

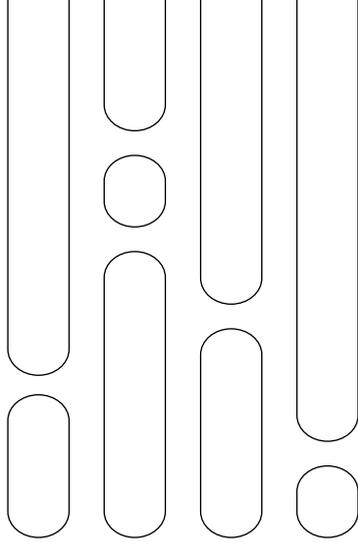
REPORT

ONE YEAR SINCE THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER: THE GROUP'S UNASSAILABLE GRIP ON POWER AND THE IMPASSE IN ITS FOREIGN POLICY

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The Afghan government collapsed on August 31, 2021, after Afghan soldiers surrendered to the Taliban which vowed to set up a new Islamic emirate following an earlier peace deal brokered with the United States in Doha, Qatar. But a year later, Afghanistan continues to grapple with violence and faces a humanitarian crisis. One year after the Taliban's takeover, it is important to review the developments on the internal and external fronts, which will allow prospective scenarios to be laid out concerning the future of Afghanistan. The report is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the internal developments, shedding light on five topics: democracy and government formation; women's rights and education, minorities, the opposition forces, and the economic situation. The second part reviews the Taliban's foreign relations with its neighbors; regional and international powers, and the factors that will impact the Taliban's foreign policy in the future.

Internal Interactions

Democracy and Government Formation Under the Taliban

Three weeks after taking control of Kabul, the Taliban formed an interim hardline-led government after intense negotiations among the group's rival internal factions. The government appointed Mullah Hassan Akhund as its interim prime minister, two deputy prime ministers Mullah Abdula Ghani Baradar and Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi, and a spiritual leader or Amir al-Mumineen Hibatullah Akhundzada: the present leader of the Taliban. Sirajuddin Haqqani was appointed as the acting interior minister. He had led the [Haqqani Network](#), designated a [foreign terrorist organization](#) by the United States, that led to the greatest number of attacks against US forces as well as Afghan civilians, before the departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

Despite promises to show moderation, the Taliban remained non-transparent and its tendency toward authoritarian rule and disrespect for basic human rights was clearly apparent.

The Taliban's centralization of power and shunning of opposition forces ended the opportunity for political dialogue among competing Afghan factions post US-withdrawal. Instead, the Afghan political landscape was quickly marred by intense factional and armed rivalries as well as brewing local opposition to the Taliban takeover and its authoritarian tendencies. Lacking full support from the Afghan people, the Taliban has been unable to swiftly entrench its powers in a manner to allow it to efficiently govern Afghanistan. Despite this, the group remains the indisputable dominant political and armed force inside the country. The Taliban argues that it inherited a bankrupted political system, and international sanctions have

impeded its path to govern the country and provide services to the Afghan people to resolve the deepening humanitarian crisis.

Women's Rights and Education Under the Taliban

UN reports indicate that women in Afghanistan face increased human rights violations a year after the Taliban took over Kabul on August 15, 2021. The Taliban's initial promise to allow women their Islamic rights including the right to seek secondary education or high school or higher [education](#) was followed by the group systemically excluding women from the education system and government jobs. Afghan women are excluded from political participation, despite increased mobilization by women to carve out a political role in Afghan society. According to news analysis by [UNICEF](#), excluding 3 million teenage girls from secondary education has cost the country a 2.5 percent loss of GDP, or a loss of \$500 million over the last year.

The Taliban is said to exercise "gender apartheid." Extreme poverty is striking women who previously worked in government jobs but now face a sudden [loss of income](#). Women in general are barred from traveling alone and the sexes are increasingly segregated. Women also face increased domestic violence and abuse in the public sphere, as their rights are unprotected. Afghan women also face difficulties in accessing social services, including access to the [health sector](#), leading to many women and children facing health risks. In May 2022, a Taliban decree mandated women to wear the [hijab](#) and fully cover their faces in the public sphere.

The Taliban and Minorities

The Taliban claimed that it would protect all Afghan minorities. But a wave of migration to neighboring countries suggests that minorities have been victimized by the Taliban and unprotected amid a wave of attacks launched by the Afghan chapter of ISIS (IS-K). The [Haqqani network](#) that forms the core of the Taliban leadership and backs Pashtuns shows no interest in involving Afghan minorities in the government.

Deadly attacks targeting Afghan Shiites and their mosques, killing dozens and injuring scores in October 2021 and April 2022 were left unaddressed by the Taliban. The Taliban claimed it had arrested the mastermind behind the attack on Shiites in Mazar-e-Sharif in April 2022, but another attack on a Shiite Mosque in the Afghan city of Kunduz in May 2022 that killed at least 30 Shiites raised further questions over the actual protection offered by the group to religious minorities, especially to Shiites in the country. In April and May 2022, the Taliban denied responsibility for attacks targeting the [Hazara section of Kabul and Afghan Sufis](#).

Evidence suggests that the Taliban has turned against Afghan Shiites. The Taliban says it killed the Shiite Hazara emissary [Maulavi Mahdi](#), who briefly served as the group's intelligence chief in Bamian Province. He was recruited by the Taliban in late 2021 to help boost the group's image among the Shiite community. He had fought alongside Taliban fighters for 10 years to help the group recapture power. However, people close to him claim he is still alive, while others say he was [arrested](#). Maulavi Mahdi had claimed that the Hazaras were sidelined under Taliban rule and his employees were not paid on time. Additionally, he claimed that the Taliban undertook deliberate efforts to discriminate against Shiite [Hazara](#) Twelvers.

Ethnic tensions have also been apparent within the Taliban. Ethnic Uzbek members of the Taliban refused to dispatch fighters to help the group deal with Mahdi's supporters. The [Uzbek](#) members seek full autonomy, especially in mainly Uzbek-populated provinces and areas in Afghanistan. They have also resisted Taliban attempts to relocate Uzbek members of the Uzbekistan Islamic Movement from Afghanistan's northwestern borders to areas far removed from the country's border with Uzbekistan.

The Taliban and Opposition Forces

A Taliban-led campaign to marginalize ethnic and religious minorities exacerbated Afghanistan's internal insurgency within six months after the group took control of the country in August 2021. The Taliban claimed it offered an amnesty to local armed groups, including to IS-K fighters. It also held talks with Ahmad Massoud, the leader of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF).

Massoud earlier had fought against the Taliban in the Panjshir Valley. Massoud's NRF lost a significant number of fighters, and consequently its ability to negotiate with the Taliban to win ministerial seats in Afghanistan's new government. The front was forced to leave for northern Afghanistan and [Tajikistan](#). But the NRF renewed its resistance in northeastern Afghanistan in June 2022, fueled by the Taliban's stubborn refusal to build [an inclusive government](#), but it risks failure given stronger Taliban forces and the reluctance of Afghanistan's neighbors to fully arm it. In northwestern Afghanistan, members of the Taliban are joining the NRF, according to reports, as internal [ethnic tensions](#) caused by the group is leading to fallouts.

In Herat on the border with Iran, Mohammad Ismail Khan, one of the most prominent warlords in Afghanistan, known as "The Lion of Herat," was arrested by the Taliban on August 13, 2022. Khan's group took control of Herat but yielded its control to the Taliban after the latter promised to allow the former's leaders to live with dignity and without fear of arrest or

death. After taking control of Herat, the Taliban released 3,000 prisoners and offered a public amnesty.

The People's Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan (Hezb-e Wahdat) and Afghanistan's National Islamic Movement are other groups attempting to recruit Taliban fighters including Pashtuns. Former members of Afghanistan's police force fled to Tajikistan and are now leading a new resistance front against the Taliban in Badakhshan. Former Afghan politicians now in exile may spearhead new fronts to oust the Taliban.

[Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum](#), now in exile in Turkey, believes war is not the answer, but is asking the Taliban to enter into negotiations with opposition forces and with the [Supreme Council of National Resistance of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan](#), a coalition formed in October 2021. Dostum, who is a member of the council, is keen for all political factions to work together in order to avert another civil war breaking out in Afghanistan. His call finds support among most of Afghanistan's neighboring countries as they also want the Taliban to enter into comprehensive talks with opposition groups. In their view, this is the only way to ensure stability in Afghanistan and prevent Afghans from seeking refuge in their territories; this has already caused much social and economic upheaval in some neighboring countries.

Other Afghan figures such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e-Islami and who is close to Iran, supports [Taliban control](#). He remains in Afghanistan but is calling on the Taliban to engage in wider talks with other groups and political parties to diffuse tensions and resolve the country's pressing issues.

The Economic Situation

The Afghan economy, as well as the Afghans' overall living conditions, deteriorated significantly in the first year since the Taliban takeover. The United States froze Afghanistan's foreign reserves which are estimated to be worth more than \$9 billion, and foreign assistance was halted, with the country depending on the latter to import items and shore up the national currency. The decline in Afghanistan's GDP and national currency as well as in Afghan income and purchasing power are the visible hallmarks of the tough economic situation facing the Afghan people.

GDP dropped significantly after the Taliban retook power as production ceased and borders were closed. According to World Bank (WB) estimates, GDP will fall 34 percent by the end of 2022 compared to 2020. This means more unemployment and a scarcity of basic goods. Moreover, the prices of basic goods have risen significantly as a result of the national currency's depreciation. According to UN estimates, more than half of Afghanistan's population is food insecure.

The WB's short-term outlook for the Afghan economy is extremely pessimistic. The WB's most recent report, released in April, described the Afghan economy's prospects in light of the current situation as "catastrophic." According to the report, Afghan income per capita fell by one-third in the final months of 2021, erasing the economic progress made since 2007. Afghanistan needs serious measures to ensure that people's needs are met, good economic management is undertaken, and international financial assistance to recover economically resumes. At the moment, it lacks the measures for the aforementioned.

Foreign Relations and International Positions

Over the last year, the Taliban government has made no significant progress toward re-establishing its international relations and re-introducing Afghanistan in the international arena. There have also been no serious attempts by the Taliban to find solutions for the recognition of the new government in Kabul. This part of the report will cast light on the Taliban's foreign relations, particularly with the most important neighboring actors, as well as with significant regional and global powers. This is in addition to reviewing the most significant reactions to the Taliban capturing Kabul once again and the main factors that will shape the trajectory of the Taliban's foreign relations in the future, and those factors that will act as a source of tension between the group and the aforementioned actors.

Neighboring Countries

Pakistan

Since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Pakistan has been concerned about security threats from Afghanistan, particularly from the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In addition, a new wave of Afghan refugees and Afghanistan's deepening humanitarian crisis have been of concern to Islamabad. Pakistan has also been gauging responses from the region and global powers while looking at protecting its own interests and joint interests with China. Recently, Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif approved [coal imports](#) from Afghanistan with Pakistani rupees instead of US dollars. As an ongoing process to address the humanitarian requirements in Afghanistan, the [Pak-Afghan Cooperation Forum](#) handed over 25 tons of food items to Afghan authorities; and after the earthquake in Afghanistan, Pakistan opened its borders in South Waziristan to establish a makeshift medical facility.

Pakistan's Foreign Office Spokesperson Asim Iftikhar recently [said](#) during a press briefing that Islamabad's policy toward Afghanistan would be based on a "regional and consensual" approach. Pakistan is also in close contact with other neighbors in the region in relation to the swift developments taking place in Afghanistan. Recently, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal

Bhutto Zardari spoke with Iran's Special Representative to the President on Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Ghomi to [discuss](#) mechanisms to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan and underscored the importance of close cooperation between both countries on regional security, refugee influx, and humanitarian assistance. Pakistan has maintained its embassy in Afghanistan and Pakistan has expressed serious concerns over the economic and humanitarian situation in the country. Iftikhar also recently said during a response to the recent UN report highlighting the growing threats from terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS-Khorasan (IS-K) and TTP that one of the most important concerns for the international community and the Pakistan government is that the Taliban should ensure that Afghan territories are not used for planning and launching terrorist operations.

[Reports](#) indicate that Omar Khalid Khurasani who was a senior leader of the TTP, a group which opposes the government in Pakistan and has been at loggerheads with it, was recently killed in Paktika, a south-eastern province in Afghanistan. Several [reports](#) also revealed that hundreds of TTP fighters were freed and are now back in their stronghold regions like Swat, Waziristan and Dir which poses a severe security risk for Pakistan. The recent skirmishes come after peace talks between the TTP, and the Pakistani government reached an impasse as the group refused to withdraw its demand for the reversal of the merger of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas with Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province in Pakistan that took place in 2018.

Likely, the differences over the Durand Line could remain a major cause of tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially after the return of the Taliban, and that could influence bilateral interactions amid lingering threats along the borders.

Iran

While Iran has maintained communication with the Taliban in the last few years, last year border security clashes became a serious concern for Tehran. Iranian officials have met Taliban representatives several times, especially amid the border clashes in [Hirmand](#) and [Nimroz](#) provinces. Iran's minister of interior recently said that the sporadic border conflicts with the Taliban's border guards have been primarily because of their ignorance regarding the demarcation of the Iran-Afghan border. Lately, clashes erupted across the 900 km border on July 31, 2022, between the Taliban forces and Iran's Border Guards, killing one on the Afghanistan side. Iran, as many countries, do not recognize the newly formed Taliban government and has called on the group to form an inclusive government that includes representatives from all ethnic and sectarian components across Afghanistan.

Iran's minister of energy had earlier traveled to Kabul and met Taliban officials to discuss ways to [increase cooperation](#) and resolve issues related to water sharing from the Helmand River. Iran has criticized Afghanistan in the past on several occasions for not abiding by the Helmand River water-sharing agreement (1973). Iranian officials have also discussed the prospects of electricity and energy supply to Afghanistan and recently the Taliban government announced that Iran has signed an agreement for Kabul to import 350,000 tons of oil from Iran amid an unprecedented rise in oil prices in Afghanistan.

Last year, the [Norwegian Refugee Council](#) (NRC) called for more funding and assistance amid reports [indicating](#) that nearly 4,000 to 5,000 Afghans were fleeing the country to Iran. The NRC secretary general after evaluating the situation also urged the international community to scale up the aid it was providing to Afghanistan. The Taliban's acting minister of refugees and repatriations also visited Tehran to discuss the refugee issue against the backdrop of an increased flow of refugees to Iran and several [reports](#) suggesting ill-treatment of Afghan refugees in Iran.

In the current context, Iran is deeply concerned about illegal cross-border drug trafficking, especially amid several reports [indicating](#) that the Taliban is involved in opium extraction and trafficking despite the ban imposed after coming to power, and in the coming months, Iran is likely to continue with its pragmatic interactions with the Taliban.

Central Asia

Afghanistan's bordering countries in Central Asia like [Turkmenistan](#), [Uzbekistan](#) and [Tajikistan](#) increased the number of their border military forces to prepare for any threats emanating from Afghan territories. While Tajikistan has [accepted](#) some Afghan refugees and has agreed to resolve the refugee issue through multilateral organizations, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have expressed serious concerns over the refugees. Moreover, amid other regional and global challenges, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Central Asian countries by and large have been cautious about completely opening their borders to Afghan refugees and likely they will continue with the same approach in the coming months.

Regional Countries

India

India has closely monitored the developments in Afghanistan ever since the Taliban took over the country a year ago. India has significant stakes in Afghanistan and New Delhi's development assistance is [estimated](#) to be over \$3 billion. Recently, New Delhi decided to [re-open](#) its embassy in Kabul and India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said that

his country has decided to start its humanitarian mission and continue its medical and vaccine support to Afghanistan. Kabul's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Abdul Qahar Balkhi also recently said that officials from both countries had been working toward resolving mutual problems and concerns.

The Taliban has repeatedly approached New Delhi to continue its connectivity projects in the country which are critical to improving Afghanistan's trade prospects as the latter is strategically located, connecting South Asia to Central Asia. India in recent years has invested significantly in expanding its trade and economic partnerships with the Central Asian countries and the Indian government has emphasized the strategic significance of the connectivity projects. Recent reports indicate that the Taliban has welcomed Indian attempts to enhance connectivity with Central Asia via Iran's Chabahar port and has hinted at the establishment of a trilateral mechanism to this end. Moreover, several comments and responses from the Taliban side [reflect](#) its intent to revive the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project. The Taliban is accelerating its efforts to make Afghanistan a vital transit route for gas exports from Turkmenistan via TAPI, however, the project has not attracted any momentum as of now.

Recently, Indian-trained Afghan soldiers were welcomed by the Taliban upon their completion of their training and return to Afghanistan. Moreover, when Afghanistan was hit by a deadly earthquake, the Taliban reached out to India for humanitarian aid to resolve the acute food crisis the country faced, and in June, New Delhi responded to the [request](#) by dispatching 40,000 tons of wheat as well as medical assistance and vaccines. Reports indicate that India also sent two delegations to oversee the delivery and distribution of food and medical supplies to Afghanistan.

India is in close contact with other countries like Iran and Russia in regard to the swift developments in Afghanistan. Recent responses from the Taliban reflect its keenness to kickstart interactions with New Delhi, especially on the economic front as Afghanistan has been facing a serious economic crunch after the group's takeover of the country and isolation from the international community. India's major concerns while dealing with the Taliban will remain to be security and counter-terrorism which were recently [highlighted](#) by India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. In the current context, India-Afghanistan relations will pivot around a number of projects that focus on security, trade, infrastructure development and humanitarian assistance.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The Taliban is expecting to sign a security agreement with Qatar, with the government in Doha continuing to be the primary mediator between

the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” and other countries. Ambassadors from the Gulf countries came together to [underline](#) the need to guarantee women’s rights in Afghanistan amid the growing concerns of the international community about the Taliban’s position on women’s rights and reports suggesting hindrances for women to work and study because of the restrictions posed by the group. Gulf diplomats stressed the importance of the national reconciliation plan as well as ensuring equality and freedom for all. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are concerned about the possibility of the proliferation of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. At a [meeting](#) in Doha, Gulf ambassadors emphasized the immediate need to intervene in Afghanistan to provide humanitarian assistance as the situation in the country is becoming increasingly dire because of growing poverty, hunger, and lack of medical care.

Recent reports indicate that UAE and Taliban officials agreed to strike a deal to run Kabul Airport and others. Although there were talks earlier with countries like Qatar and Turkey along with the UAE to run Afghanistan’s airports, the Taliban [reportedly](#) decided to hand operations completely over to the UAE and as per the deal, Afghan nationals will be employed at the airports. According to the deal, Abu-Dhabi-based GAAC Solutions would manage the airports in Kandahar, Kabul, and Herat.

Likely, the Gulf countries will remain concerned about shared challenges like drug trafficking, refugee flows and terrorism and interactions with the Taliban will only progress gradually depending on the group’s measures to ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan and mend relations with the international community.

Global Powers

The United States

The United States’ interactions with the Taliban over the last year have been limited and Washington’s approach toward the country has focused on addressing terrorist threats, human rights abuses and building an inclusive stable political system, although the Taliban regime has not taken any stern measures to allay fears related to the first two matters, while regarding the final matter, it has not made any progress either, with it excluding opposition forces and minorities from positions of influence and power.

Amid the domestic political tussle between the Democrats and Republicans in the United States, the Biden administration has been [attacked](#) by the opposition for the disastrous withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. A recent [report](#) by the United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs revealed that elite Afghan soldiers, including several high-ranking officers and commandos trained by the United States,

fled to Iran with weapons. The report also indicated that Russia, China and Iran were looking to recruit these soldiers, potentially posing a significant national security risk for the United States. Former US National Security Advisor John Bolton said that the Taliban failed in its commitments to the Afghan people and called the signing of the Doha agreement a big mistake. Last year, several Republican senators introduced legislation called the “Afghanistan Counter-terrorism, Oversight and Accountability Act” to [impose](#) sanctions on the Taliban and all governments that engage with the group. The Taliban is keen on being recognized by the United States and their allies and is seeking sanctions relief and the unfreezing of Afghan assets.

A recent [UN report](#) on the Taliban’s first 10 months in power highlights the extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detentions, silencing of dissent, and stifling of free speech. American officials have been skeptical about the counterterrorism commitments made by the Taliban as stipulated in the Doha agreement signed in 2020. Moreover, the recent [killing](#) of the leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul who was living in a safe house further increased the United States’ mistrust and skepticism of the group. The Taliban’s failure to meet the expectations of Western powers has complicated the flow of humanitarian aid to the country.

Reports suggest that since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, the United States has halted providing support for the reconstruction of the country and has instead focused on targeted assistance to provide for basic needs. As a result, the United States has led the assistance efforts in delivering [humanitarian aid](#) through UN agencies and NGOs, providing approximately \$775 million until now.

So far, Washington’s approach toward Afghanistan has focused on the evacuation of American citizens and the resettlement and rehabilitation of Afghans who have plunged into hardship amid the severe economic and humanitarian crisis in the country. The United States will likely extend some relief to the Taliban despite the tensions between both sides as the domestic situation in Afghanistan is likely to worsen, posing a significant security threat to neighboring countries and the world.

China

China engaged closely with the Taliban even before the group’s takeover of Afghanistan. China has called for an inclusive government to be formed in Kabul which is essential for long-term stability. While speaking about Afghanistan, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the OIC Summit [said](#) that “China supports Islamic countries to use Islamic wisdom to solve current issues.” Representatives of the Chinese Embassy have held several meetings with Taliban officials in 2022 largely focusing on provisions to

continue with infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan. China is also maintaining close relations with other regional partners to form a regional consensus on Afghanistan. Chinese officials have been present in all the regional discussions on Afghanistan and China has often flexed its diplomatic weight by mediating between different countries and initiating dialogue concerning Afghanistan.

China has not yet recognized the Taliban government; however, Beijing maintains diplomatic ties with the group. China recently [delivered](#) \$37 million in aid to Afghanistan, fulfilling its promise made in 2021. Chinese diplomats and officials have also urged the United States to release Afghan assets. Reports suggest that the United States has [seized](#) nearly \$9.5 billion of Afghan assets since the Taliban took over the country.

Recently after the [meeting](#) between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Taliban counterpart Amir Khan Muttaqi on the sidelines of the SCO Foreign Ministers Summit, China declared that it will not charge tariffs on 98 percent of the goods imported from Afghanistan in an attempt to revive the country's economy and boost bilateral economic ties.

China has blamed the United States for the fragility in Afghanistan and has often underlined the role of Washington at international summits in creating the conditions for the debacle that the country now faces. China is also wary of terrorist outfits regrouping and planning terrorist operations in Afghanistan because of the threat they post to Chinese and wider regional security. The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) poses a greater threat to China than the Taliban and Beijing has urged the group to crack down on the ETIM.

China also has significant economic interests in Afghanistan, especially in the mining sector. The Mes Aynak copper mine and the contract for oil extraction in the Farvab and Sar-e-Pol provinces are key Chinese investments in the country and to reap any benefit from these investments, stability in the country is crucial. Afghanistan's strategic location is also critical for China's ambitious One Belt One Road Initiative and maintaining good diplomatic ties with the Taliban is important to incorporate the country into the initiative. Hence, it is likely that Beijing will accelerate its efforts to expand its cooperation with Afghanistan to protect its economic and strategic interests in the coming years.

Russia

Russia has been cautiously monitoring the internal developments in Afghanistan as any growing threats from IS-K would impact Moscow's security considerations. Recently, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov [said](#) that recognizing the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan is not on Russia's "current agenda." Russia's special envoy for Afghanistan Zamir

Kabulov recently said that Russia would decide on recognizing the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” regardless of the opinion of the United States or any other country. He also [said](#) that an “inclusive ethnopolitical government in Afghanistan” should be the first step toward any recognition of the emirate.

Any economic support to the Taliban government is a matter of concern for Russia, despite the fact that Russian and Afghan officials have signed an agreement to enhance economic cooperation. Such agreements and deals are vital for the Taliban to stimulate the Afghan economy. The Taliban delegation also met with Russian officials in Moscow to discuss the prospects to develop commercial ties and boost mutual trade relations. Recent [reports](#) indicate that the Taliban was in talks with Russia to import 1 million metric tons of petroleum products that would be bartered for minerals, food items, and raw materials.

Russia’s approach largely seems defensive and the fulcrum of its interactions with the Taliban will revolve around its economic interests and strategic considerations in Central Asia as well as its own security considerations.

The European Countries

The issue of establishing an inclusive political system, as well as women’s and minority rights, have remained a source of contention between the group and European countries in the year since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This file, according to the Europeans, is one of the most important to evaluate the Taliban. During its first year in power, the group attempted to make overtures to the European community to break the ice between the group and the European countries and achieve international recognition. The group’s representatives, led by the Taliban government’s foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, met with Western diplomats in Oslo at the end of January 2022. The delegation discussed the issue of recognizing the Taliban government and unfreezing Afghan assets with Norwegian officials as well as representatives from the United States, the UK, Germany, Italy, and the European Union (EU). The group also stated its willingness to initiate communication between itself and Afghan civil society representatives living abroad.

There has been noticeable communication between the two sides, and the group has asserted that it seeks to soften its position and make good on its promises made during the first months of retaking power in Afghanistan, particularly to ensure rights and freedom. However, all of these efforts have so far failed to meet the aspirations of the European countries. All of these promises have remained purely symbolic. In this context, the EU has condemned the Taliban’s restrictions imposed on the freedom of Afghan women. The EU’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, also condemned the

deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan one year after the Taliban takeover. Human rights violations, particularly against women, girls, and minorities, are extensively on the rise.

Future Scenarios

The future of Afghanistan is still ambiguous as there are no reliable indicators pointing to an improvement in the harsh living conditions of the Afghan people. After reviewing the current indicators that are likely to impact the country's future, we can conclude the following three scenarios:

- **The path to statehood:** This is an optimistic scenario and will only materialize if the international community places sufficient pressure and provides the needed incentives to the Afghan government, so it finds it necessary to adopt appropriate policies that lift the isolation imposed on the Afghan people, pave the way for international humanitarian organizations to enter the country as well as for countries that are eager to provide aid to Afghanistan. This is in addition to hastening the process of releasing the country's frozen assets to stimulate the economy. Only if the aforementioned happens can the Afghan state return to the international community. Yet, this is an unlikely scenario given the decreasing interest in Afghanistan, and many countries have resorted to pursuing bilateral approaches to achieve their interests, given the fact that the international community is now preoccupied with more significant issues.

- **Intra-disputes:** This is likely to happen if the opposition factions unite against the Taliban's monopolization of power. Despite the Taliban's firm grip on power and elimination of "rebels" in the north, such simmering threats risk the group's rule. IS-K is still an unmovable concern for Taliban's internal front. The targeting of Ayman al-Zahawiri, the al-Qaeda leader, is indicative of the existence of his supporters as well as enclaves of ISIS from which he also drew support. Thus, the threat is still looming for the Taliban. This scenario is possible if one of the countries believes that it has an interest in supporting the opposition forces. Yet, many countries are avoiding to intervene in Afghanistan's affairs as they do not want to get stuck in its quagmire.

- **The deteriorating status-quo to continue:** This is the most likely scenario as it is difficult for the Taliban to forge normal foreign relations, and the group is concerned about losing its firm security grip. In addition, there is an absence of initiatives and active communication channels with the Taliban government. Thus, the current Taliban government will adopt its preferred and more familiar security approaches and will not be willing to implement new approaches that might not succeed. The international community has called on the Taliban to be more cooperative and give more freedom to the Afghan people, yet the group's influential figures are not

willing to give up on what they deem as “legitimate” achievements of their longstanding “struggle.”

Conclusion

Probably, the last scenario will take shape, given the fact that there are no signs of an impending recovery in Afghanistan because of a lack of incentives or pressures that could force a change in the country. Thus, Rasanah’s research team believes that this scenario appears the most likely to materialize in Afghanistan. The research team also forecasts a host of developments to take place in the coming months such as the following:

- It is unlikely that the Taliban government will achieve international recognition in the near future. However, it is clear that countries will forge individual relations based on realpolitik with the Taliban government to secure an advantage over other countries. Maybe this is what the Taliban government is banking on.

- Afghanistan’s deteriorating security landscape makes it vulnerable to increased armed conflict and violence. From mid-August 2021 to mid-June 2022, the UN recorded 2,106 casualties including 700 killed mostly by IS-K. In addition, despite the Taliban issuing an amnesty against its enemies since the United States left Afghanistan, the UN has reported 178 arbitrary detentions, 160 extrajudicial killings, and other instances of incommunicado detentions and torture.

- The Taliban may face real resistance if the opposition forces unite against it. The Afghanistan Supreme Council says it is seeking to build unity among all groups and political factions to form a united resistance front against the Taliban. Others in the council aim to pressure the Taliban so that it alters its politics and halts ethnic and religious discrimination. The Taliban government has failed to fully comprehend the severity of the growing opposition and take corrective action.

- No neighboring country can ignore the Taliban but they will continue to call on the group to commence inclusive talks with all political factions to ensure stability on the Afghan political landscape.

- Afghanistan’s movement toward a democratic future will be compromised by the Taliban’s tendency to concentrate power and shun opposition forces.

- Afghanistan’s political landscape is likely to continue to see political tensions with opposition forces and civil society actors attempting to push back against the Taliban’s dominant power and control.

- The moderate faction in the Taliban may be able to convince the spiritual leader of the need to open up to the international community and moderate policies in order to receive financial support and for Afghanistan’s assets to be unfrozen. This may lead to tensions between the moderate and hardline factions over the direction and course of Afghanistan.

- Women protesting against discrimination and demanding their rights will face more harassment, arbitrary detentions, threats, forced disappearance, and torture. The marginalization of women could lead to another wave of migration from Afghanistan, thus impacting the country on multiple fronts: social and economic.
- Mounting opposition by Afghan and international civil society groups and women's rights groups could lead to serious political repercussions for the Taliban that will lead to its further isolation at the international level.
- The Taliban resorting to violence to control ethnic and religious minority groups will further mobilize the international community against it and lead to multiple pockets of new resistance emerging across the country.
- The Taliban's failure to protect minority groups will lead to further waves of terrorism against them and escalate the level of destabilization in the country.
- In terms of foreign policy, the issue of achieving international recognition for its rule will continue to drive the Taliban's internal and external actions in the coming years. Despite the difficulties, the group will strive to maintain communication channels with the rest of the world, including the United States.



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