging the Islamist group to curb terrorism and establish an inclusive regime, while criticizing the United States and its allies for their

reluctance to engage with the Taliban.⁸¹ This approach can be construed as China's attempt at gaining more effective collective leverage against the Taliban.

(3) Russia

Relations between the Taliban and Russia were formerly hostile. The failure of the Soviet intervention left Moscow with an aversion to any involvement in Afghanistan. The late 1990s, however, saw the rise of the Taliban which had links to international Islamic militant groups and Chechen dissidents, prompting Russia to back the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, together with Iran, India, and Central Asian countries.⁸² At the time, Afghanistan was turning into a base for militant groups that sought to destabilize Central Asian Republics, which Russia considers as under its sphere of influence, and Russia itself, such as IMU whose targets were Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. For this reason, Russia welcomed the toppling of the Taliban regime by the United States and NATO after the 9/11 attacks.⁸³

But, not long thereafter, Russia developed mixed feelings about the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. It recognized that the U.S. military presence kept the Afghan state from collapsing and prevented instability from spilling over into neighboring Central Asian countries and beyond into Russian borders. Like China, however, Russia became wary of the U.S. presence, viewing it as an attempt to secure American influence in central Eurasia.⁸⁴ This concern, coupled with the pessimistic view over the sustainability of the democratic regime in Kabul and emergence of ISKP as a common threat to the Taliban and Russia, drove the latter to build relations with the Taliban. Russia opened back channels with the Islamist group in 2015 and began to host dialogues between the Taliban and Afghan government officials in 2018.⁸⁵ At the same time, Russia explored solutions to the Afghan issue under multilateral initiatives, such as regional frameworks with the participation of China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian countries, as well as the Troika of U.S.-China-Russia.

Because of this backdrop, Moscow largely welcomed the Taliban's takeover of Kabul.⁸⁶ Russia has aligned its approach toward the Taliban with countries like

China and Pakistan, favoring engagement with the group. Moscow provided humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan in November 2021. The Taliban, for their part, have emphasized their good relations with Russia and assured that they would not allow anyone to use the Afghan soil for attacks against Russia and its neighbors.⁸⁷

At the same time, however, Russia's moves reveal wariness toward Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Russia has long developed cooperation with individual Central Asian Republics, as well as within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), on responses to contingencies and terrorist attacks on the border between Afghanistan and Central Asia.⁸⁸ The measures Moscow has taken since August 2021 include exercises with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, respectively, and the intensification CSTO exercises for responding to the terror threat spilling over from Afghanistan.⁸⁹ After the fall of Kabul, Russia reached an agreement with India, a country also wary of the Taliban, to strengthen intelligence cooperation on Afghanistan and terrorism, and confirmed with China on strengthening responses to terrorism and narcotics originating in Afghanistan.⁹⁰

What Russia worries is that terrorism and extremism will spread to Central Asian countries adjacent to Afghanistan and to Russia itself.⁹¹ Its concern is reportedly centered not on the Taliban exporting terrorism but on Afghanistan becoming a breeding ground for terrorism due to the Taliban's limited governing capacity.⁹² Moreover, among the Central Asian countries, Tajikistan in particular has accepted some Afghan refugees since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, raising concern of the infiltration of terrorists disguising themselves as refugees.⁹³

Afghanistan is home to various militant groups that target Central Asian countries and Russia, including ISKP and IMU, the latter of which has several hundred members.⁹⁴ Russia has partnered with the Taliban in dealing with ISKP and thus has shown confidence in the Taliban's sincerity to contain the rival jihadist group.⁹⁵ As already noted, however, the Taliban's ability as a governing entity to deal with ISKP is unknown.

Meanwhile, Russia faces the challenge of getting the Taliban to form an ethnically inclusive government. Russia is working in tandem with countries

like China, Pakistan, and Iran in this respect, but Moscow has been especially vocal about the importance of this issue.⁹⁶ Underlying this are considerations for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which have a strong interest in ensuring that ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks are not persecuted in Afghanistan, as well as concerns that a political setup that is not representative of Afghanistan's ethnic diversity would be unsustainable and could lead to a civil war.⁹⁷ In this regard, Tajikistan in particular adopts a hard-line stance against the Taliban. When the Taliban announced the interim government in September 2021, Russia refused to call it an inclusive setup, adding that it will continue to call on the Taliban to establish a government that represents all ethnic groups.⁹⁸

The experience in the Soviet era has kept Russia wary of direct involvement in Afghanistan,⁹⁹ and the influence Russia alone could have on the Taliban is less than Pakistan and China's. That said, Russia has a prominent presence in multilateral diplomacy on Afghanistan. In October 2021, Russia held a meeting of an extended Troika of U.S.-China-Russia-Pakistan (the United States was absent) as well as a Moscow Format meeting participated by China, India, Pakistan, Iran, five Central Asian countries, and the Taliban. The joint statement of the latter calls on the Taliban to form an inclusive government and urges the international community to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ Russia has participated in almost all of the high-level meetings on Afghanistan that have been held by the key stakeholders since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul.

(4) Iran

Iran, bordering western Afghanistan, has considerable political clout in the country through religious and cultural bonds with the Hazara and other Shia Muslims, who make up nearly 20% of Afghanistan's population, and with the Tajiks in the country who speak the Persian language of Dari.¹⁰¹ Relations between Iran and the Taliban have transformed dramatically over the past two decades. In the 1990s, the relationship was hostile. Iran provided substantial support to Burhanuddin Rabbani's government and subsequently the Northern Alliance, formed in northern Afghanistan by the factions that had constituted the Rabbani government after it

was ousted from Kabul. Some say such Iran's support far exceeded what Pakistan provided for the Taliban.¹⁰² Meanwhile, the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist movement, was hostile to Shia-dominated Iran and persecuted the Shia Hazara minority in Afghanistan. In 1998, Iran threatened a war against the Taliban with the mobilization of its military in response to the killing of Iranian diplomats and a journalist in northern Afghanistan.

Against this backdrop, Iran cooperated with the U.S. overthrow of Taliban rule and the establishment of a new regime in Afghanistan in 2001. However, as relations with the United States deteriorated over nuclear and other issues, Iran subsequently began to view U.S. forces in Afghanistan as a threat and shifted to building relations with the Taliban through dialogue and limited military assistance, while maintaining relations with the government of Kabul.¹⁰³ From the mid-2010s, Iran and the Taliban started cooperating to eliminate ISKP, a group that harbors far stronger hostility toward Shia-dominated Iran than the Taliban does, in the Iran-Afghanistan border areas controlled by the Taliban.¹⁰⁴

For this reason, the Iranian reaction to the Taliban's seizure of power was generally favorable. President Ebrahim Raisi hailed the U.S. failure as an opportunity to forge a lasting peace in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁵

Now that U.S. forces have withdrawn, Iran's concern is with preventing the Taliban and other Sunni Islamist organizations, such as ISKP, from persecuting Afghan Shia Muslims and conducting terrorist attacks against Iran from Afghanistan.¹⁰⁶ So far, the Taliban have taken some measures to reassure Tehran, such as appointing a Hazara as governor and allowing Shia religious events. The Taliban seem to try not to unnecessarily antagonize Tehran, given its record of supporting the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and the importance of economic relations with Iran, especially trade.¹⁰⁷ It is doubtful, however, that such rational calculations are shared down to the lowest levels of the group, with reports that Taliban members have been killing Hazara people since August 15.¹⁰⁸

Even more unclear is the suppression of other Sunni Islamist organizations. Iran has developed some kind of relationship with al Qaeda, albeit that does not mean the latter is simply a proxy for Tehran,¹⁰⁹ which keeps the risk of al Qaeda

infringing on Iranian interests low. ISKP is a real threat, however. The jihadist group has repeatedly targeted Hazara people in Afghanistan, including the May 2021 terrorist attack on a school and the October suicide bombing in Kunduz. It is an irony that Tehran, which used to hope for the U.S. withdrawal, has to face an increased threat of terrorism now—it was the U.S. counterterrorism operations that had kept ISKP at bay in Afghanistan.

Iran, like Pakistan, also has concerns over the influx of refugees from Afghanistan. To date, Iran has accepted the second largest number of Afghan refugees after Pakistan. Many Afghan refugees have sought refuge in Iran because of the relative ease of crossing the border. The Iranian government fears, however, that ISKP might infiltrate among the refugees.¹¹⁰ Although Iran has closed its borders as the Taliban advanced toward Kabul in August 2021, claiming it cannot accept any more refugees, more are expected to arrive in Iran if the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate.¹¹¹ In November 2021, it was estimated that 4,000 to 5,000 Afghan refugees were crossing the border into Iran every day.¹¹²

The establishment of an inclusive Afghan government is also a key concern for Iran, which has links to the Hazaras and Tajiks, and Tehran has been urging the Taliban for its realization. Following the announcement of the interim government in September 2021, Iran openly criticized its composition as not inclusive, calling on the Taliban once again to form a government that has representation from all political and ethnic groups in Afghanistan.¹¹³ Earlier, Iran condemned in strong terms the Taliban's use of force to suppress the National Resistance Front comprised mainly of Tajiks, which attempted to resist the Taliban until the end in Afghanistan's Panjshir Province.¹¹⁴

So far, Iran has remained steadfast in addressing these challenges through engagement with the Taliban rather than confrontation. In addition to providing humanitarian assistance, the October 2021 talks between the Iranian mission and the Taliban resulted in several agreements on economic relations, including facilitation of border trade.¹¹⁵ In November, an agreement was reached to supply 100 megawatts of electricity to the national electric power company of Afghanistan,

which has had difficulty paying for imported electricity since the Taliban takeover.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Iran has tried to coordinate its Afghan policy with other stakeholders, hosting a foreign ministers' meeting of Afghanistan's neighbors at the end of October participated by China, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

As regards its potential, Tehran has many levers it can use to put pressure on the Taliban. Iran's network in Afghanistan consists mainly of the Hazara and Tajik minorities but also extends to the dominant Pashtuns.¹¹⁷ Economically, Iran is Afghanistan's key trading partner, and it is virtually impossible to reach the sea from Afghanistan without transiting Iran or Pakistan, making Iran critically important for any other external powers to implement connectivity projects involving Afghanistan.

In addition, Iran maintains a hard-power instrument that could be utilized inside Afghanistan. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has deployed the Fatemiyoun Brigade, a militia made up of Afghan Hazara immigrants and refugees to Iran, to support the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war since 2013, reportedly sending a total of 50,000 fighters. The fighters have been being pulled back, however, as the Syrian civil war loses momentum, and observers have suggested they may be used in Afghanistan instead.¹¹⁸ The foreign minister of Iran once suggested that the Afghan democratic government use the Fatemiyoun Brigade to deal with ISKP.¹¹⁹ If Iran's interests were to be seriously harmed in and by Afghanistan under Taliban rule, it is conceivable that Iran could resort to pressure tactics using these levers.

(5) India

India was among the countries that supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in the 1990s. Although Pakistan's intervention in Afghanistan, including support for the Taliban, has been driven by the perceived "Indian threat," Delhi, which had developed close relations with successive Afghan governments before the Taliban took power in 1996, had historically been not so enthusiastic about leveraging its ties with Kabul against Islamabad.¹²⁰

But, in the late 1980s and onwards, India realized how detrimental an Afghanistan with Pakistan's significant influence could be—not only for Delhi's clout in the country, but also for India's own security. Completing the anti-Soviet proxy war in Afghanistan, Pakistan diverted the assets it had developed for supporting jihad from the country to Kashmir. The Pakistan Army and ISI trained fighters in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to send to support the massive insurgency that was raging in Indian-administered Kashmir and also deployed Islamic militants who had previously fought Soviet forces to Kashmir.¹²¹ Although the Taliban themselves were not systematically involved in the Kashmir insurgency, India, which heightened concerns on this development and viewed the Taliban as a puppet of Pakistan, supported the Northern Alliance in an effort to contain the Islamist group.¹²²

Therefore, after the 9/11 attacks, India looked favorably upon the democratic regime in Afghanistan that was established with the backing of the international community. India provided \$3 billion in economic cooperation, as well as training for administrative officials and security forces.¹²³ Even after the Taliban resurged and Washington began to explore a peace deal with the group, Delhi did not hide its concerns over the negative impact of the U.S. withdrawal and consistently supported the Ghani administration, while refraining from building an overt relationship with the Taliban.¹²⁴ Not until June 2021 were there reports about India's moves to build relations with the group. After Kabul fell, India immediately withdrew its embassy and had no official contact with the Taliban delegation in Qatar until late August.

After retaking Kabul, the Taliban said they attached importance to their relations with India.¹²⁵ Although the group is perceived as hostile to India, in fact the Taliban have appealed to Delhi since the 1990s, hoping to reduce their dependence on Pakistan. Meanwhile, in the Indian government, there had been a growing tendency since the mid-2000s to view the Taliban as a reasonable party that can be talked with, and some behind-the-scenes contacts were reportedly made through intelligence agencies.¹²⁶ Still, there is persistent concern that a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan poses an increasing terror threat to India.

That said, it is not likely that India's worst fears will materialize—a return to the 1990s situation when Afghanistan became a hotbed of terrorism, which in turn spiraled the violence in Indian Kashmir out of control. As noted above, such developments at the time were largely spearheaded by Pakistan, which is no longer able to do the same despite maintaining relations with anti-India militant groups. The international community evidently keeps a closer eye on state sponsorship of terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In this regard, since it was placed on the gray list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in 2018, the fear of being blacklisted by the Task Force, which could result in economic suffocation, has discouraged Pakistan from making any conspicuous moves in support of terrorism.¹²⁷ Additionally, there are now powerful anti-Pakistan Islamist organizations such as TTP that did not exist in the past. They have ties to anti-India militant outfits, which are still supported by the Pakistani military and ISI, and thus bolstering support for the latter will unintentionally energize the former, leading to an escalation of terrorist attacks against Pakistan itself.¹²⁸

Still, even if Pakistan does not substantially bolster support for anti-India militancy and the situation in Indian Kashmir does not deteriorate as it did in the 1990s, terrorist attacks in Kashmir and mainland India could still very well increase. Pakistan-based militant outfits, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which are primarily focused on attacks in mainland India and Indian Kashmir but also have a base in Afghanistan and ties to the Taliban, have gained momentum from the Taliban's success.¹²⁹ The JeM chief met with the Taliban leadership after the fall of Kabul and asked for support for the anti-India jihad in Kashmir.¹³⁰ The Taliban's wavering position on Indian rule in Kashmir, which such outfits view as oppressive to Muslims,¹³¹ leaves open the possibility for the Taliban to step in. There also is the threat of al Qaeda and ISKP that have been freed from U.S. counterterrorism pressure.

Moreover, India is likely to have difficulties in sustaining its position as Afghanistan's main development partner, a role it has fulfilled for the past two decades. Notwithstanding the Taliban's expectations and wishes for India's continued involvement in Afghanistan's economic development,¹³² it can be

thwarted easily by Pakistan, which loathes India's expanding influence in Afghanistan. Even in the past two decades, all forms of Indian presence in Afghanistan have been subject to terrorist attacks by the hard-line Haqqani Network within the Taliban and Pakistan-based groups like LeT and JeM. These organizations are believed to have close ties to the Pakistani military and ISI.¹³³ The risk of staying in the post-U.S. Afghanistan is too great for Delhi if there is neither a pro-India government in Kabul nor U.S. forces that support it.

Meanwhile, at this time, India neither has the option to interfere in Afghanistan by supporting anti-Taliban groups. There is no powerful resistance group, and above all, even if one were to emerge, India is unable to act on its own. Its support of the Northern Alliance in the 1990s was possible precisely because of collaboration with Iran, which borders Afghanistan and has a network in the country, and with Russia, which is the backer of Central Asian Republics that lie to the north of Afghanistan.¹³⁴ Both Iran and Russia have so far chosen to engage with the Taliban.

Against this backdrop, after the Taliban's seizure of power, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar made clear that India was adopting a "wait-and-watch" approach to developments in Afghanistan.¹³⁵ This may be indicative of the little room left for Delhi to act proactively; if so, however, there is also little need for India to rush into any action. Unless the situation in Kashmir in the 1990s repeats itself, the growing terror threat can still be addressed effectively with defensive measures. The fact that China and Pakistan are strengthening their engagement with the Taliban and expanding their influence in Afghanistan is a cause for concern to Delhi, but, at present, India has no means to stop this. Furthermore, while India's current approach to the Taliban differs from Russia and Iran's, Delhi still coordinates with the two on Afghanistan.¹³⁶ That both countries are working in tandem with China and Pakistan is, paradoxically, a source of reassurance for India; its partnership with Russia and Iran would enable India to grasp the situation in Afghanistan and, if the needs arise, to join the engagement camp later.

At the same time, India has gradually moved to maintain its position as a key stakeholder in Afghanistan. In early November 2021, it hosted the Regional

Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, which Iran has held twice in the past, with the attendance of national security advisors from Russia, Iran, and five Central Asian Republics. The Taliban expressed a favorable opinion of the meeting, notwithstanding that it was not invited.¹³⁷ During the Moscow Format meeting held beforehand in October, the Indian delegation held talks with the Taliban and reportedly offered humanitarian assistance, which was formally announced in November.¹³⁸ It appears that, for the foreseeable future, India's policy toward Taliban-ruled Afghanistan will be two tracks: dealing with the potential growth of the threat of terrorism resulting from the developments in Afghanistan and, simultaneously, closely following the moves of the Taliban and key stakeholders through its partnership with Russia and Iran and regional diplomacy.

4. International Politics over the Post-U.S. Afghanistan

(1) Latitude for Cooperation among the Key Stakeholders

If one takes an objective look at what the six key stakeholders for the post-U.S. Afghanistan, including the United States, demand of the Taliban following their takeover of the country, noticeable similarities can be observed. While there are differences in the order of priority, details, and degree, the six countries generally make the same three demands: containment of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan against other countries; establishment of an inclusive political structure; and respect for the rights of women and minorities. In addition, while the countries used to have varying views on the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, they have all benefited from its existence, which helped to impede destabilization of the Afghan state and curb the threat of wide-ranging terrorism from the country.

Additionally, aside from Pakistan and Iran, which have significant influence in Afghanistan, the four remaining countries have no strong intention to deeply engage in the country and pursue anything beyond preventing or managing consequences that are detrimental to their political and security interests. There are no longer any vital U.S. national interests to be pursued in Afghanistan, other than

detering terrorist attacks from the country, as President Biden has categorically stated, and the United States has little intention of putting significant energy into Afghanistan. China may possibly be interested in Afghanistan's economic potential; however, the record of its economic activities in the country over the past two decades suggests Beijing is not strongly attracted to developing Afghanistan's economic interests per se, apart from its utility as a tool to maneuver the Taliban. As for Russia, given its experience of the failed intervention in the Soviet era, Moscow remains wary of getting involved in Afghanistan too deeply. India, which was loyal to the former democratic government until the last minute, has lost both influence in Afghanistan and the partners to maintain that influence following the Taliban's seizure of power. As such, there is no compelling reason for Delhi to become deeply involved in today's Afghanistan beyond preventing terrorism. In short, intense competition over the influence in Afghanistan among the key stakeholders—reminiscent of the 19th century “Great Game” between the British and Russian empires, which was ominously predicted to occur after the U.S. withdrawal—has so far been a far-off prospect.

Assuming the commonalities in what they demand to the Taliban, as well as the absence of the new “Great Game,” it seems not inconceivable that some sort of collaboration emerges among the key stakeholders. However, the reality is that the six countries have not been able to form a common approach to deal with Afghanistan under the Taliban. The United States adopts the position that it will neither recognize the Taliban government nor provide aid that directly funds the group unless the Taliban fulfill their commitment to address the threat of terrorism, establish an inclusive government, and respect human rights.¹³⁹ China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran similarly do not recognize the Taliban government and generally make the same demands but give priority to engaging with the Taliban. Moreover, the four countries also criticize the pressure tactics of the West, essentially backing the Taliban's demands, and call for the lifting of sanctions and the freeze on assets of the Afghan central bank.¹⁴⁰ The joint statement of the Moscow Format meeting hosted by Russia contains the wording, “take into account the new reality, that is the Taliban coming to power in the country.”¹⁴¹ At the UN Human Rights Council

in October 2021, China, Russia, and Pakistan voted against the appointment of a special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan.

Among the factors preventing the key stakeholders from aligning their approach is their disagreement on the degree, details, and order of priority of containing terrorism, establishing an inclusive government, and respecting human rights—even though the overall directions of what each country demands from the Taliban are not so far apart from one another. In particular, clear differences exist in the weight each stakeholder attaches to the rights of women and minorities.

That being the case, what should not be overlooked here is that the issue of how to deal with Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover is now being subsumed into the competition between the United States, on the one hand, and China, Russia, and Iran—countries that have already been embroiled in a broader rivalry with Washington—on the other hand. Putting Islamabad aside (which is still an American ally), the proactive attitude of Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran on engaging with the Taliban is an extension of the relationships they built with the group while it was an anti-U.S. insurgency movement. The three capitals made rapprochement with the Taliban amid respective security concerns over the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, albeit it might not be the sole reason. Hence, all three countries are now trying to make contrast between their willingness to embrace the new ruler in Afghanistan and reluctance of the United States and its allies, intending to exploit the collapse of the western-backed Afghan democratic regime and the Taliban's return to power as an opportunity to propagandize the failure of the United States.¹⁴²

That said, it is another matter whether China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran can secure what they demand from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan through actively engaging with the Taliban. Pakistan, for its part, has been unable to extract the Taliban's sincere crackdown against TTP, and it is uncertain how the Taliban will deal with ETIM as sought by China. Furthermore, the Taliban have asserted that the interim government that they announced in September 2021, which Russia and Iran criticized as not representing all political and ethnic groups in Afghanistan, is sufficiently inclusive.¹⁴³

(2) The Taliban and the Shadow of ISKP

It is unclear to what extent the Taliban are willing to meet the demands of the key stakeholders, such as containing terrorist attacks from Afghanistan, forming an inclusive government, and respecting the rights of women and minorities. That said, even if the Taliban are willing to meet the demands, the presence of ISKP, another Islamist movement, will make it difficult.

In general, as competition between terrorist organizations intensifies, individual terrorist groups tend to escalate violence as a show of presence.¹⁴⁴ Although the Taliban are not oriented toward international terrorism, the presence of IS creates incentives for al Qaeda and other competing international jihadist groups to ramp up their attacks.¹⁴⁵

Furthermore, ISKP has sought to attract Taliban and al Qaeda supporters by claiming that it is the true jihadist group, not the Taliban.¹⁴⁶ Hence, it is conceivable that, even if the Taliban were to try to constrain external terrorism by foreign militant groups in Afghan territory, dissatisfied groups and individual members will simply join ISKP. Defectors from TTP, Taliban, al Qaeda, and LeT have indeed joined ISKP.¹⁴⁷ While IMU has vacillated between the Taliban and ISKP, ETIM is noted to have a relationship with not only al Qaeda but also ISKP.¹⁴⁸

Similar issues could arise within the ranks of Taliban as well. Cracking down on such allied militant groups or easing the harsh Taliban-style rule, including suppression of women's rights, at the request of foreign governments could create divisions within the Taliban and threaten the unity of the organization.¹⁴⁹ Besides, ISKP is reaching out to younger Taliban members who are ideologically more radical and are dissatisfied with their leadership's reluctance to restrict women's rights or willingness to cooperate with the United States and China. This, coupled with the high compensation ISKP is offering, has led to a large number of them joining ISKP.¹⁵⁰ Thus, it is becoming all the more difficult for the Taliban leadership, which values organizational unity,¹⁵¹ to respond to the demands of the international community.

(3) Spillover Effects on International Relations

Given that there is little prospect of the Taliban meeting the demands of the key stakeholders, it would be ideal for the six countries to align their approaches and use pressure and engagement in a coordinated manner. Since September 2021, several multilateral meetings on Afghanistan were held in succession, including the Troika Plus meeting in November attended by the special representatives of the United States, which is wary of engagement with the Taliban, and China, Russia, and Pakistan, which are positive about engagement. It would be preferable that these developments lead to the convergence of the approach among the six.

However, their attitude hitherto suggests otherwise. Namely, the key stakeholders' demands of the Taliban—especially the one of counterterrorism, which has direct ramifications for their own security—will continue to be unmet, which in turn further complicates relations among them.

At the regional level, this could be observed in India-Pakistan and Pakistan-Iran relations. In the case of the former, if LeT or JeM, after seeing the success of the Taliban, intensifies its attacks against India, Delhi will construe that Islamabad is escalating its proxy war. Meanwhile, Pakistan, which firmly believes (albeit objectively dubious) that India is supporting TTP and ISKP, will perceive that India is stepping up the offensive if TTP attacks were to intensify. These developments will increase tension between India and Pakistan. In addition, if Iran aggressively exercises its influence or resorts to direct intervention using militias to protect the Shia minorities in Afghanistan or to eliminate the ISKP threat, this will alarm Pakistan and complicate relations between the two countries. While Iran-Pakistan relations are not necessarily adversarial, the two countries are linked to different factions in Afghanistan and within the Taliban and thus compete with each other for influence.¹⁵²

At the global level, one can expect spillover effects on U.S.-China/Russia relations and U.S.-Iran relations. Given their efforts to contrast their willingness to embrace the Taliban with the pressure tactics of the West, Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran are likely to, at least publicly, condemn the United States and its allies for preventing the Taliban from establishing effective governance, rather than

criticizing the Taliban, if the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan were to extend to the three. At the same time, China and Russia may justify their own domestic, oppressive counterterrorism policies as a response to the growing threat from Afghanistan. Yet, that logic is unacceptable to the West, which views their authoritarian way of governance as problematic. As a result, the Afghanistan issue could add another source of conflict to the already intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China/Russia/Iran.

As mentioned above, it would be an exaggeration to describe the ongoing interaction of key stakeholders over Afghanistan, especially international politics among the United States, China, and Russia, as a “Great Game.” Nevertheless, coordination or cooperation among all of the key stakeholders remains difficult—more or less affected by their broader rivalry beyond the Afghan issue—and will be the same henceforth. Against this backdrop, the future of the Afghan state after the withdrawal of U.S. forces is becoming even more uncertain.

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