

Afghanistan After Regime Change: Domestic and International Uncertainty

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The August 2021 events in Kabul developed at a breakneck pace and resulted in the swift collapse of President Ashraf Ghani's pro-American government and the Taliban¹ seizing power. These events also posited the question of the scenarios the further development of events in Afghanistan could follow. This is not an idle question since the direction of the country's new conservative "evolution" can have a very significant impact on adjacent regions, primarily Central Asia. The bloody

events of January 2022 in Kazakhstan clearly demonstrated the domestic instability potential of the regional states.

New authorities are being established in Afghanistan, its domestic political and social order is undergoing in-depth restructuring. The Taliban regime is seeking domestic and international legitimacy. All these processes are far from being complete and are fraught with major risks. This paper outlines the principal domestic and international parameters of the "Afghan question."

American Project in Afghanistan: Long Road to Collapse

For the entire second half of the 1990s, the United States was on the fence about the Taliban. Many in U.S. political and expert circles supported cooperation with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance,² but there was also a strong contingent who advocated the need to establish cooperation with the Taliban. In 2000, the U.S. administration began to lean towards tightening its stance on the Taliban. However, following George W. Bush's victory in the presidential elections, pro-Taliban forces hoped he would right the anti-Taliban slant and kept pushing this line throughout 2001.

These views carried so much weight that even after the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, the United States prioritized retaliation against al-Qaeda³ through working with the Taliban, and not

overthrowing their regime. This desire was so powerful that a two-day ultimatum to the Taliban turned into two-week-long indirect talks on the matter. The talks were conducted by the head of Pakistan's intelligence service, who made several trips to Kandagar, although the Taliban ultimately refused to take part.

Washington had no options left outside of a direct intervention against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. It was then that the office of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld developed a new concept. They proposed positioning the intervention as U.S. assistance to the local anti-tyranny forces. It was supposed to inspire the "good guys" in other parts of the world to implement regime changes.⁴ This approach made the Northern Alliance the natural ally of the United States in its Afghanistan operation.

¹ The Taliban movement is designated as terrorist organization in Russia.

² The Northern Alliance represented the government overthrown by the Taliban in 1996 and consisted mostly of non-Pashtun warlords. In 1998–1999, the Taliban made major inroads into the territories under the Alliance's control, yet with assistance from Russia, Iran, and some other states, the Alliance continued to hold minor areas in the north of Afghanistan.

³ Designated as terrorist organization in Russia.

⁴ Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria were mentioned, as well as some other countries whose names are redacted out of the documents currently declassified.

Following the invasion, the Taliban dispersed throughout Afghanistan's south and east, virtually without any resistance. One obvious problem was the failure of the United States to capture Osama bin Laden. Still, the intervention appeared to have been more than successful. A fragile temporary administration was formed from representatives of the Northern Alliance, former mujahedeen parties, pro-monarchic circles, and émigré technocrats. The administration was led by Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun who had been an emigrant in the United States. Work started on drafting a constitution and preparing for elections. The international community promised support to the new authorities.

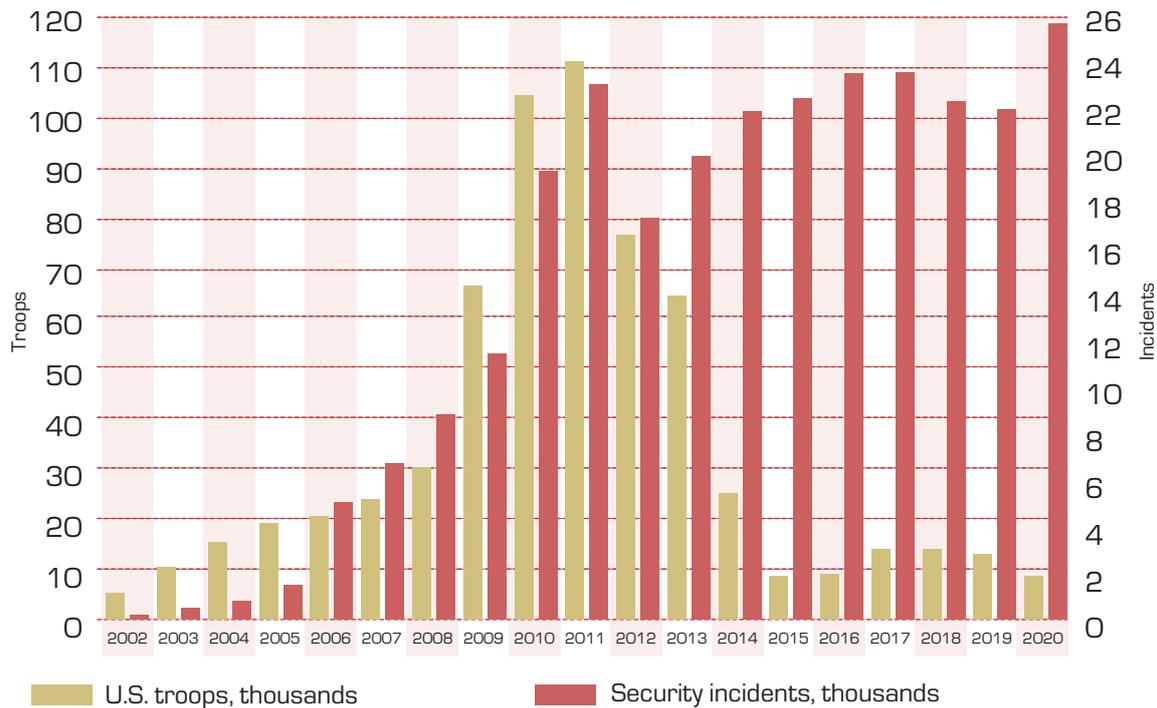
Starting in the second half of 2002, the Taliban began to make their presence felt, carrying out terrorist attacks, abductions of foreign citizens and members of the new administrations, and attempts on their lives. By 2003, some believed that the Taliban had survived and were regrouping, while others continued to believe Afghanistan to be mostly safe and the government capable of dealing with the remains of the Taliban. The George W. Bush administration was leaning towards the latter view and wanted to curtail interest in Afghanistan, especially since preparations for the invasion of Iraq were in full swing. However, there was also a growing contingent in the United States who believed that attention should remain on Afghanistan. For some of them, Afghanistan was an important geopolitical objective for the United States to build military bases keeping Iran, China, and Russia in American cross-hairs. Others were more focused on the democratization agenda: they wanted to reform a Muslim state and turn it into a part of the Global West. Ultimately, the U.S. administration began to expand its military presence and build up assistance, but its scale was far from what the proponents of both opinions were asking for. The number of American troops in Afghanistan did not exceed 30,000.

In 2006–2007, the relays from U.S. ambassadors in Afghanistan painted a

progressively grimmer picture: the situation was deteriorating rapidly, and the negative trends could not be curtailed using the available resources. The situation had to be saved. However, the George W. Bush administration did not agree to move to a qualitatively new level in the matter, although it did incrementally increase its military presence and assistance. Barack Obama, on the other hand, latched onto the “save Afghanistan” programme. He wanted to make sure Afghanistan was standing firmly on its own two feet and then withdraw the troops. His administration, however, debated the specific steps to be taken. Vice President Joe Biden suggested focusing exclusively on counter-terrorist steps, mostly against al-Qaeda. But it was another approach that won, one that was termed counter-insurgent, in contrast to the counter-terrorist approach. This concept boiled down to expanding control over territory through decisive advantage in manpower, establishing a normal course of life there, while simultaneously training Afghanistan's military and law enforcement that could have taken over responsibility for security of a more stable Afghanistan.

Obama approved this strategy in March 2009, authorized the doubling of the U.S. military contingent on the ground, and appointed a new commander, General Stanley McChrystal. That summer, U.S. troops gained ground from the Taliban. By the autumn, however, the commander had submitted a grim report to the president saying that the military campaign could fail. He proposed preventing such failure through decisive action and sending more troops to Afghanistan (the best course of action, he noted, was to double the military contingent once again – adding another 60,000 troops, or at least 40,000, with 30,000 being the absolute minimum). After some hesitation (the strategy was debated again for three months), Obama increased the number of troops in Afghanistan by another 30,000, but set a deadline for the military: they had to turn the situation around in 18 months, that is, by the summer of 2011, and then the U.S.

U.S. Troops in Afghanistan and Security Incidents



Source: prepared by the authors on the basis of CIGAR Quarterly Report to Congress, October 30, 2021.

President promised to start the process of withdrawing the troops. Obama said nothing publicly about negotiations with the Taliban, but those in political and expert circles came to firmly believe that searching for contacts with the Taliban and attempting to launch talks had been a priority since 2010.

Contrary to Washington's expectations, 2010 did not bring any breakthroughs. The number of troops increased, and so did the number of battles. This time, however, the Taliban did not run away and did not disperse. They retreated, but they resisted and they repeatedly counterattacked. McChrystal had to repeatedly adjust his approaches. A different kind of breakthrough was made in 2010, however: diplomats from various countries started to establish contacts with the Taliban. President Hamid Karzai was also a long-standing proponent of the talks. Official U.S. statements stressed that the country had not asked anyone to speak to the Taliban on its behalf, but it welcomed contacts.

Against this backdrop, those in U.S. military, political, and expert circles started

to claim that it would be wise to delay the withdrawal of the troops. The army was now primarily seen as a tool to boost bargaining positions in negotiations with the Taliban. During the first months of 2011 Obama came under increasing pressure, and he might have given in. But after Osama bin Laden was killed in a CIA operation Obama started withdrawing troops in June 2011 without major opposition.

As we noted above, American views of the Afghanistan campaign changed significantly over time. Washington constantly debated the Afghanistan policy. Moreover, by the late 2000s, another factor surfaced. A community of those working on Afghanistan in various governmental and non-governmental agencies emerged. They developed a concept of the country being important for the U.S. security, and for America's foreign political strategy as a whole. They operated with the same geopolitical considerations: Afghanistan is within a stone's throw of all the states the United States needs "to keep an eye on" or "reach," should need be, i.e.

Iran, Russia, and China. This community also claimed that the United States cannot demonstrate any weakness in Afghanistan and thus needs to “pull” the country along so that no one could doubt the power of the United States. Most importantly, however, these people were confident that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan would help prevent terrorist attacks at home, on American soil.

Disagreements in Washington made such “professionals” increasingly free to act. They argued with the “centre” and sometimes allowed themselves to delay, ad infinitum, or sabotage instructions they did not like. At the same time, there was a dissonance with the sentiments among politicians. Those in American political circles never asked these questions directly, but they constantly loomed in the background: What is going on in Afghanistan? And could it end in “another Vietnam”? However, the “group of professionals” had the strongest argument of all: What if a major terrorist attack takes place in the United States after the troops have been withdrawn from Afghanistan? Politicians did not dare assume such responsibility, preferring to leave it to the professionals. These developments fully manifested themselves during Obama’s second term, who never dared to fully withdraw the troops from Afghanistan. By late 2014, the United States had reduced its military contingent in Afghanistan to approximately 10,000 troops.

Until 2015, the Taliban fully controlled small areas, although they did have a presence throughout almost the entire country. Their power system operated mostly underground. From 2015 onwards, the government started to rapidly lose control over the country: in late 2015, it controlled up to 70% of the country’s territory, by late 2016, it controlled just 57%. This prompted Donald Trump, who had declared his intention to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, to increase their numbers slightly instead. The Taliban, however, was on the offensive again. In 2018, the government controlled 54% of the districts and 63% of the population. After establishing direct control over a large share of the territory and

population in 2015, the Taliban effectively installed a parallel authority system. It became customary, however, to point out that the Taliban was taking control of less densely populated areas, while the government controlled the more densely populated areas, including all the major cities. It was thus concluded that the Taliban could never seize the entire country, although it was acknowledged that the government could do nothing to change the situation either. This served as grounds for calls to engage in talks.

In late 2018, Trump appointed the Special Representative, Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, to conduct talks with the Taliban. Back in 2013, the Taliban established a political office in Doha that was used to contact various foreign representatives. Still, attempts to engage in full-fledged direct talks with the United States remained unsuccessful for a long time. By then, the optimism in the spirit of 2010 concerning talks with the Taliban had long faded. It seemed at first that the main problem lay in the absence of talks as such, and consequently, should such talks be launched, it would be quite possible to achieve some arrangements. However, it proved difficult to negotiate with the Taliban. For several years, attempts had been made to involve them in talks with the Afghanistan government. Such meetings were held, but the Taliban believed that final agreements could only be achieved with the United States.

Finally, Washington agreed to conduct direct talks. An agreement was signed in Doha in February 2020 whereby the United States undertook to withdraw its troops by May 2021, while the Taliban guaranteed that they would not pose a terrorist threat to the United States. The agreement also envisaged the launch of intra-Afghan talks (nothing specific was stated, however). The Doha agreement came under heavy criticism. Upon his arrival as president, Joe Biden was being pressured to extend U.S. military presence. Debates on the matter stretched into April 2021, when Biden finally announced that U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan (although not by May 2021, but

by September 11, and then the deadline was pushed forward to September 1).

There are different interpretations of what had been going on concerning the Afghan question in the late spring and summer of 2021. Some people believe that President Ashraf Ghani was in cahoots with the Taliban and surrendered power to them. Others alleged a conspiracy between the Russian, Pakistani, American, and British intelligence services that allegedly threw Ghani under the bus and allowed the Taliban to take power. Such versions are naturally impossible to verify. There is now reason to believe that the events had taken a far more prosaic course.

The United States needed to leave Afghanistan in an organized manner, without it being a complete embarrassment, without chaos coming to reign immediately afterwards, and without the state and political system of Afghanistan collapsing straight away. Therefore, it was important for the American side to have some intra-Afghan arrangements in place, to have a compromise coalition government that included members of the Taliban installed. It would retain legitimacy, international recognition, and outside donor assistance.

The general outline of these exchanges seemed obvious. The Taliban would have power, but no recognized legitimacy. Ashraf Ghani, on the contrary, would have international recognition, but no real power. Yet the Afghan president made it known he would not make concessions and the arrangements would have to be achieved on his terms. The Taliban was not eager to engage in talks with him anyway, and talks were utterly impossible on such a footing.

Ghani still did nothing to improve his bargaining position. In June Afghanistan's special ops units stopped conducting operations in the provinces. Without the military and transportation assistance of the United States, these units were ambushed and could not be evacuated. Therefore, the elite forces were concentrated in the cities. The Taliban took over territories with ease. The military and political leaders in northern

and western provinces still had their own military units. Additionally, with the Taliban advancing, non-Pashtun communities (primarily Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras) started assembling militias. These forces were ready to go to war against the Taliban, at least locally. The Ghani government, however, held them back.

This raises a legitimate question: What game was Afghanistan's president playing? Maybe he really dreamed of holding major cities, of the Taliban coming to realize that they had to engage in talks on an equal footing. But maybe Ghani was hoping that the situation would deteriorate and that the emergency in Afghanistan would prompt President Biden to reverse his decision to withdraw U.S. troops. Perhaps Ghani was essentially trying to blackmail the United States.

Apparently, talks on installing a compromise government in Kabul continued until early August. Ghani, however, drove those talks into a dead end. The Taliban then proceeded to swiftly take control of the country's border and major cities, and they entered Kabul on August 15.

Ghani and the former government fled. Most embassies were evacuated from Kabul. The United States continued to evacuate its troops and friendly Afghans until late August. Afghanistan's assets abroad were frozen, and the country was cut off from international payment systems. Regular air travel stopped.

In the first few weeks, there were still hopes of finding a swift way out of the predicament. Ex-president Hamid Karzai was still in Kabul, as was the former Chief Executive of Afghanistan (an office analogous to that of Prime Minister) Abdullah Abdullah. There was hope of them helping work out political and legal schemes that would ensure the continuity of the authorities and, consequently, transfer legitimacy and international recognition to the Taliban. However, these attempts failed. In early September, the Taliban "reset" the Afghan statehood on new principles, as an Islamic Emirate, and formed their own government.

Taliban: Evolution of the Movement and its Stance Today

The Taliban emerged in 1994 as a mostly Pashtun movement in response to the chaos and the insurgent warlords taking the law into their own hands, as they deemed themselves the victorious heroes in the fight against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. As they overthrew Najibullah's regime in 1992, they became locked in conflicts among themselves. The central element on the Taliban agenda was to bring order to the country, which was on the whole positively perceived by regular Afghans.

The idea of bringing order was intertwined with the ethnic and political question. The warlords included many Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, and consequently the concept appeared that the Pashtuns, being Afghanistan's state-building ethnic group from which people serving in the country's authorities traditionally came, were taking on the mission of bringing order to the country. Large numbers of non-Pashtun Afghans saw it as chauvinism they were ready to resist. Soon after the Taliban came to power, the Northern Alliance was formed, bringing together many warlords, mostly Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, although it also included Pashtuns. They mounted resistance to the Taliban's power spreading into the northern and western regions of Afghanistan.

The Taliban were singularly conservative in their religious practices. But their key aim was not going back to the broadly understood original Islam, but establishing an order in Afghanistan where theologians and mullahs regulate both public and private matters. Relying on the support of Pakistan's intelligence service, Taliban achieved military successes, and in 1996 seized Kabul.

Their rule in Afghanistan in 1996–2001 went down in historical memory as a highly negative period. The Taliban introduced social standards that stood in sharp contrast with modern norms. Traditional Pashtun customs went into effect,

women were made dependent on men, they were prohibited from working and appearing in public without a burqa and unaccompanied by a man. Education was curtailed (girls were not allowed in schools), music, television, games, and sports were prohibited. Ethnic minorities, particularly Shiite Hazaras, were oppressed. Cruel punishments were handed out for violating the system of prohibitions, including public executions and the cutting off of limbs. Such conduct became symbolic of a total departure from modern values. Additionally, the Taliban had plans for expansion. Mullah Omar, the Taliban's spiritual leader, had a map in his office where the borders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan stretched even into Russian territory. The Taliban supported terrorists in Chechnya, and even established "diplomatic relations" with Ichkeria. They also gave asylum to many al-Qaeda supporters, starting with Osama bin Laden himself.

Following the U.S. invasion in 2001, the Taliban had been involved in insurgent fighting for 20 years, and the movement had evolved somewhat.

In the 2000s–2010s, the war was transformed in the Taliban's eyes from a civil conflict into a fight for national liberation. The main enemies in their eyes were not the intra-Afghan forces, but the foreigners who had invaded Afghanistan. Gradually, increasing numbers of Afghans came to see the war in the same light. Accordingly, the Taliban's social base began to expand. An increasing number of non-Pashtuns joined them, although they mostly found themselves in the Taliban's military units (sometimes even reaching high ranks), not in their ideological bodies. The Taliban maintained extensive ties in the Islamic world, and had close contacts with jihadis. Moreover, their contacts extended beyond ties with Muslim countries to include official representatives of the United States and European countries.

Virtually all experts agree that there is a lack of solidarity within the ranks of the Taliban, which manifests in several aspects at once. Ideologically, they are mostly geared towards the Pashtun code and the Deobandi movement, but there are also those now who lean towards Wahhabism, while some are more inclined towards the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Some Taliban see themselves as part of a national movement, while others view themselves as jihadi warriors, yet others as Pashtun nationalists. There are differences between the views of the older and the younger generations of the Taliban, and contradictory commitments of outside partners. Some Taliban look to Pakistan for assistance, while others look to Qatar and Saudi Arabia for money (let us emphasize this money does not necessarily come from official governments). There are certain differences between the two most influential bodies within the movement, the Quetta Shura and the Peshawar Shura. The former was in charge of fighting in the south, the west, and the north-west of Afghanistan, while the latter was in charge of the east and the north. Apparently, there are some differences along tribal lines, namely, the Pashtuns' traditional rivalry between the Durrani and the Ghilji tribes. The latter rivalry within the Taliban is likely a consequence of different opinions held by the Taliban's most authoritative figures, and today, these are Haqqani, Baradar, and Yaqoob.

The Haqqani faction relies on the Peshawar Shura and controls the Ministry of Interior Affairs. This faction is closest to jihadi warriors, and it attracts those who share Wahhabi ideas. Its principal outside partners are Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Haqqani faction has solid ties with al-Qaeda. As far as we can tell, this is the faction that adheres to the most rigid stance on domestic and foreign issues. With its strong standing in the central government, this faction specifically focuses on several regions in the country. Haqqani insisted on being vested with the right to appoint governors in the five provinces in Afghanistan's east, and appears to be particularly interested in Badakhshan in the northeast.

The Yaqoob faction controls the Ministry of Defense. Its principal outside partner is Pakistan.

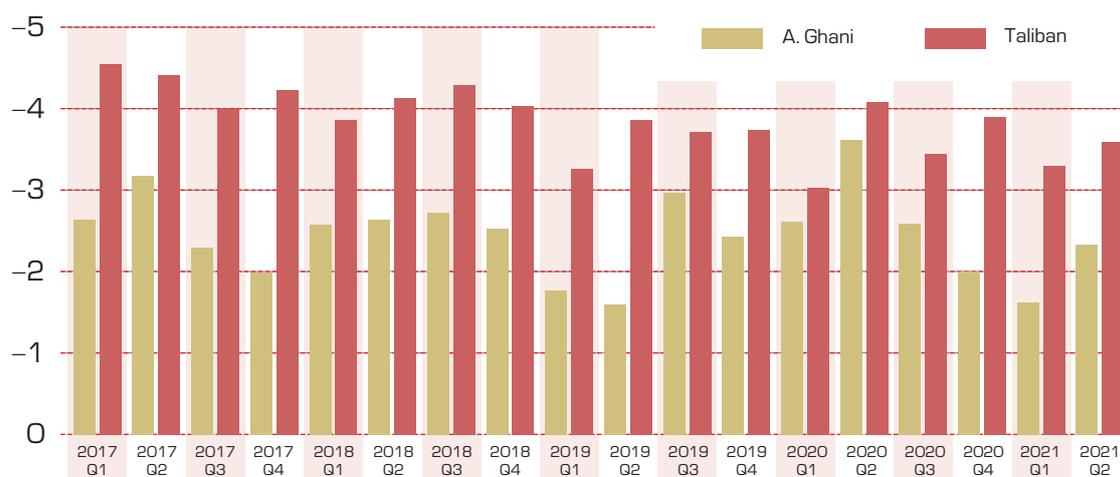
Yaqoob is a son of the Taliban's founder, Mullah Omar. He himself staked a claim to leadership in the Taliban, but was not elected. Apparently, he attracts the Taliban's "old guard," i.e. those who lean towards the original ideas and reliance on the Pashtun code and the Deobandi movement. As far as we can tell, Yaqoob adheres to a moderate stance on domestic and foreign issues, with Quetta Shura being his base in the Taliban.

Baradar also relies on Quetta Shura members. He was the principal negotiator with foreign representatives recently, and signed the 2020 agreement with the United States. This leads experts to deem him the most moderate among the Taliban leaders, someone who is willing to establish cooperation with the international community. However, the protracted normalization of relations with the outside world might undermine Baradar's standing within the government. While Haqqani and Yaqoob made their contribution to the Taliban's military victories, Baradar is not a "war hero", which is also a strike against him.

Some experts believe that disagreements between the Taliban factions will snowball, and "radical hawks", primarily Haqqani, will push harder and may enter into a conspiracy with international terrorist groups in Afghanistan in order to remove the "moderates" from power. So far, however, there is more reason to believe that the Taliban have already developed the skills to interact amid constant disagreements, and neither faction will take decisive actions against the others, although the tug-of-war over power and resources will be permanent. Despite disagreements and statements that are often contradictory, the Taliban government succeeded at forming a government, resuming the work of government bodies, and developing its stances on several issues in domestic and foreign affairs.

The Taliban totally reject any armed resistance to their power. A resistance movement emerged in Panjshir in September 2021. Some believed that it did not set itself the goal of overthrowing the Taliban. Rather, its purpose was to put pressure on the Taliban to induce them to include their political opponents into the government. The Taliban did not start any talks,

Tone of Publications in World Media on A. Ghani and Taliban



Source : prepared by the authors on the basis of the GDELT database.

they presented the resistance with ultimatums and ultimately dispersed them. That should have given a clear signal to other dissidents. At the same time, the Taliban claim that they have no interest in settling scores, and to make good on their word, they granted amnesty to former law enforcement and military personnel.

The Taliban re-introduced many archaic social norms: music and sports are prohibited. However, its stance on those social issues that are particularly sensitive for the international community is relatively moderate. Women's rights are not interfered with as much as in the second half of the 1990s, but restrictions were still imposed: they only may appear in public wearing a burqa (but not necessarily accompanied by a man), girls are allowed to have an education (officially until the 6th grade only, and separately from boys).

In its foreign policy, the Taliban claims that it wishes to establish normal relations with the international community. They respect those diplomatic missions that remained in Kabul,⁵ and willingly interact with other foreign powers via their office in Doha (by early December 2021, they had held about 12 meetings with American, European, and Asian diplomats). In addition, they have visited Moscow and Ankara, and pursue active cooperation with the United Nations. Publicly and in their interactions with foreign representatives, the Taliban constantly reaffirm that Afghanistan will not be a source of threats to other states and declare their intention to fight drugs. In turn, the new government repeatedly poses the question of recognition, establishing ties, and unfreezing Afghanistan's assets abroad, and on lifting international sanctions from the Taliban.

⁵ As of the end of 2021, the embassies of Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar remained in Kabul.

Post-American Afghanistan: Fears, Hopes and Reality

The sharply negative historical memory about the Taliban met with the sentiments that emerged amid the international community's fatigue over the project of building a new, modern Afghanistan. As a result, following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, media reports and expert discussions around the world contained a mix of both hopes and fears. Some claimed the Taliban had changed: they had learned from the mistakes of the past. Others insisted the Taliban was still the same or even worse than before.

During their first five months in power, the Taliban did not quite live up to either the hopes or the fears. The developments "on the ground" are contradictory. In Kabul, and in Afghanistan in general, a certain order has been established. In rural areas, life did not change much, while in the cities, it rapidly resumed the course that is customary for most regular people. Small- and medium-sized businesses even had some hopes for the Taliban: pro-western officials were infamous for corruption and lack of integrity, while the Taliban have a reputation of being loyal to business. The Taliban managed to rapidly rein in crime and general instability. People can lead their regular lives. Certainly, the social and everyday living standards the Taliban have established appear somewhat savage for those who have gone through the western education system, but most regular Afghans get on with them quite well.

As regards the matters that are crucial for the international community, the Taliban did not fully bring back the customs that had been in effect in 1996–2001. After some hesitation, the Taliban allowed students to continue university programmes they had already started, and allowed female students to complete their studies. The Taliban did not impose stringent censorship, and elements of pluralism remain. In September, civil activities, including women, repeatedly held rallies in Kabul, Herat, and

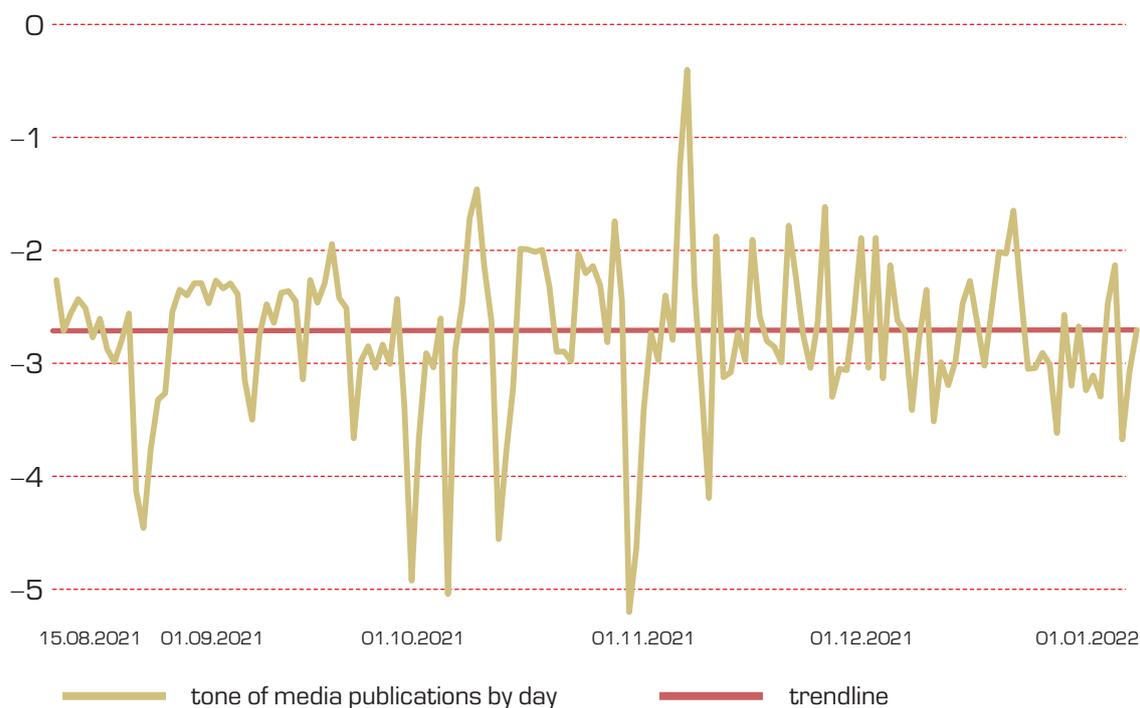
Jalalabad protesting the social rules the Taliban were imposing. The Taliban demonstrated restraint and did not use brute force against them. Gradually, the wave of protests died out (mostly by itself, although there were reports of the Taliban intimidating civil activists). Some print and online media continue their operations, and sometimes émigré members of the opposition are allowed to state their opinions. The Taliban did not cut off the internet and mobile networks, people generally have access to outside information sources and connection to the outside world.

There is no reliable information on the Taliban systemically persecuting some population groups. Many reports about the Taliban's atrocities (and there was a veritable deluge of such reports, including videos, spreading on the internet and on social networks in late August and September) proved to be fake upon scrutiny. Moreover, the Taliban granted amnesty to law enforcement and military members, while civil servants were invited to go back to their ministries and agencies to continue in their offices.

With a certain positive attitude, one can see advantages in the Taliban and its government not being a monolithic structure, in there being certain internal disagreements and debates that could be viewed as a system of checks and balances of sorts.

There are also negative attitudes to the Taliban, emphasized primarily by instances of pointed brutality and public executions. Even though they are not systemic and, as far as we can tell, not approved by the Taliban government, they cannot be viewed as isolated instances of overzealousness. Such instances demonstrate the attitude inherent in some part of the Taliban's social base, their warlords and rank-and-file fighters, that is, this is what they would like to do and what they see as the right thing to do. The Taliban does not approve

Tone of Publications on Taliban in World Media After August 15, 2021



Source : prepared by the authors on the basis of the GDELT database.

of or encourage such actions, but there is also no evidence to claim that serious punishment awaits those committing such actions.

There are reports coming in from various parts of Afghanistan about persecutions and repressions by the Taliban. They search for important local anti-Taliban figures, members of the former government's law enforcement and military. This forces many Afghans to go into hiding. There are reports of pressure put on relatives of anti-Taliban émigré politicians who remain in the country.

The Taliban's social norms and ways of maintaining them (despite certain leeway) and punishments for violating such norms are archaic. Even if the majority of the population accepts them out of tradition, fear, or semi-illiteracy, there are still tens if not hundreds of thousands of people in Afghanistan who had become used to more modern social standards, and for them, the Taliban's customs are repressive. The relaxations of rules in the most important question, women's rights, do not outweigh the Taliban's overall approach. Women are not equal to men socially, there

are special norms and restrictions in effect for them, including restrictions on education and participation in social and political life. And this means that in the future, social standards for women will drop further.

The structure of the Taliban's political power remains opaque and abstruse. The Taliban makes contradictory statements on the status and inclusivity of the government. Instead of entering debates, the Taliban would rather prefer to gloss the issue over. There are no signs of the Taliban's intention to organise or move towards establishing the country's fundamental law (a constitution).

At the moment, supreme authority in the country is in the hands of the Taliban movement. Their leading council formed a government. How do people become members of this council? How is their authority maintained? How is the council membership rotated? And how will the generational rotation take place in the future? There are no answers to any of these questions. The bottom line is: the current regime has, politically speaking, usurped rule mostly by force.

Amid their peaceful statements, the Taliban remains hostile towards at least one neighbouring country, Tajikistan. Militants are assembled close to its borders, and the Taliban government has made rather belligerent statements to the country.

The positive and negative attitudes to the current developments have produced two principal approaches. One claims that the Taliban is mostly conducting a policy that is quite reasonable and acceptable for international standards. The negative instances are temporary exceptions. Accordingly, instead of isolating the Taliban, the movement should be encouraged through cooperation to take further positive steps.

The other approach claims that the Taliban has been disguising its true face since coming to power (either they tried to not give more grounds for domestic resistance, or they tried to ingratiate themselves with the international community). But further down the road, they will show their true colours. They will increasingly disregard the opinion of domestic opponents and the international community and will increasingly “tighten the screws”, while “overzealousness” will become the norm.

In the second half of 2021, a large chunk of expert and political discussions of the Afghanistan question was conducted within this dichotomy and boiled down to waiting for, and substantiating either positive or negative dynamics. However, by the end of 2021, it had become clear that this dichotomy was absolutely insufficient for an adequate understanding and assessment of events in Afghanistan.

There is reason to say that “positive” and “negative” elements co-exist, and that the balance between them is not changing as a result of certain shifts in the Taliban’s policy. The common rules of the Taliban government are understood and complied with differently in different parts of Afghanistan. For instance,

in Herat and Maaar-i-Sharif, girls attend all grades at school, even though the central government mandates ending their education at sixth grade. There are some reports on girls being allowed into all grades at schools in the provinces of Zabul, Kunduz, Sar-e Pol, Bamyan, and Ghor. In Kabul, there are now private schools operating from homes (and there are many people willing to study there despite the underground nature of these schools), and the established norms are not followed there either. In some provinces, on the contrary, leaflets distributed by local Taliban authorities introduce rules for appearance and conduct, both for men and women, that are harsher than the rules instituted by the central government. We cannot say that such deviations from the norms are strictly district-based. There are differences in rules and norms within individual provinces and even cities. In poor neighbourhoods, rules are tighter, while in richer neighbourhoods, they are more relaxed.

Theoretically, it could also be seen as a temporary phenomenon until the Taliban has established a full-fledged governance system. For instance, relaxations of the rules may be explained by the Taliban’s unwillingness to provoke discontent, which involves making certain concessions. Examples of harsher rules may be seen as instances of local overzealousness that are, again, temporary. However, it is also quite possible that it will gradually become the norm and will increasingly manifest with time.

Deviations from the norms established by the central government may be adopted by members of the Taliban upon interactions with local mullahs and communities. Additionally, local authorities will apparently represent not the central Taliban government as a whole, but one of its factions, and will lean towards interpreting the orders of the central government, that in many cases constitute compromises, in accordance with their faction’s line.

Approaches of the Main Global and Regional Actors

Russian MFA



Taliban delegation at talks in Moscow, October 20, 2021

The international community attempted to work out a common approach to the Taliban's Afghanistan. On September 17, 2021, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2596 listing issues that prompted concerns following the Taliban's coming to power: terrorist threat, humanitarian crisis, inclusive government, human rights, and territorial integrity. Most states take account of this list, although their emphases differ. The United Nations itself continues to work in Afghanistan. Its employees note many negative elements in the activities of the Taliban government, yet stress that it is ready to cooperate and call for continuing this cooperation.

Western countries. The United States was moderately critical of the Taliban's coming to power in August 2021. It clearly did not

welcome this course of events, but did not want to exacerbate relations with the Taliban, as the United States continued to evacuate its troops, as well as approximately 75,000 Afghans that had worked for the United States. The United States therefore needed practical cooperation with the Taliban.

In the broader perspective, Washington intends to continue fighting terrorism in Afghanistan, provide humanitarian aid, promote human rights, and evacuate, both legally and illegally, "their people" remaining in Afghanistan. The United States does not rule out as a matter of principle the possibility of recognizing the Taliban, but it continues to postpone this issue indefinitely and set vague conditions (there are statements that the United States needs to see what the Taliban does as opposed to what they say). The United

States considered the possibility of practically interacting with the Taliban to fight ISIS⁶, but the Taliban refused. Generally, the United States is ready to engage in contacts with the Taliban (U.S. and Taliban delegations met in October in Doha), but it is to be done in such a manner as not to be associated with political recognition. The United States wants to operate in Afghanistan without interacting with the Taliban government: the American side wants to deliver counter-terrorist drone strikes (which it regularly does) and provide humanitarian aid via non-governmental channels.

Leading European states have taken a similar stance. They are not yet ready for independent counter-terrorist action in Afghanistan, though. Germany is ready to go further than the United States in interacting with the Taliban. Not only did a German delegation meet with the Taliban in Doha in October, but they also visited Kabul in November. On the other hand, France characteristically emphasizes the value of the negative attitude to the Taliban's power. France clearly makes it known that full-fledged recognition for the Taliban is not on the agenda, but also admits the necessity of interacting with them. Rumours have been circulating since the autumn of 2021 that France and Germany were considering bringing their diplomats back to Kabul. All these elements are present in the European Union's stance. Compared to individual states, the organization places a greater emphasis on the refugee problem. On the one hand, Europeans demand – for moral and value reasons – that the Taliban allow those who cannot reconcile themselves with their authority to leave the country (meaning primarily the educated class etc.). On the other hand, however, they are wary of an uncontrollable migration flow.

The United Kingdom leans towards a pragmatic approach. UK representatives met with the Taliban government's delegation in Doha as early as September 1, 2021, and then held another meeting in October. London repeats common western stances on key issues,

but in practice, the United Kingdom strives to establish a good communication channel with the Taliban.

For the last 20 years, *India* had been building close ties with the pro-western regime in Kabul, thus gaining additional opportunities in its relations with Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian states, and in regional politics generally. India was disappointed with the loss of its standing in Afghanistan. New Delhi is concerned about Pakistan's increasing role in Afghanistan. In the initial weeks after the Taliban came to power, Indian experts appeared to be counting on major domestic resistance to the Taliban, and support for such forces was voiced. When it became clear that there was no powerful resistance to the Taliban, a pragmatic approach gained the upper hand in India with a view to building contacts with the movement. India hopes to gain certain leverage to contain scenarios that could be negative for India and to possibly support the moderates in the Taliban leadership. Naturally, New Delhi is in no rush to officially recognize the Taliban, but it will refrain from stressing its anti-Taliban sentiments. India intends to act along the lines of the dominant international approach (particularly its western part) to the Taliban's Afghanistan.

Iran had long been anti-Taliban as it was not ready to reconcile itself with the Taliban's hard-line stance against Shiites and Tajiks, its traditional partners in Afghanistan. However, the negative aspects of the U.S. military presence gradually outweighed Iran's anti-Taliban's sentiments. In August 2021, Iran viewed the collapse of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan in a positive light. Iran's critical approach to the Taliban's suppression of resistance in Panjshir did not change Tehran's overall intention to give the Taliban a chance. Iran hopes the Taliban will implement reasonable domestic (without repressions against Iran-oriented groups) and foreign policies. Iran, therefore, makes statements intended to establish constructive mutual relations. Apparently, Iran will have some backup plans should these hopes fall through, but it does not stress them so far.

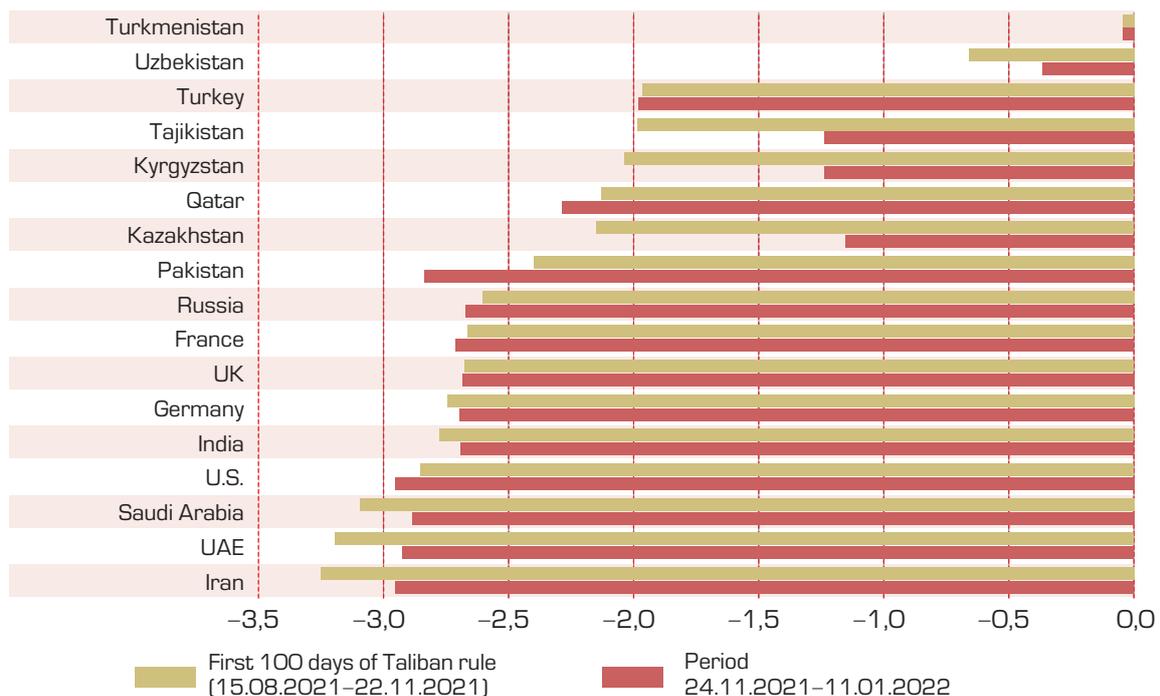
⁶ Designated as terrorist organization in Russia.

China supported the United States and its allies throughout their Afghanistan operation, and in recent years, Beijing has to some degree assisted in the efforts to engage in peace talks with the Taliban. China, however, does not intend to share any kind of responsibility for the consequences of the collapse of the former authorities. Beijing, therefore, is actively interacting with the Taliban government via its embassy in Kabul, among other channels, and continues to provide humanitarian aid and discuss economic and infrastructure projects. The accelerated implementation of such projects is thus far unlikely. The Taliban assured China that, under its control, Afghanistan would not pose a terrorist threat to China. The Taliban also took some practical steps to this effect: Uyghur groups were deployed further away from the Afghan–China border. Generally, China is not ready to speedily recognize the Taliban and is waiting for them to demonstrate respect for China’s interests.

Central Asian states. When the situation in Afghanistan exacerbated before Ashraf Ghani’s government collapsed, Uzbekistan held a military exercise together with Russia and Tajikistan not far from the Afghan border.

Yet the Taliban repeatedly assured Uzbekistan of its friendly intentions. When Ghani’s regime collapsed, Uzbekistan promptly entered into working relations with the new authorities (even before the Taliban had formed its government) and, following a short hiatus, again opened its border for trade. Special Representative of the President of Uzbekistan for Afghanistan visited Kabul several times, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan also made an official visit. Uzbekistan’s representatives resumed a dialogue with Kabul on the main issues in bilateral relations, mostly in trade and the construction of a railway via Kabul to Peshawar and then on to Pakistan’s ports (the project is strategically important for Uzbekistan). Uzbekistan is inclined to believe the Taliban’s assurances that they do not intend to export their domestic model into the region. While Uzbekistan officially supports the demands of western states, it is opposed to putting pressure on Afghanistan. As both sides are interested in cooperation, they do not focus on problematic issues, such as Afghanistan’s energy debts and the fate of Afghanistan’s military equipment (before the Ghani regime collapsed, Afghan pilots flew virtually all of

Tone of Publications on Taliban by Country



Source : prepared by the authors on the basis of the GDELT database.

Afghanistan's air force fighters to Uzbekistan without authorization).

Unlike Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan does not want to attract international attention to itself, although it also pursues a policy of establishing friendly relations with the Taliban. Turkmenistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Kabul with an impressive delegation and was received by the Taliban's Prime Minister. Ashgabat also expects to accelerate the implementation of its large projects, with the transit gas pipeline running via Afghanistan to Pakistan and India being a priority. Turkmenistan leaves all domestic matters in Afghanistan to the discretion of the Taliban government, does not comment on them and does not put forward any demands of the Taliban government.

Tajikistan has taken a completely different position. It was highly critical of the Taliban's coming to power. Dushanbe offered (at least moral) support to the resistance movement that emerged in Panjshir in September. Many Tajik politicians from Afghanistan's previous regime found asylum in Tajikistan. It attempted to act as an intermediary in setting up negotiations between the Taliban and the opposition on a coalition government agreement, although the Taliban balked at the idea. There are reports that Tajikistan is assisting Afghan politicians and warlords who are opposed to the Taliban in establishing a unified platform, but their internal contradictions appear to be too great to overcome. The statements made by Tajikistan officials at the highest levels emphasize the negative aspects of the Taliban's activities, and demonstrate that the country's leaders are extremely wary of the Taliban's peaceful statements and believe it necessary to prepare for aggressive actions on the part of the Taliban. The Taliban had indeed made belligerent statements directed at Tajikistan, although explaining them by Tajikistan's attempts to interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs. The sides are stepping up their military capabilities in the border regions.

Immediately after the regime change in Kabul, Kazakhstan focused on security issues. Afterwards Nursultan admitted that the Taliban, coming to power was a reality one should

reckon with. Kazakhstan's embassy in Kabul started to establish contacts with the Taliban government, in October the delegation of Kazakhstan visited Kabul, and public statements drew more and more attention to trade and providing Afghanistan with humanitarian help. Nevertheless, amid tragic developments of January 2022 Kazakhstan's authorities started to focus on security issues in connection to Afghanistan once again. It was declared that there had been terrorist fighters among the protesters, including those who completed training in Afghanistan.

Kyrgyzstan has taken a similar stance. From its original security-focused statements it, too, transitioned to placing an emphasis on trade and humanitarian issues.

Middle Eastern monarchies. Saudi Arabia has taken a broadly similar stance to that of western states, and also expects the Taliban government to implement moderate policies. However, some statements on the matter are harsher (up to claiming that the global community will find a way to hold the Taliban responsible should they violate their commitments). Meanwhile, some suggest that the issues of Afghanistan's domestic development should be left to the discretion of Afghans themselves. The latter approach can be expected to come to the foreground in Saudi Arabia.

The United Arab Emirates was initially somewhat ambiguous in its stance. The country became an important corridor for western states evacuating Afghans who had cooperated with the West. Many figures from the former regime also left for the UAE. At the same time, the UAE did not close down its embassy in Kabul and set about establishing relations with the Taliban. The latter course gradually took the upper hand. Figures from the former regime were prohibited from speaking out, although they remain in the country. The UAE essentially recognizes the Taliban's right to determine Afghanistan's domestic and foreign policies and opposes putting outside pressure on the Taliban. It also extends assistance to the Taliban regime.

Qatar sees Afghanistan as a successful example of its efforts to become a global mediator valued by all sides. Qatar was the largest channel for

evacuation from Afghanistan, which was a great help to western states. At the same time, Doha is the city where the Taliban has its only full-fledged office, which it uses to communicate with many foreign delegations, including the embassies of many countries accredited in Afghanistan (many states evacuated their embassies from Kabul to Qatar). Qatar's embassy still functions in Kabul and advocates cooperation with the Taliban instead of putting pressure on them. One option under consideration is Qatar, in cooperation with Turkey and possibly the UAE resuming operations of Kabul Airport.

Turkey was a member of the international coalition and actively promoted its contribution to building "a new Afghanistan." In the summer of 2021, the United States considered transferring control of Kabul Airport to the Turkish military to help out the Ghani government once the United States withdrew its troops. The Taliban viewed these plans in a very negative light, believing it would violate its Doha Agreement with the United States, which envisioned foreign militaries leaving Afghanistan. However, once the Taliban came to power, uncertainties in relations between the two states were overcome, and in October, Ankara received a delegation from the Taliban. Turkey opposes putting pressure on the Taliban and interfering into its domestic policy. Now the Taliban government itself is interested in Turkey and Qatar resuming

normal operations of Kabul Airport. Ankara is not ready to extend official international recognition to the Taliban government, but it does not want this circumstance to stand in the way of practical interaction with the Taliban.

Pakistan is the country that interacts most with Kabul at different levels, and it actively provides it with practical aid in establishing a regular life under the Taliban authority. This aid is in great demand. At the same time, Islamabad acts as the main international and regional lobbyist of the new Afghan authorities and expects its traditional influence in Afghanistan to become comprehensively and strategically entrenched. Pakistan today is the only country where domestic discussions involve important calls for the government to immediately recognize the Taliban regime officially. At the same time, Pakistan is not interested in the international isolation of Kabul and the deterioration of the socioeconomic situation in the country. Consequently, it attempts to convince the Taliban to take reasonable account of the prevailing international opinion, and Pakistan's official stance repeats the common themes of the international community. At the same time, despite the Taliban's long-standing ties with Islamabad, there are points of contention between them that will prevent the Pakistani authorities from achieving the long-held goal of dominating Afghanistan.

Terrorist International in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has probably the largest concentration of terrorist organizations in the world (over 20), all of which are solidly entrenched and strive to spread their influence beyond the country.

Islamic State. The Afghan wing of Islamic State (Islamic State – Khorasan Province⁷, ISKP) emerged in Afghanistan's eastern provinces in 2014 and was initially made up of mostly foreign militants. In 2015, it became active and its ranks swelled with Pashtuns. ISKP had stable financing, acted independently, and was brutal towards its opponents. Having sustained major losses in clashes with government forces, American special ops forces and the Taliban in 2018–2020, ISKP got a new ambitious leader, Shahab al-Muhajir, and the group restructured its activities. The new leadership decided not to hold territories in the east of Afghanistan and formed small groups that were given considerable leeway. These units penetrated urban areas in various provinces, which effectively allowed them to carry out terrorist attacks throughout Afghanistan.

As their presence expanded throughout the entire country, the group's ranks swelled with Pashtuns from Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks. The group, which was demonstrating success on the "battlefield," recruited both militants fighting against infidel foreigners and those who had become disillusioned with the Taliban. With the United States and the Taliban concluding an agreement in 2020, ISKP started positioning itself as the main intractable jihadi force in Afghanistan, which ensured an additional influx of radical militants. Therefore, when the events of August 2021 began to unfold, ISKP was quite prepared and ramped up its activities: between mid-August and late November 2021, the group carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks.

Amid the current socioeconomic situation in Afghanistan and problems with running a fully operational administrative system, ISKP has no financial problems. The group's agents actively

raise funds for its jihad throughout the Muslim world. This allows the group to pay militants wages that are high by Afghan standards, and that attracts new radicals to the group. There are reports of ISKP now attracting former law enforcement and military members from Ashraf Ghani's government, and Tajik and Uzbek units from the militia that emerged spontaneously after the Taliban came to power (in both cases, these people are driven by fears of persecutions on the part of the Taliban). Experts, however, differ in their assessments of how widespread and sustainable this actually is. ISKP has the most to gain from the complicated and uncertain situation in Afghanistan.

ISKP prioritizes the spread of jihad into neighbouring regions, primarily Central Asia. Islamic State may prefer to gain a foothold in Afghanistan, thereby creating a springboard for attacks in the region. For that purpose, the group may attempt to independently settle in a single district in Afghanistan or "insert" itself into the conflicts in the Afghanistan government, siding with the most radical faction and thus becoming part of the central Taliban government. Another option for ISKP is to stay away from the fight for power and control over territories in Afghanistan. A country without power and order that is virtually ungoverned would be an almost ideal base for further regional expansion. For that purpose, Islamic State would need to inflict as much physical and moral damage on the Taliban as possible, undermine their operational capabilities, and put the country's population on the brink of survival. In such conditions, ISKP would have maximum freedom to act, almost no responsibilities, and a great social base for expanding their ranks. In addition, it would be able to carry out cross-border attacks against neighbouring states and covertly infiltrate emergent flows of Afghan refugees.

Al-Qaeda. Compared to ISKP, it would seem that al-Qaeda in Afghanistan is barely visible. But this impression is deceptive. Despite the losses

⁷ Part of the organization designated as terrorist in Russia.

it sustained, al-Qaeda retains its standing in Afghanistan and tries to remain inconspicuous. The group is still under the Taliban's political protection, and its leadership is still given asylum in the region of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border.

The numbers of al-Qaeda militants in Afghanistan is estimated at 400–600. These are mostly mentors and advisors in the Taliban's units. Militarily, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have always been deeply integrated and always acted together in the intra-Afghanistan conflict. Al-Qaeda also carries out propaganda campaigns, promoting its ideas of liberating occupied Muslim lands, establishing an Islamic caliphate, and calling for the observance of Sharia law. Al-Qaeda supporters view the events in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 as a victory of global jihadism that should be taken further in other places.

Expanding jihad into the world's key regions is al-Qaeda's principal goal. It could support expanding the fight into the Central Asian areas, too, since it has close ties with several Central Asia-oriented groups operating in Afghanistan. Still, al-Qaeda prioritizes South Asia, the Middle East, the United States, and Europe.

As far as we can tell, al-Qaeda is interested in bolstering the Taliban's power and establishing normal life in Afghanistan. We can assume that al-Qaeda will take a wait-and-see approach for the foreseeable future and, instead of forcing action outside Afghanistan, help the Taliban establish order within the country and prepare international actions for the future.

South and Central Asia-oriented groups.

The Taliban allowed several groups – comprised mostly of Pakistani and Central Asian nationals as well as Uyghurs – to remain in the territories under their control, and also actively interacted with them.

Some “Pakistani” groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba⁸ maintain relations with Pakistan's intelligence service. However, at the same time, they have their own system of relations with the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and ISKP. The Taliban Movement in Pakistan

(TMP) is a special case. It is both at war with Pakistan and friendly with the Taliban (in the past, the TMP was also supported by the secret services of the former Afghanistan authorities). Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent⁹ is also geared towards operating not only in Pakistan, but also in India.

The key Central Asia-oriented groups are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan¹⁰ (made up primarily of Uzbeks, but it also accepts other peoples in Central Asian and Russian peoples), Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhari (the backbone of which is formed by natives of Uzbekistan and southern Kyrgyzstan), Jamaat Ansarullah (made up exclusively of Tajiks). These groups have experience carrying out underground operations in the post-Soviet territory and of military involvement in regional conflicts. The Taliban also took in the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, which prioritizes China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and the Uyghur question. In recent years, many Central Asia and Uyghur-oriented groups have prioritized shifting the fight into their “home” regions, and in recent years have strengthened their positions in Badakhshan, which they apparently see as their main springboard to extend jihad beyond Afghanistan.

Groups oriented towards South Asia, Central Asia, and the Uyghurs were not deeply integrated into the Taliban's military structure, but acted as if they were under the Taliban “umbrella” and had to coordinate important issues with them. Pakistani groups acted in a freer manner, while Central Asians and Uyghurs respected the chain of command. At the same time, however, they maintained independent relations with al-Qaeda and ISKP.

The Taliban and the Terrorist International.

The practice of the Taliban cooperating closely with the diverse terrorist international in Afghanistan contradicts the Taliban's repeated public statements that they had no intention of waging a jihad beyond Afghanistan and they would prohibit using Afghanistan as a springboard for aggressive actions against

⁸ Designated as terrorist organization in Russia.

⁹ Part of the organization designated as terrorist in Russia.

¹⁰ Designated as terrorist organization in Russia.

neighbouring states. The Taliban also made such statements non-publicly in their contacts with representatives of Russia, China, and Iran. Such a commitment regarding the United States is set down in the agreement signed by the two countries in 2020. Both regional and global politics are dominated by the opinion that the Taliban would have to take some steps to eliminate this contradiction.

In November and December 2021, there were reports from Afghanistan that the Taliban were taking steps to integrate foreign militants (apparently primarily those from Central Asia-oriented groups) into the emerging army of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban claims that they would assign foreign militants individually throughout their army units instead of keeping them in stable groups. In general, such a policy adopted by the Taliban may be quite acceptable for mitigating the terrorist threats coming from Afghanistan, but the scale and results of such policies practiced by the Taliban remain utterly uncertain.

At the same time, it is not entirely clear to what extent the Taliban could persuade foreign militants to abandon their jihadist programme beyond Afghanistan and settle in the country. Large-scale coercive measures are most likely impossible: whatever their disagreements, members of these groups remain the Taliban's brothers in faith and arms, and also their guests. Additionally, the Taliban at the moment could hardly use material incentives to bolster their suggestions that foreigners abandon jihad. The prospect of re-establishing the disbanded foreign units cannot be entirely ruled out either.

As we have already noted, jihadist organizations do not intend to rest on the laurels of their victory over the United States, its allies, and the local puppet government. Instead, they are preparing to continue the fight. There are signs that ISKP and al-Qaeda are competing to round up foreign jihadis, as well as to purchase weapons from the population looted from the military supply depots of the United States and the former government. Therefore, the key issue in the near future is what kind of relationship the Taliban government will form with these global jihadist organizations.

As we have already noted, the Taliban and al-Qaeda cooperate closely. Throughout the Afghan war, their representatives met to discuss matters of operational planning for military operations. The contacts were curbed, though, during U.S.–Taliban talks. Al-Qaeda is believed to have been assured by the Taliban that their historical ties are inviolable. This resulted in al-Qaeda leaders taking the Doha Agreement calmly, especially since the Taliban succeeded, following long and difficult negotiations, in putting such wordings in the agreement that would not force them to arrest al-Qaeda members or expel them from the country. The Taliban only assured the American side that leaders and middle-ranking al-Qaeda members are under control and are not planning any actions abroad.

Traditionally, the leaders of al-Qaeda and the Taliban have mostly communicated via the leading members of Haqqani's group. However, other Taliban factions support al-Qaeda, too. It is practically impossible for the Taliban to assume a hard line against al-Qaeda.

The Taliban has a more complicated and ambiguous relationship with ISKP. The very emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2014, Islamic State banking on establishing a caliphate within certain geographical boundaries, and especially the founder of Islamic State Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaiming himself a descendant of the prophet Mohammad and staking a claim to the office of the overlord of all faithful Muslims were met with a highly ambiguous reception in the international jihadi movement.

When foreign troops were partially withdrawn from Afghanistan in 2015, the Taliban began to clearly gain ground on the governmental army, and Ashraf Ghani tried (and failed) to use the threat of Islamic State to obtain more international support. A short while later, indirect signs appeared that the Afghan government's secret services were attempting, on the contrary, to establish relations with Islamic State and use them as a counterbalance to the Taliban, which was getting stronger.

There had been fruitless attempts to establish relations between Islamic State and the Taliban. In 2014, a document dubbed a letter from

the Taliban to Islamic State was circulated. It recognized Islamic State's successes in Iraq and Syria and suggested that Muslims abandon their disagreements and pool their efforts to fight the infidels. Even if we accept this letter as authentic, Islamic State soon got rolling in Afghanistan in a manner that provoked disagreements with the Taliban. In 2017, Lashkar-e-Taiba, acting most likely upon the instructions of their Pakistani handlers, attempted to act as intermediaries between the Taliban and ISKP to try and lead them to join forces to fight Ghani's pro-American regime. But again this attempt failed.

By the time of the regime change in Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban and ISKP had long been locked in a confrontation. They waged a war not only against the United States and the pro-American regime in Kabul, but also fought each other. Therefore, reports that the Taliban wasted no time in executing high-ranking Islamic State prisoners after coming to power, while at the same time setting members of al-Qaeda and other groups free appear quite logical. Nevertheless, we cannot say with any certainty that the Taliban would be willing and able to take decisive action in order to fully eradicate ISKP in Afghanistan. Despite all the disagreements and even antagonism between the leaders of the Taliban and ISKP, rank-and-file militants and middle-ranking commanding officers are not locked in an irreconcilable hostility. It is more than possible that they could fight among themselves, this is common for a

civil war and a jihad. At the same time, however, some Afghan and foreign militants can change allegiance depending on the situation. Rank-and-file members cannot view someone who successfully fights infidels as their existential enemy. ISKP is a powerful force, and eliminating it will require major efforts from the Taliban. The Taliban, therefore, may attempt to force the main body of ISKP's militants to recognize the authority of the Taliban while eliminating the intractable leadership by force.

Special mention should be made of the Taliban's relations with the TMP. This case is interesting because the Taliban cooperates with Pakistan while at the same time helping the TMP, which is at war with the Pakistani military. Islamabad expects the Taliban to take a more consistent stance in favour of Pakistan in this matter. At the same time, Sirajuddin Haqqani's attempts to act as an intermediary in developing a temporary ceasefire agreement between the TMP and the Pakistani government does not entail Afghanistan's Taliban severing ties with the TMP or turning TMP militants over to the Pakistani authorities. It turns out that the Taliban helped mitigate this problem for Pakistan, but did not help achieve a final resolution. Pakistani experts believe that the TMP may become an "instrument" in the hands of Afghanistan's Taliban government that could be used to put pressure on Islamabad should such a need arise, or become a bargaining chip in talks on other issues.

Production and Export of Drugs

ISAF media



Afghanistan is a global centre of opiate production: it accounts for approximately 70% of the world's opium poppy fields. In addition to opiates, Afghanistan is a major producer of cannabinoids and, recently, methamphetamines. The opiate production economy is estimated at USD 1.8–2.7 billion (10–15% of the country's GDP). Opium and heroin are Afghanistan's major exports, the cost of their deliveries exceeds the country's official exports.

The traditional problem of growing opium poppies escalated to a new level in the 1990s. In 1986–2000, opiate production increased by approximately 23% annually. The rapid development of the drug economy took place

against the background of the collapse of Afghanistan's statehood in the early 1990s, the impoverishment of the population, and the exacerbation of the civil war. In 1997, Afghanistan became the world leader in opiate production, a dubious distinction it has held ever since. Afghanistan's drug economy is closely tied to outside forces. The main exports to foreign markets go via Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asian states.

The Taliban's first stint in power coincided with an explosive growth in drug production. The Taliban's negative attitude towards drugs was based on moral and religious grounds. However, in the initial years of its rule the Taliban did not take any steps to combat drug

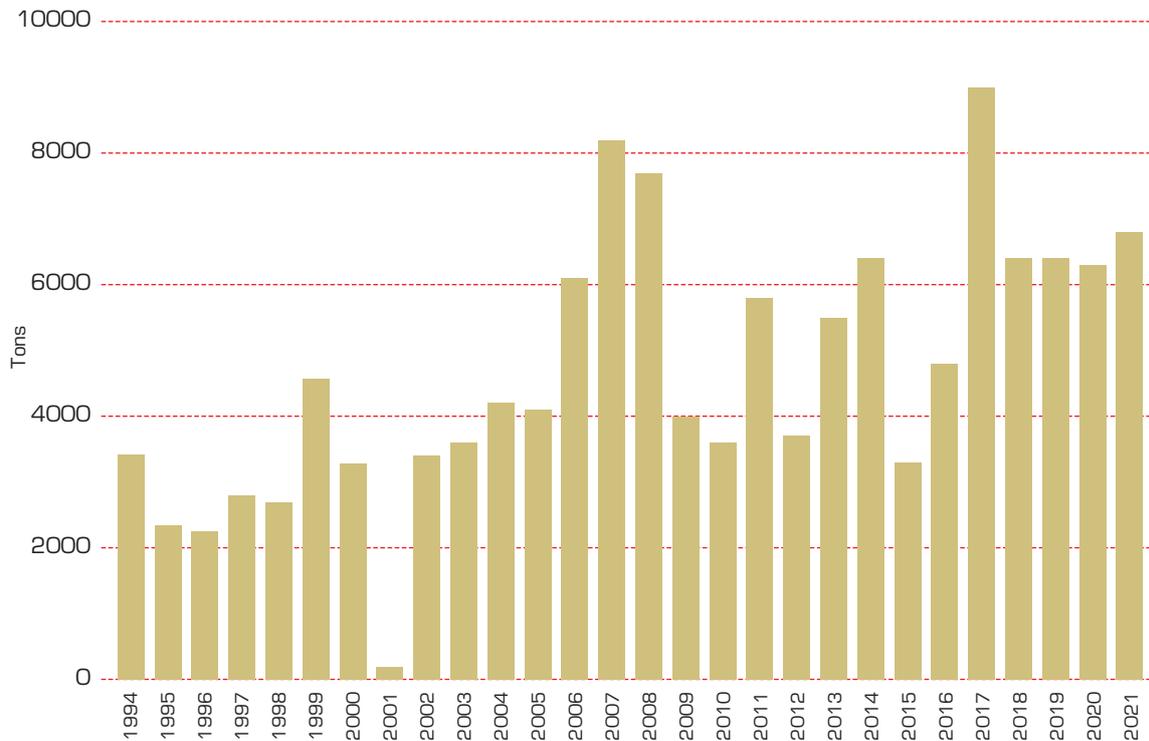
production. As they expanded their control of the country, they instituted a taxation system for drug production. In fairness, however, it should be said that drug production was also developing in Afghanistan's northern and western provinces, which were largely controlled by the Northern Alliance warlords until 1998–1999.

In 1999, when the Taliban controlled virtually the entire country (the Northern Alliance controlled only minor areas), they issued an order to eliminate a third of the opium poppy fields, and it was implemented fairly decisively. Many believed that the Taliban was thus attempting to establish a dialogue with the international community, showing that the organization was a capable and responsible power. Sceptics believe that the Taliban had other pragmatic considerations. For instance, they attempted to use prohibitions in order to monopolize the economy's principal export sector. Or else they attempted to right Afghanistan's disadvantaged situation in the global drug business. The thing was

that purchasing prices in Afghanistan did not increase, even when prices on consumer markets were going up. As a result, all drug mob chains made more money than initial producers. Afghanistan drug producers found themselves at an even greater disadvantage when prices dropped on consumer markets, and under such conditions Afghan producers were required to lower purchase prices. As a result, the only way Afghanistan could participate in the drug business was by constantly expanding its poppy fields. The Taliban could have attempted to rectify this situation by acting as a "drug OPEC". It is possible that all these reasons were at work simultaneously. In practice, drug production fell by 28% in 2000. In 2000, the Taliban issued a religious fatwa (an order) completely prohibiting drug production and managed to cut production by two thirds in the key drug-producing provinces.

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, drug production immediately started to increase. Afghanistan was opening up, and the drug business took advantage of this. Opium

Opium Production in Afghanistan



Source: prepared by the authors on the basis of the World Drug Report.

production grew steadily until 2007, when 8200 tonnes were produced. There was a visible dip in 2008–2010, followed by another increase. In 2017–15 years after the start of the international operation – against the backdrop of reports that a new, democratic, and modern Afghanistan was being built, a record 9000 tonnes of opium was produced.

In the last 20 years the Taliban did not fight drug production on the territories they controlled. On the contrary, prevailing estimates showed they used the drug business as a source for replenishing their coffers.

The United States and the international coalition's strategy for fighting drugs in Afghanistan was neither decisive nor consistent. They attempted to implement a crop substitution policy, that is, farmers were subsidized for growing something legal. But these programmes need to develop over time, and here they tried to implement them in one fell swoop. Not infrequently these programmes turned out to be a sham due to local corruption. Foreigners were highly reluctant to eradicate opium fields (sometimes they hired mercenaries to do that). Generally, Afghan drugs were not a priority problem for Washington (the United States is a market for Latin American and Asian drugs). The United States and the Afghanistan government it controlled explained that they did not want to create more problems for the local population, which had few legal sources of income, and therefore the fight against drug production should go hand in hand with expanding the legal economy. In the short term, the American side suggested that those who are concerned about Afghanistan drugs fight them not in Afghanistan, but in neighbouring states, that is, they should fight transit instead of production (the United States also said it was ready to take joint steps in this area). Afghanistan's

government simply insisted that production was not the problem, rather, consumption was. The United States and the government in Kabul used these arguments to essentially plunge international discussions of Afghanistan's drug problems into a vicious circle. It was evident that, in the short term, they would not take any active steps to fight Afghanistan drugs.

In the time that the United States and its allies stayed in Afghanistan, drug production there increased approximately twofold. This is even taking into account the fact that drug production has dropped significantly since 2017. Worse still, as drug production in Afghanistan increased, criminal circles in all neighbouring states and in virtually all adjacent regions were becoming more involved in the criminal business around Afghanistan drugs.

Today, the Taliban is again making promises to fight drug trafficking and eliminate drug exports. At the same time, they say that fighting drug production in the current economic conditions is very hard. The problem, again, is that you cannot take away a source of sustenance without offering something in return.

It should be kept in mind that the Taliban is now facing two aspects of the Afghan problem: exports and domestic consumption. Both domestic consumption and exports have increased over the last 20 years against the backdrop of a manifold increase in production. Given the Taliban's religious and moral principles, it prioritizes decreasing domestic consumption, instituting moral order in the country, and supporting proper compliance with Islamic norms. There are reports of the Taliban aggressively introducing forced rehabilitation of drug addicts. Thus far, the Taliban has not launched a decisive campaign against drug exports.

Basic Problems with Development and Stability

From the personal collection of Mikhail A. Konarovsky



Street Vendors

Several long-term problems have a major impact on the domestic situation in Afghanistan. These include socioeconomic modernization, the ethnic and sectarian balance in the country, and the rivalry between foreign actors, both global and regional.

There have been several attempts over the past 100 years to modernize Afghan society. In the 1920s, these attempts were undertaken mostly using domestic resources, with the partial involvement of foreign capital and experts. In the 1950s–1970s, there was another attempt with reliance not only on domestic resources, but also on major involvement of foreign experts, preferential loans, and donor aid (the Soviet Union was actively involved in this assistance, both financially and by sending experts). Two further attempts were made with the dominant involvement of outside forces: Soviet Union in the 1980s, relying on the local left-wing movement; and the United States in the 2000s–2010s, relying on pro-western technocrats. Each time, social measures were

roughly the same: restricting the influence of mullahs, tribal leaders and the archaic customs they supported; giving women equal rights, abandoning the legal requirement for women to wear burqas, introducing education for girls, abandoning the rigid regulations of everyday life, permitting European-style clothes, etc. And each time, it was precisely such social transformation that provoked a highly powerful traditionalist reaction from Muslim clerics and tribal leaders, and armed resistance followed.

Up until the 1990s, the country appeared to be steadily moving towards modernization, certain rollbacks notwithstanding. The period of modernization in the 1950s–1970s was drawn out, and seemed to have taken root in the cities. In the 1970s, there were people who demanded that the reforms be abolished, and others who demanded that they be expedited. The latter comprised left-wing radicals who engineered a coup in 1978 in order to embark on an accelerated socialist modernization track. However, the de-modernization of the 1990s proceeded at

breakneck pace, and the educated class left the country just as quickly. It took another invasion, this time from the United States, for educated people to start coming back from emigration with support from a foreign military power. Now rapid de-modernization is taking place once again, and it is again clear that, without outside support, the modernists lack domestic power, and they are fleeing abroad.

Pashtuns believe themselves to be the state-forming ethnic group and claim a special role in state governance. This has led to a never-ending underlying struggle between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. However, over the few decades of the civil war, the situation has become more complicated and acute, and the importance of the ethnic and denominational factor has increased manifold.

The military detachments of warlords have always had an ethnic tinge, which resulted in a gradual increase of ethnic/national consciousness. Additionally, Afghanistan's ethnic makeup was evidently changing gradually, to the extent that it was now possible to dispute the exclusive role of the Pashtuns. There are no exact estimates, as a census has not been conducted in the country, but the international expert community typically state that Pashtuns make up 35–42% of the population (Pashtuns believe that their numbers are much higher, with nationalists estimating them at 60–70%; the maximum Pashtuns will concede is “clearly no less than half the population”), Tajiks make up 25–30% (Tajiks themselves believe they make up approximately 40%), and Uzbeks and Hazaras make up about 12–15% (their communities generally agree with these assessments). Others are small ethnic groups.¹¹

Since large non-Pashtun groups believe that Pashtuns no longer make up the majority of the population, their communities have developed two somewhat contradictory demands: greater autonomy (that is, a decrease in the authority of Pashtuns over them) and greater representation in the central government. During the civil war in the first half of the 1990s, the warlords both strived for autonomy of their territorial

holdings and fought for largely symbolic offices in Kabul. Similar developments initially continued after the U.S. intervention. However, once the Americans built a governance system that gave the central authorities tremendous powers and started spending money through that very government, fighting for a place in that government became everyone's priority. Tajiks, the largest non-Pashtun group, finally developed the idea that they had a right to supreme authority in Afghanistan. The Pashtuns insist on their primacy in governing the state and categorically deny the claim of the Tajiks to the supreme authority, as well as their idea to federalize Afghanistan. The ethnic and sectarian factor appears to permeate all political, economic, and social issues.

The Taliban have been less brutal in their treatment of the Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek communities since coming to power in the country for the second time in their history. There are, however, still concerns that the Taliban will “Pashtunize” Afghanistan even if they do not expedite the process. The only thing that outweighs the ethnic factor is religious fanaticism and radicalism. Jihadis are international. Therefore, in recent months, we have seen the emergence of a seemingly paradoxical situation whereby some non-Pashtuns, fearful of the Pashtun Taliban, are becoming jihadis and primarily joining ISKP.

Afghanistan has long been an area of rivalry. In some periods, it was rivalry between global powers. Russia and Great Britain competed for influence in the late 19th century turning Afghanistan into a buffer between their respective empires. In the 1980s the Soviet Union and the United States were involved in a proxy war in Afghanistan. The anti-Russian slant of the geopolitical views of the United States on Afghanistan have contributed to the deterioration of the U.S.–Russia relations over the past ten years. However, the rivalry between regional powers is more intense and long-standing. India and Pakistan are locked in the most intense rivalry in Afghanistan, with varying success for both sides. There are also

¹¹ Turkmens, Baloch, Arabs, Gurjars, Pamiris, Nuristanis, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaqs, Pashayis.



A ballot at the 2014 presidential election.
A voter did not mark any candidate, but left the message:
«Safety first, then elections»

contradictions between Iran and Pakistan. Iran and Saudi Arabia are involved in a complicated multi-level confrontation, which they also wage in Afghanistan, although it is not nearly as intense as the India–Pakistan rivalry.

Large-scale infrastructure projects in Afghanistan also had a facet of geopolitical and geo-economic competition. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States aspired to reduce connections between Central Asia and Russia. Initially, the plan was to erect infrastructure connecting Central Asian to Europe via the Caspian region and the South Caucasus bypassing Russia. After invading Afghanistan, the United States chose to pull the Central Asian states away from Russia in a different direction. The American side formulated the Greater Central Asia concept, which entailed the maximum connection of Central and South Asian states via Afghanistan, the creation of a transportation and energy infrastructure that would connect them, and the development of political, humanitarian, and cultural ties. The so-called “Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process” proceeded in the same vein. By now, these ideas have become deeply entrenched in regional politics and are even perceived as regional initiatives.

The former Afghanistan authorities eagerly supported such ideas. The Taliban also support

large projects involving their country. At the same time, there are different variants of putting these ideas into practice. Some initiatives are designed to connect Central Asian states with Pakistan (China supports such initiatives), others would provide access to Iranian ports (an Indian priority). There are signs of rivalry between these projects. At the same time, not only do they have an anti-Russian aspect and add a new dimension to the Pakistan–India stand-off, but in a broader context, also engulf Afghanistan and Central Asia into the confrontation between the U.S.–India and U.S.–Pakistan blocs.

None of the aforementioned basic problems are unique. Dozens of developing states have faced them. In numerous instances, the authorities would launch accelerated reforms that encountered resistance from traditionalist forces in society. Many societies are heterogeneous, they have internal ethnic or sectarian fault lines. The problem of relations with stronger actors, global leaders, was, too, more or less common for many states leaving behind their colonial dependence. For a long time, Afghanistan appeared to be part of the global trend of the developing world. Looking at it today, we get the impression that in order to push the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan in the 1980s, western states and some other countries “bolstered” anti-modernization forces to such an extent that no domestic counterbalance to them has been able to appear for over a third of a century. At the same time, ethnic and sectarian problems are being exacerbated, reproducing mistrust in society and regularly putting the country on the brink of a civil war. Additionally, Afghans have developed a rather distorted concept of sovereignty. Decades of regional and global actors being involved in the affairs of their country have convinced locals that Afghanistan has an exceptional significance for global politics, giving rise to the belief that there will always be outside actors whose interests can be balanced in a profitable manner.

Future of Afghanistan and Russian Interests

In 2021, the scenarios in which the situation in Afghanistan would normalize itself that the international community was banking on failed. First came the failure of plans to integrate the Taliban into the internationally recognized government (on the basis of the Doha Agreement). Then, after the Taliban seized power, the transfer of legitimacy and international recognition from the former government to the Taliban never took place. As a result, the massive outside subsidies for Afghanistan that had continued for years stopped. This is not only a story of the last two decades. Since the mid-20th century, Afghanistan has been either one of the main beneficiaries of international assistance, or a priority client of great powers. Its domestic political and socio-economic system existed mainly due to the substantial funding from the outside. When the country lost such subsidies in the early 1990s, chaos reigned, and then the first Taliban regime was installed, which posed a threat to both regional and international security.

So the sentiments in favour of resuming some kind of international Afghanistan project are quite natural. It should be financed from the outside, but in such a manner so that no individual country (or group of countries) has a decisive influence on Afghanistan's geopolitical orientation, while the country's government would steer a non-confrontational course towards its neighbours and the international community. The reason why global and regional powers assist Afghanistan is so that it does not pose a problem for anyone – given prior experience, that appears to be a perfect formula.

However, those states that had for the last two decades been Afghanistan's principal donors are putting forward terms of cooperation (regarding the country's domestic political and social system) that are unacceptable to

the Taliban. The Taliban views their coming to power as the liberation of Afghanistan (liberation from outside occupation and from customs imposed on the country from the outside). Profoundly convinced of their own political and ideological righteousness, the new authorities are not ready to give in to outside pressure and make major concessions.

Efforts intended to launch a revamped “international project” for Afghanistan will continue in 2022. It is, however, becoming increasingly likely that, in the short term, outside stakeholders will temper their negative expectations and be involved in providing Afghanistan with only a limited amount of humanitarian aid. Very few are ready for closer cooperation with the Taliban government. Pakistan is the most willing, but Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are also ready to cooperate to some degree. Russia, China, and Iran are aligned with them.

Still, even though most states in this group are somewhat friendly towards the Taliban and are hoping for a renewed “international project” for Afghanistan, they take into account the dominant international position and are not ready to fully assume responsibility for the Taliban's Kabul. This means that, in the short term, the international situation around the Taliban government will not undergo any radical changes. Sanctions against the Taliban and its leaders will continue, its government will not be able to use Afghanistan's foreign assets, international trade and economic projects will be hampered. All of these complicate the domestic situation in Afghanistan, yet it also creates unique conditions when an internal force must assume responsibility for the country and bring it back to the path of independent (albeit complicated) life.

The Taliban's ability to complete its transformation from a movement that only

partially represents the Afghan society into a national force that accounts for the interests of most Afghans is crucial for Afghanistan's domestic stability. In practice, this means abolishing the desire to bring the country to "a common Taliban denominator" (which is what part of the Taliban's social base and leadership is apparently inclined to do). Instead, it means being flexible in implementing a socio-political programme that retains the practice of either relaxing or tightening the norms instituted by the central government depending on the opinion of local communities. Currently, this is the most relevant type of "inclusivity" for Afghanistan. Afghan society is likely willing to postpone the issue of greater representation in the central Afghan government.

The Taliban will have to demonstrate its ability to contain terrorist groups in their country if it wants to maintain a positive dynamics of relations with the group of states that are ready to go further than the international community in establishing closer interactions with Afghanistan under the Taliban.

The 2022 will test the Taliban's ability to handle these basic tasks in domestic and foreign policy, largely on its own. This is an "experiment" fraught with a multitude of risks. Contradictions may mount in the Taliban's central leadership, and a rift there is possible. Regional resistance to the Taliban authorities may increase, too, ultimately collapsing into a multilateral civil war. The Taliban may have insufficient power to keep its promises to contain the terrorist threat, and consequently it may withdraw these promises (at least with regard to some states) and use international extremist groups based in the country as a way of putting pressure on some outside actors under the pretext of not being provided with enough assistance. Nor can we rule out the Taliban regime transforming into a dictatorship that is cruelly oppressive against part of its own population, which will complicate the Taliban's relations not only with the international community, but also with its immediate neighbours. Then the Taliban's Afghanistan may, in cooperation with

the terrorist international, become openly aggressive against its neighbours and the international community.

Ultimately, however, these risks derive from the Taliban's own policies and not from outside conditions. The Taliban government is not the only one in the world to be subjected to sanctions' pressure, unfair treatment, and double standards by a significant part of the international community. And these factors cannot be used to justify domestic repressions or aggression against other countries (even if those countries have a critical stance on the Taliban).

In a broad historical retrospect, Russia made a significant contribution to Afghanistan's economic development and social modernization, both as part of extensive international effort of the 1960s–1970s, and independently in the 1980s. Russia also assisted the western effort in Afghanistan in the 2000s–2010s, even though it has never fully shared its ideology. And Russia certainly could not consent to the attempts to involve Afghanistan in geopolitical projects aimed against those countries that Washington considers non-friendly, including giving an anti-Russian slant to American activities in Afghanistan.

After 2014, Russia maintained contacts with all the principal political forces in Afghanistan, including the Taliban. Russia strove to use these contacts to set up a dialogue between the main intra-Afghan forces, and prompt the United States to recognize the need to reach agreements with the Taliban so that an intra-Afghan dialogue could be launched and an end could be put to the western military presence in the country. These efforts were invariably criticized by the U.S. and their like-minded allies, including the pro-American government in Kabul. Still, in the recent years, until the very collapse of the former regime in Kabul, Russia interacted with the United States in its attempts to achieve intra-Afghan agreements that would allow the United States to withdraw its troops without making it a shameful display and without deeply destabilizing Afghanistan. On the whole, Russia has remained an important (although not a key) actor in Afghanistan

through the years, was part of international efforts and, as such, was faced with the failure of policies developed by other actors.

After the collapse of the American project, Russia needs a stable Afghanistan (without a civil war), one that does not export terrorism and drugs. For Russia, preserving elements of social modernization in Afghanistan is desirable, but it is not a priority compared to the issues outlined above. Like other states in neighbouring regions, Russia does not want to set strict terms for the Taliban. Instead, it

wants to give the Taliban a chance to prove itself as an independent and geopolitically neutral force. At the same time, Russia cannot ignore security risks and, hence, hedges against them by enhancing military cooperation with Tajikistan and to some extent Uzbekistan. The fact that Taliban's Kabul will have to act under unfavourable international circumstances and without extensive foreign support entails the greater risk of the Taliban's failure to manage domestic issues and/or carry out its commitments to foreign actors.

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