

Afghanistan: Three Years Down the Road and Resurgence of Terrorism

(CSAG/CCJ5)

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Key Points

- Three years following the U.S. and coalition forces withdrawal, Afghanistan is a low foreign policy priority for many in the international community and is once again being sucked into a vicious whirlpool of terrorism.
- Under the Taliban, security in Afghanistan is fast deteriorating and major VEOs are finding sanctuaries and moral and material support.
- Moreover, global / regional competitors with interests in Afghanistan are also fueling the terrorism fire by use of proxies against each other.
- Under critical examination, the U.S. policy to deal with Afghanistan could be more proactive and sustainable, with focus on re-establishing its influence to stabilize the region.
- The overall objective could be to preserve hard-won gains of the past two decades, at least partially, while adapting to new realities on ground.

1. Introduction

Three years into Taliban rule, the question of whether Afghanistan once again becomes a haven for international terrorism is fast becoming a reality. The possibility of terrorism operating again in, and from, Afghanistan, threatening the security of the U.S. and its allies and partners, should be a major global concern. Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIS-K - an affiliate of ISIS) is strengthening itself in Afghanistan along with strong and interdependent links between Taliban, Al-Qaida, and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Of note was the presence of Al-Qaida leader Aimen al-Zawahiri in Kabul in 2022, who the U.S. Government killed in July of that year.¹ The ISIS-K terrorist attacks in Kerman, Iran in January 2024 and in Moscow in April 2024 were planned in Afghanistan, further solidifying credence to the resurgence of terrorism.² The departure of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan following a two-decade-long war has predictably renewed competition for influence in the country, with China, Russian, and India seeking to strengthen their relations with the ruling Taliban.³ The American withdrawal from the landlocked Asian nation in 2021 gave Russia an opportunity

¹ Jake Harrington, Jared Thompson "Zawahiri's Death and What's Next for al Qaeda" <https://www.csis.org/analysis/zawahiris-death-and-whats-next-al-qaeda> (accessed on May 02, 2024)

² Katherine Brucker "On the Terrorist Attack at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow" <https://osce.usmission.gov/on-the-terrorist-attack-at-the-crocus-city-hall-in-moscow/> (accessed on May 02, 2024)

³ Dawood Azami "China, Russia and Great Power Politics in Afghanistan and Central Asia" <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/central-asia/china-russia-and-great-power-politics-in-afghanistan-and-central-asia> (accessed on May 8, 2024)

to “return” to the war-torn country, this time focusing on the diplomatic, information, and economic instruments of national power, on a journey which looks set towards recognizing the Taliban Government.⁴ In January 2023 and August 2024, China and UAE accepted the credentials of the Taliban’s newly appointed Afghan ambassador respectively. Although the step did not amount to formal recognition of the Taliban, it marks the most significant challenge to a U.S.-led consensus against normalization with the Afghan regime.⁵ Iran and India are also busy increasing their influence in the region. Moreover, with the world’s focus mainly and understandably toward the Ukraine-Russia war and Israel-Hamas conflict, security in Afghanistan remains out of the spotlight, and under the Taliban, is again becoming a hotbed of terrorism. Amid two major wars / conflicts and intensifying strategic competition with China, the U.S. is facing challenges in forging a collective international response to pressing global crises. This CSAG-paper will try to answer following questions:

- a. Where does the terrorism threat level stand in the fourth year of Taliban rule?
- b. What is the Taliban’s role in nurturing and monitoring various terrorist groups?
- c. What are the implications of the Taliban’s posture?
- d. How should Afghanistan be managed to nullify terrorism threat and bring stability in the region?

2. Threat Picture in Afghanistan under the Taliban

Terrorist groups in Afghanistan fall into two main categories; those allied with the Taliban and those opposing them. Allies being Al-Qaeda and TTP, with ISIS-K being the main group that opposes them.

- a. **Al-Qaeda.** In the first year of Taliban rule (2021-22), Al-Qaeda began to rear its head and message more actively in Afghanistan. Aimen al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul, was a significant development in Al-Qaeda's post-takeover activity. Since his killing by the U.S., Al-Qaeda has been relatively quiet. However, most of Al-Qaeda’s leadership is reportedly residing in Afghanistan.⁶ Relations between Al-Qaeda and Taliban are historic and deep rooted. The Haqqani Network, a longtime ally of Al-Qaeda, is a semi-autonomous quasi-official component of the Afghan Taliban. The group’s current leader is Sirajuddin Haqqani, who has also served as the deputy leader of the Taliban since 2015. Sirajuddin’s appointment has strengthened cooperation between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.⁷ Based on these ties, the terrorist group is now running militant training camps; sharing the profits of the Taliban’s illicit drug, mining, and smuggling enterprises; and funneling the proceeds to affiliated jihadi groups worldwide.⁸ A July 2023 report from UN sanctions monitors also assessed that Al-Qaeda is “in a reorganization phase, establishing new training centers” in eastern Afghanistan. On the other hand, the U.S. assess that Al-Qaeda “is at its historical nadir in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its revival is unlikely.”⁹ However, given either tacit support or a lack of effective

⁴ Nikolai Mikovic “Russia’s Troubling Taliban Paradox” <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts> (accessed on May 13, 2024)

⁵ Asfandiyar Mir, Andrew Watkins <https://www.foreignaffairs.com> [America Can’t Isolate the Taliban: Why Regional Powers Are Reopening Ties With Afghanistan \(foreignaffairs.com\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com) (accessed on May 28, 2024)

⁶ “Ibid”

⁷ “Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan” <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10604> (accessed on May 8, 2024)

⁸ “Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022)” <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2093255/N2312536.pdf> (accessed on May 13, 2024)

⁹ Asfandiyar Mir Commentary: No good choices: The counter-terrorism dilemmas in Afghanistan and Pakistan <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/commentary-no-good-choices-the-counter-terrorism-dilemmas-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/> (accessed on May 28 2024)

governance by the Taliban, Afghanistan continues to offer a range of opportunities to terrorist groups, and it would be ill-advised to write off any kind of threat.

- b. **TTP.** In contrast to Al-Qaeda, TTP, in hibernation and depleted to small factions after counter-terrorism operations by Pakistan, has rapidly gained strength due to close relations with the Afghan Taliban, their ability to unite different factions under overarching TTP leadership, and external support from foreign actors. TTP enjoys limited local support in the border areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan due to its origin and family ties. With the presence of fighters across eastern Afghanistan, TTP has vigorously expanded and escalated its operations against Pakistan, with an increase in attacks by 79% within a span of one year.¹⁰ The group appears to be reorganizing in Afghanistan and has managed to acquire sophisticated weapons and increase its recruitment. UN sanctions monitor reports that TTP draws support both from Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban (described as “generally sympathetic to TTP aims”) and has increasingly focused on recruiting Afghans.
- c. **ISIS-K.** As for ISIS-K, the group’s overall levels of violence in Afghanistan dropped over the last year and it also failed to expand its territorial presence, a concern when the Taliban first came to power.¹¹ The Taliban have been working to neutralize ISIS-K and successfully eliminated some of its leaders in 2023. However, the organization still poses the “greatest threat within Afghanistan” and beyond. The terrorist entity is “expanding its external operations capacity,” as evidenced by its growing media presence (particularly propaganda targeting Central Asian nationals) and planned or actual attacks in Russia, Pakistan, India, Türkiye, and Germany.¹² It has also demonstrated signs of integration into a strong transnational network, with reports that the group is receiving funding and guidance from ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and Somalia.¹³ At the peak of its financial crisis in the first half of 2023, ISIS-K’s propaganda activities declined, however, it was still able to give the impression of a proactive and resilient organization with the ability to magnify the significance of its few, intermittent attacks.¹⁴ ISIS-K is able to cash in on defected members of Taliban, TTP, and Tajik Taliban through its global ISIS ideology, characterized by Salafist jihad.¹⁵ Through this ideology, ISIS advocates jihad (Holy War), one facet of which is the “Greater Jihad,” which Sunni Muslims must wage against external non-Muslim enemies, notably the disbelieving West. Another facet is the “Lesser Jihad,” which they must wage against internal enemies, notably non-Sunni Muslims.¹⁶

¹⁰ “Terrorism in Pakistan Soars 79% in 2023” <https://www.picss.net/articles/terrorism-in-pakistan-soars-79-in-first-half-of-2023/> (accessed on May 09, 2024)

¹¹ Antonio Giustozzi “The Islamic State in Khorasan between Taliban Counter-terrorism and Resurgence Report” <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects> (accessed in May 16, 2024)

¹² USIP Senior Study Group on Counter-terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan “Senior Study Group on Counter-terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Final Report” <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/05/senior-study-group-counter-terrorism-afghanistan-and-pakistan-final-report> (accessed on May 24, 2024)

¹³ “Ibid”

¹⁴ Antonio Giustozzi “The Islamic State in Khorasan between Taliban counter-terrorism and resurgence prospects” <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects> (accessed on May 16, 2024)

¹⁵ “Ibid”

¹⁶ Guidère M. L’État “Islamique en 100 questions (The Islamic State in 100 questions)” <https://search.library.yale.edu/catalog/12821901> (accessed on May 21, 2024)

- d. **The Yuldash faction** of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) had remained loyal to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, however, after the Taliban takeover, they started to defect to ISIS-K due to restrictions imposed by the Taliban.¹⁷
- e. The same applies to the Uyghurs of the **East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)**, who were the first to be relocated away from their long-term hideout of Badakhshan in north-east Afghanistan to the porous border area between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.¹⁸ They have the capacity to collaborate with the Taliban or ISIS-K as interests align.

3. Afghanistan and Global / Regional Interests

Afghanistan's strategic location and complex socio-political fabric make it a focal point for proxy warfare. The use of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan as proxies entails a rich and complex history. These external interventions have fueled conflict, complicating efforts for peace and reconstruction. The multifaceted involvement of different countries underscores Afghanistan's role as a battleground for regional and global powers' competing interests.

- a. **Iran** has been supporting Shia militant groups, such as the Fatemiyoun Brigade, which is composed of Afghan Shia fighters. While primarily active in Syria, these groups reflect Iran's strategy to influence Afghan affairs, especially to protect Shia communities and counterbalance Sunni extremist groups.¹⁹ Despite ideological differences, Iran has also engaged with the Taliban, providing weapons and training to exert influence and counter the U.S. presence.
- b. **Russia** had been providing support to the Taliban, including weapons, to destabilize the U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and to gain leverage in regional politics.²⁰ With decreased influence of the U.S. in Afghanistan after the withdrawal, Russian efforts are again at hand to fill the void and influence proxies as and when required. Russia's recognition of the Taliban, albeit not yet official, includes accepting Taliban diplomats and establishing diplomatic ties. This move aligns with Russia's strategy to reassert its influence in Central Asia and counter Western pressure.²¹
- c. **India** has not formally launched diplomatic ties with the Taliban. However, it has avoided alienating the group since its return to power in a bid to retain India's influence in Afghanistan.²² Historically, India did not support the Taliban Government in Afghanistan, however, their recent approach involves developmental

¹⁷ Annie Pforzheimer "Thanks to the Taliban, Afghanistan is once again a hotbed of terrorism" <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/4081833-thanks-to-the-taliban-afghanistan-is-once-again-a-hotbed-of-terrorism/> (Accessed on May 20, 2024)

¹⁸ Asfandyar Mir, Andrew Watkins <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/America/Can't-Isolate-the-Taliban-Why-Regional-Powers-Are-Reopening-Ties-With-Afghanistan> (foreignaffairs.com) (accessed on May 29, 2024)

¹⁹ Kevin L.Schwartz "Citizen Martyrs": The Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade in Iran" <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/afg.2022.0085> (accessed on June 3, 2024)

²⁰ Nikolai Mikovic "Russia's Troubling Taliban Paradox" <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts> (accessed on May 26, 2024)

²¹ "Ibid"

²² Ruchi Kumar "Is Modi's India cozying up to the Taliban?" <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/12/1/is-modis-india-cosying-up-to-the-taliban> (accessed on May 20, 2024)

aid and infrastructure projects, maintaining connections with various political and ethnic groups to safeguard its interests.²³

- d. **Saudi Arabia** and some **Gulf states** have provided financial and ideological support to various Sunni extremist groups, including the Taliban, to increase their regional influence and counter that of Iran.²⁴
- e. The **U.S.**, through Operation Cyclone, ran a covert program to arm and finance the jihadi warriors (the mujahideen) during the Soviet-Afghan war from 1979 to 1989.²⁵ The U.S. opposed the Soviet Union in Afghanistan primarily due to the broader context of Cold War, where the two superpowers were engaged in a global struggle for influence. After 9/11, a protracted Taliban insurgency was fought against the Afghan Security Forces and their U.S.-led coalition supporters. In February 2020, the U.S. reached a deal with the Taliban, known as the Doha Agreement under which the U.S. withdrew its forces from Afghanistan, which paved the way for the collapse of the Afghan Government and Taliban rule.
- f. **Pakistan's** interest in Afghanistan is multifaceted, driven by strategic, economic, and security considerations. Pakistan remained a key ally of the U.S. during the Soviet-Afghan War and helped vivify the Taliban in the 1980s to battle the Soviet army.²⁶ Similarly, Pakistan also remained a prominent ally of the U.S. in the war on terror. Upon U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan was hopeful that the Taliban Government would be helpful in managing strategic economic and security concerns. However, this has not transpired as the Taliban Government's foreign policy has led to resurgence of terrorism in the region.

4. How is the Taliban handling VEOs?

Although the Taliban assert they are committed to denying the use of their territory by terrorist groups against other countries, Taliban's handling of different terrorist organizations in Afghanistan involves a mix of alliances, confrontations and strategic calculations, aimed at consolidating their power while navigating international pressures and internal threats.²⁷

- a. **Material Support to VEOs.** The Taliban enable various VEOs by providing them a haven within the country. Movement of some of the groups is not restricted within the country. Moreover, the Taliban provide welfare payments and access to weaponry and ammunition, among other forms of material support, to allied groups. Modern and sophisticated weapons and equipment (given by the U.S. and coalition) taken over by

²³ Rayaz Ahmad Ganaie, Muzzafar Ahmad Ganaie <https://www.nature.com/articles> "India's Afghanistan policy: a quest for strategic space post the US withdrawal" (accessed on May 26, 2024)

²⁴ Daniel L. Byman "The U.S.-Saudi Arabia counter-terrorism relationship" <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counter-terrorism-relationship/> (accessed on May 26, 2024)

²⁵ "The United States and the Mujahdeen" <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory2/chapter/the-united-states-and-the-mujahideen/> (accessed on May 13 2024)

²⁶ Qandeel Siddique "DIIS Report - pakistan's future policy towards Afghanistan a look at strategic depth, militant movements and the role of india and the us" <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docN6044EEA4E64F21863635a45608cb8f55d025000db21fde77c18a46819d99a02183381293be4b> (accessed on August 15, 2024)

²⁷ "Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan" <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf> (accessed on May 13, 2024)

the Taliban from erstwhile Afghan security forces in 2021 are now being given / sold to VEOs, notably to Al-Qaeda and TTP by the Taliban. Poor governance and loose control over sub commanders contribute here. Sale of acquired U.S. weaponry to TTP and Al-Qaeda through provincial governors and troops on the ground largely remains unchecked. Some of the equipment is also being provided to VEOs intentionally by the Taliban Government to keep its alliances with particular factions alive.²⁸

- b. **The Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda.** The Haqqani network within the Taliban Government have remained a primary liaison between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. With Al-Qaeda, Taliban (Haqqanis) having been increasingly involved in production and trafficking of methamphetamine and synthetic drugs, providing much needed funding to both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.²⁹ The Haqqani Network's strategic position within the Taliban structure, particularly through its leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, underscores its importance in both domestic governance and international terrorism dynamics. A January 2024 UN sanctions report informs that Al-Qaeda is now operating training camps, madrasas, and safe houses in Afghanistan but assessing that "the group cannot at present project sophisticated attacks at long range".³⁰ The Taliban seem to have also asked Al-Qaeda to not undertake attacks against the U.S. and its allies, as indicated by both U.S. intelligence assessments and Al-Qaeda's own messaging.^{31 32}
- c. **Commonalities between the Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and TTP.** When it comes to TTP, the Taliban have been providing safe havens and access to intelligence and material support as well. One of the binding factors between Taliban and TTP is the presence of a common enemy, ISIS-K. Moreover, being Pashtun dominated, TTP always has a strong affiliation with Taliban. Tribe members, relatives and friendships also play a pivotal role in keeping these ties alive. Al-Qaeda's relationship with the TTP has been reinvigorated in the Taliban-provided sanctuary in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda is also helping the TTP work around certain Taliban-imposed restrictions in Afghanistan and providing strategic guidance to the TTP's operations in Pakistan.
- d. **Threat to Central Asian (CA) States.** The CA states are facing increased security threats due to the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, especially with the support of groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The Taliban's return has created a fertile ground for various extremist groups that threaten regional stability. One of the primary concerns is the potential for these groups to use Afghanistan as a base for launching operations in CA. The porous borders between Afghanistan and the CA states, particularly Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, exacerbate this threat. It is evident that with the passage of time, under Taliban rule, terrorist organizations are gaining strength in Afghanistan. Since 2023, ISIS-K has

²⁸ Abubakar Siddique "Pakistani Armed Groups Obtain U.S. Weapons Left Behind In Afghanistan" <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-armed-groups-obtain-us-weapons-left-in-afghanistan/32340664.html> (accessed on May 28, 2024)

²⁹ Clayton Thomas "Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan" <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=IF10604> (accessed on May 16, 2024)

³⁰ "Ibid"

³¹ "Prospects of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and through 2024" <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Declassified-Assessment-Prospects-for-AQ-in-Afghanistan-and-Globally-Through-2024-June2023.pdf> (accessed on May 20, 2024)

³² Asfandiyar Mir, Andrew Watkins <https://www.foreignaffairs.com> [America Can't Isolate the Taliban: Why Regional Powers Are Reopening Ties With Afghanistan \(foreignaffairs.com\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com) (accessed on May 29 2024)

launched a major recruitment drive aimed at militants from Tajikistan and other CA countries, specifically targeting experienced members of terrorist groups with a long history of terrorist attacks.³³

- e. **Crackdown against ISIS-K.** The Taliban's crackdown has been mainly against ISIS-K which is rooted in self-preservation. The Taliban's offensive seems to have at least three different approaches: targeting high-value targets such as top ISIS-K leaders; a large-scale counterintelligence campaign within the Taliban's ranks in search of insiders working for ISIS-K; and punishing segments of populations perceived to be aligned with ISIS-K, such as the Salafi population in the east and north of the country.³⁴ For the Taliban, ISIS-K seems to be the main opposition group that is able to make political and religious appeals with the most direct dissident potential to weaken the Taliban. But it seems that the Taliban are struggling to contain the urban terror campaign of its archrival. After the ISIS-K attack in Iran and Moscow, the threat of ISIS-K's ability to operate globally became a reality, adding extra pressure on already fragile Taliban efforts against ISIS-K.
- f. **Taliban's Reluctance.** The Taliban have been somewhat reluctant to restrict or hamper foreign terrorist elements in Afghanistan. Any visible Taliban actions against foreign fighters (less ISIS-K) would make the Taliban appear to be betraying the broader jihadi brotherhood and thus jeopardize the Taliban's foreign funding. This foreign funding is important for two reasons. At the institutional level, it is one stream of Taliban income amid a collapsed Afghan economy. At an individual Taliban commander level, the foreign funding provides critical revenue for paying the commanders' personal fighters and thus is a key source of personal protection for the commanders and leverage within the Taliban. Taliban leaders without large numbers of their own fighters have much less influence.³⁵

5. Overall Analysis of the Current Situation

- a. **Internal Developments.** Afghanistan is becoming a hotbed for terrorism again due to a combination of geopolitical, social, and economic factors. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan is experiencing significant instability due to inept governance. This is marked by internal factionalism, an extreme level of corruption, repression, and inadequate control over large areas of the country. This unstable environment has allowed terrorist groups to thrive and pursue their vested agendas. Various VEOs, predominantly ISIS-K, Al-Qaeda and TTP, have always remained present, if not active, in Afghanistan. Although materialistically in a better condition than they ever were, the Taliban still lack essential resources especially in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and sometimes the will to effectively combat these groups. There is limited external political bandwidth, military capacity, or access to counter VEOs in Afghanistan with ideal conditions to re-constitute themselves out of the global spotlight. Despite this, with the world mostly pre-occupied in Russian-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas war and Israel-Hezbollah

³³ Jason Burke "Islamic State recruitment from Tajikistan and other Central Asian Countries" [Islamic State 'recruiting from Tajikistan and other central Asian countries' | Islamic State | The Guardian](#) (accessed on May 13 2024)

³⁴ "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban" <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban> (accessed on May 29 2024)

³⁵ Vanda Felbab-Brown "What Ayman al-Zawahri's death says about terrorism in Taliban-run Afghanistan" <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-ayman-al-zawahris-death-says-about-terrorism-in-taliban-run-afghanistan/> (accessed on May 13 2024)

conflict, there has been insufficient pressure or leverage on the Taliban to act. Indeed any incentive to do so has been undermined by a few countries which have already shown inclination towards accepting the Taliban Government as legitimate.

b. **External Developments**

- (1) The Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship is intricate as well as diverse, encompassing several decades of common history and complex geopolitical dynamics. The establishment of Taliban Government in 2021 marked a critical juncture in the diplomatic ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan. At the outset, Pakistan embraced a prudently optimistic position, endorsing international involvement with the Taliban as a means to increase stability in Afghanistan. However, this relationship was derailed with the resurgence of TTP and other VEOs. Taliban administration continues to provide safe havens to militant factions that pose serious security threats to Pakistan, other neighbors, and beyond.
- (2) Afghanistan is an integral part of Iran's strategic "Look East" policy which aims to strengthen economic and energy ties with major nations such as India and China. Through this policy, Iran seeks to deepen its strategic influence in Afghanistan to achieve its long-term regional goals and to contain external influences such as those of the U.S.
- (3) The CA states' policy towards Afghanistan has been dominated by self-interests. Although the engagements of CA states with the Taliban Government experienced some lows in the early period of Taliban rule, policies centered around prioritizing economic interests are now at the forefront. However, the Taliban Government's inability and unwillingness to counter VEOs remains a big hurdle in furthering the ties between CA states and Afghanistan.
- (4) Afghanistan's geo-strategic location invites global competitors to use proxies for their vested interests. The Kremlin aims to position itself as a key player in regional security and counter-terrorism efforts, leveraging Afghanistan's strategic location to maintain an influence in the region. Potential recognition of the Taliban Government by the Kremlin is a step in this direction. This may lead to China and India thinking seriously about recognizing the Taliban Government to pursue their interests.
- (5) The U.S. along with its allies and partners have been working on the approach to withhold Taliban recognition. However, the Taliban appear to be unmoved by the U.S. and global pressure with the continued implementation of policies of internal oppression and power consolidation. Direct engagement with the Taliban by Russia, China, Iran, and India presents several challenges. It weakens U.S., allies, and partners efforts to isolate the Taliban until it meets international demands such as respecting human rights, solidify counter-terrorism commitments, and form an inclusive government while shifting geopolitical influence in the region away from the U.S. and its allies and partners towards Russia and China.

- c. **The Victory Narrative and Will to Counter Terrorism**. The self-proclaimed "Taliban victory" against the U.S. has emboldened VEOs globally and can be used to retain fighters and attract new recruits to the cause. The victory against the U.S. narrative undermines any residual will the Taliban has to counter terrorist

organizations in Afghanistan. This narrative of a successful jihad against foreign occupation inspires VEOs to carry out attacks both within and outside Afghanistan. This drives an abundance of recruits, accessibility to weapons, other equipment and funding in this unstable environment and provides the means for VEOs to survive in Afghanistan. The Taliban's historical ties with Al-Qaeda and the ideological rivalry with ISIS-K contribute to a complex and volatile security landscape.

- d. **Afghanistan's Economy and Recruitment.** Afghanistan's economy has deteriorated considerably under Taliban leadership, leading to widespread poverty and grave humanitarian crisis. To compensate for their crippled economy and satisfy rampant corruption, the Taliban are turning to illicit drug production, mining, and smuggling operations, which is also providing rich grounds for other extremist actors to enhance their funding. This economic instability also provides fertile ground for terrorist recruitment, as individuals, already tired of Taliban repressive regime, are turning to extremist groups for financial support to survive and find a sense of purpose amid desperation. Moreover, many Afghan people also blame external forces, the "oppressors," for the dire conditions in Afghanistan. Given their culture of revenge (Badal) and economic desperation, VEOs are provided with access to a plentiful supply of unemployed fighting age male recruits.³⁶
- e. **Humanitarian and Social Situation in Afghanistan.** Overall, the humanitarian and social situation in Afghanistan remains dire and complex which is characterized by economic hardships, a struggling population trying to cope with instability and severe restrictions on women. Despite international aid efforts, the country's economic situation has not improved, leaving many families struggling to survive on less than \$1 per day.³⁷ Additionally, the country faces a significant refugee crisis, adding to the strain on Afghanistan's already limited resources and infrastructure.
- f. **Porous Borders.** Afghanistan's porous borders facilitate the movement of militants, drugs and weapons, complicating efforts to control and combat terrorist activities. VEOs take advantage of this situation and escape to their respective hideouts in Afghanistan or border areas to conduct their activities in neighboring countries.

6. Recommendation

The U.S. / Western countries policy towards Afghanistan could be adapted to the developments in Afghanistan and be multifaceted, balancing diplomatic engagement, security interests, and regional stability while at the same time countering the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan. This way the U.S. / Western countries can contribute to stability and development in Afghanistan and in the region, while safeguarding its own security interests.

³⁶ The Pashtuns have a unique and defining tribal code called Pashtunwali or the 'code of life of the Pashtun'. Its main components are (1) hospitality (Melmastia), (2) asylum (Nanawati), (3) **justice/ revenge (Badal) meaning "to seek justice or take revenge against the wrongdoer with no time limit"**, (4) bravery (Tureh), (5) loyalty (Sabat), (6) righteousness (Imandari), (7) trust in God (Isteqamat), (8) dignity (Ghayrat), (9) Honour of women (Namus).

³⁷ "Approximately 85 percent of Afghans live on less than one dollar a day" <https://www.undp.org/stories/approximately-85-percent-afghans-live-less-one-dollar-day> (accessed on August 15, 2024)

- a. **Long Term Strategy.** The U.S.' stance, supported by its allies and partners is to withhold recognition and apply coordinated pressure to ensure the Taliban meets international standards before gaining legitimacy. The Taliban has a history of severe human rights abuses, including restrictions on women's rights, suppression of free speech, and harsh punishments for perceived crimes. Formal recognition could be seen as an endorsement or legitimization of these practices. This might also embolden other extremist groups by showing that gaining power through violent means can eventually lead to international legitimacy, thus destabilize regions and undermine global counter-terrorism efforts. Recognition could also strain relationships with allies and partners, who view the Taliban's governance as a threat to regional stability and human rights. Overall, the recognition of the Taliban Government by the U.S. carries complex risks that would need to be carefully weighed against any potential benefits.

Unfortunately, accepting the status quo of non-recognition leaves the U.S., its allies, and partners largely blind to the developments and powerless to influence changes in Afghanistan. However, they remain deeply embroiled in the outcome of short-term economic, security, and political affairs. The U.S. needs to consider confronting this reality with a radical proactive response. The U.S. and its allies and partners could swallow "the bitter pill" and recognize the Taliban Government. A rapprochement means neither friendship nor endorsement of the Taliban's policies, but it would offer more opportunities than the minimal leverage the U.S. currently has. This hard step can facilitate more effective cooperation in counter-terrorism efforts, as the Taliban may be more than willing to share intelligence and work with U.S. or partner countries effected by terrorism to suppress Al-Qaeda, TTP, and ISIS-K. Recognition could also lead to some level of regional stability, where the U.S. along with its allies and partners can foster a stable environment. This step may also help the U.S. have more diplomatic leverage over the Taliban, pushing them to adjust current policies and adherence to international norms and agreements. Recognizing the Taliban Government will be a complex and controversial decision, it might improve U.S. influence in international forums, particularly with nations facing similar insurgencies and non-state actor governance issues. This step can also mitigate the influence being carved by other regional / global players, like China and Russia.

- b. **Short to Mid-Term Strategy.** Recent U.S. engagements with the Taliban Government seem to have reassured them with respect to their selective actions against ISIS-K, while leaving out Al-Qaeda, TTP and others. Even TTP, which claims to be more local in its focus, continues to incubate direct threats to the U.S. as elements of Al-Qaeda continue to shelter behind the TTP in Afghanistan.

As a short to mid-term strategy, the U.S. may enable its partners directly affected by the stability situation in Afghanistan, materialistically, monetarily, and through intelligence sharing. Pakistan continues to effectively carryout counter-terrorism operations in the border areas with Afghanistan to bring about more stability in the region. The U.S. had previously funded several counter-terrorism capacity building programs in Pakistan focused on law enforcement. The U.S. may offer enhanced counter-terrorism-specific security assistance in the shape of material support and intelligence to Pakistan to eradicate terrorism. Successful cooperation in countering terrorism could lead to stronger relations between the U.S. and its allies and partners in the region. Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have responded in varying ways to the Taliban's takeover. The Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan Governments appear to be prioritizing stability / economic ties and have had official engagements with the Taliban.

Tajikistan, on the other hand, has opposed the Taliban and has had its own struggles with Islamist militancy, which is being generated in Afghanistan. Thus, the U.S. has an opportunity to enable Tajikistan in countering terrorism, increasing stability in the region and enhancing U.S. influence. The U.S. will also be able to formulate contingency plans to take lethal actions against groups in the region that are planning or involved in terrorist activities against direct U.S. interests.

The logic of enabling partners like Pakistan and Tajikistan in conducting counterterrorism operations is to give a unified and strong message to the Taliban to demonstrate credible actions on its international commitments, subsequently countering the conditions that foster terrorism. Enablement of allies and partner countries and an increase in cooperation will also allow the U.S. to enhance its influence in the region in the backdrop of the growing challenges its diplomatic power is facing around the world. Rather than considering counterterrorism as an unwelcome distraction from strategic competition, the U.S. and western countries could use counterterrorism as a significant pillar for strategic competition. That which extinguishes terrorism, also establishes the U.S. and Western nations as bulwarks of the international rules-based order, with support to those who feel disenfranchised by this system.

7. Conclusion.

Regional security in South & Central Asia is inextricably linked with internal stability in Afghanistan, which remains volatile and trending negatively. The Taliban Government seems to be taking advantage of space enabled by the discord and lack of communication / consensus between major stakeholders on the Afghanistan issue. However, the Taliban's focus on consolidating power and enforcing their version of Sharia law has diverted attention from counterterrorism efforts and is making Afghanistan a hotbed of terrorism, again. By implementing an approach that combines immediate counter-terrorism measures with long-term developmental and diplomatic strategies, in collaboration with its partners in the region, the U.S. can be decisive with its partners on Afghanistan to prevent or contain reinvigoration of VEOs. Concurrently, it will also give opportunity to the U.S., along with its allies and partners, to regain / solidify its influence in the region in the backdrop of strategic competition.