



# PYRRHIC VICTORY: UNFOLDING NEW CHALLENGES FROM THE AFGHAN CONUNDRUM

*The paper aims to comprehend the newly found challenges of Afghanistan that have emerged right after the sudden withdrawal of the American forces and have created a security vacuum in the war-torn country. The paper explores various dimensions through which a Taliban-controlled country can become the most significant security threat to the South Asian region and the rest of Asia, hampering the peace and stability of the region. Further, it reconnoitres the rise of the new Taliban regime and how it is different from the previous one. The notion of good terrorists and bad terrorists has also been assessed while deliberately focusing on the differences between the Taliban and other extremist groups in the region. It further analyses the humongous humanitarian crisis and repercussions that have been unfolded from the chaotic and hostile situations in the country and how it further worsens the Afghan people's conditions. The paper also briefly examines the drug menace in the Golden Crescent and how it will affect the neighbouring countries, especially India.*

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The US war on terror finally came to an end on August 31, 2021, amid a global pandemic when the last US C-17J Super Hercules aircraft airlifted the remaining soldiers of the US Delta force. Major General Chris Donahue of the US Army 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division became a historical figure after the two-decade-old military campaign came to a discomfiture end.<sup>1</sup> He is now registered as the last US soldier to leave Afghanistan. Geopolitical Experts, International Relations theorists, Political Editors, Commentators, Foreign Policy experts, Diplomats and governments worldwide are now busy contemplating the geopolitical gains and loss of the 20-year protracted war. Facts and Figures are out in the open. Millions of dollars were spent, thousands of lives lost, and prolonged bloodshed which never saw an opportunity of peace to be resurrected upon it. From the narrative that was cheered around the world until the Obama administration, i.e. ‘*The United States of America doesn't negotiate with terrorists*’<sup>2</sup>, to leaving an entire country in the hands of a radical terrorist organization to govern and uphold the rights of the citizens of Afghanistan, the American made debacle is going down in history as a major obdurate international failure.<sup>3</sup> The esoteric American foreign policy has come full circle – from nurturing the Mujaheddin to abandoning them after the Soviet withdrawal, fighting them post 9/11 and now rendering them the designated leaders of war-torn Afghanistan. With no tangible gains and looming rudderless uncertainty, the US invasion of Afghanistan has indubitably facilitated metastasising the terror networks and extremist outfits worldwide.

America's greatest war since the Second World War had undisputed colossal failures and lament consequences on many levels. Such horrendous rendezvous by the West and its allies will baffle historians for the coming of age. Undoubtedly, the American misadventure will cast an indelible mark all over the Asian continent, given the strategic depth Afghanistan holds by virtue of its geographic location situated at the crossroads of Central, South and Southeast Asia. Washington's retreat has opened an abysmal void that is now being exploited chiefly by Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran. The desperation of the Biden Administration to leave Afghanistan in a blink of an eye was quite perceptible from the fact that they had to fly in CIA Director William Burns to meet the Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar and settle the remaining scores for its early withdrawal.<sup>4</sup> Such manoeuvres have only underscored the helplessness of Washington, who seems to be ready to settle for any compromise that the Taliban might have to offer. The recalcitrant Taliban were almost prepared to make a significant territorial gain when the US forces started withdrawing their troops with a sword of possible deadline dangling over their head. The US cost for its Afghanistan blunder will indeed be paid by India in full when the newly resurrected Taliban emboldened China, and mischievous Pakistan comes together to strike a nerve on its northern frontiers. Afghanistan is now caught up in insurmountable problems, which are only getting worse with each passing day.

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<sup>1</sup> Suci, P. (2021, August 31). Image of Last Soldier Out of Afghanistan — Is This How America's Longest War Will Be Remembered? *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2021/08/31/image-of-last-soldier-out-of-afghanistan---is-this-how-americas-longest-war-will-be-remembered/?sh=6dca1e2a2939>

<sup>2</sup> Ungar, R. (2014, September 1). Why “We Don’t Negotiate With Terrorists” No Longer Holds Up As Policy. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rickungar/2014/06/05/why-we-dont-negotiate-with-terrorists-no-longer-holds-up-as-policy/?sh=6e0cdd973b05>

<sup>3</sup> Powell, J. (2015, July 12). We must negotiate with terrorists: The dirty secret our government does not want to admit. *Salon*. [https://www.salon.com/2015/07/12/we\\_must\\_negotiate\\_with\\_terrorists\\_the\\_dirty\\_secret\\_our\\_government\\_does\\_not\\_want\\_to\\_admit/](https://www.salon.com/2015/07/12/we_must_negotiate_with_terrorists_the_dirty_secret_our_government_does_not_want_to_admit/)

<sup>4</sup> Reuters (2021, August 24). CIA director met Taliban leader in Afghanistan on Monday. <https://www.reuters.com/world/cia-director-met-taliban-leader-kabul-monday-washington-post-reports-2021-08-24/>

The paper aims to comprehend the newly found challenges of Afghanistan that have emerged right after the sudden withdrawal of the American forces and have created a security vacuum in the war-torn country. The paper explores various dimensions through which a Taliban-controlled country can become the most significant security threat to the South Asian region and the rest of Asia, hampering the peace and stability of the region. Further, it reconnoitres the rise of the new Taliban regime and how it is different from the previous one. The notion of good terrorists and bad terrorists has also been assessed while deliberately focusing on the differences between the Taliban and other extremist groups in the region. It further analyses the humongous humanitarian crisis and repercussions that have been unfolded from the chaotic and hostile situations in the country and how it further worsens the Afghan people's conditions. The paper also briefly examines the drug menace in the Golden Crescent and how it will affect the neighbouring countries, especially India.

Further, it discusses the newfound troika of China, Pakistan and the Taliban and how it can cause concern for India's national security. The Afghan debacle has blindsided the international community in between a raging and lethal pandemic. Amid this dynamic situation, it is imperative to understand the various health challenges that aggravate the suffering of Afghanistan's people and what consequences it holds for the rest of the world while painting a grim picture of the entire west-orchestrated fiascos.

### **The Plummeting Economy under the Taliban Regime**

The Afghans are suffering through their worst nightmares. Afghanistan's economy has been struggling for years, even before the prevailing events of August 2021 took place. But the sudden ascent of the Taliban's hostile takeover has been quite overwhelming and a tremendous shock for the entire world. The Afghans are descending into the worst humanitarian crisis. It's palpable that under the Taliban, Afghanistan is slowly and gradually collapsing under the severe economic meltdown, leaving the country and its people in dire need of all the possible humanitarian assistance and foreign aid. The landlocked, import-dependent nation has entirely sealed off its borders. The new radical regime, which now claims to be the country's legitimate ruler, cannot access about \$9 billion in frozen foreign currency reserves.<sup>5</sup> Before the Taliban's takeover, the Afghan government's 75 percent spending was specifically driven through foreign aid and grants from western countries and prominent international institutions.<sup>6</sup> The Afghan economy never flourished, with 90% of its population still living below the poverty line and earning less than \$2 a day. The US has made it significantly clear that any Central Bank assets of the Afghan government present on US soil will not be made available to the Taliban. Banks have been shut; the ATMs are not dispensing cash anymore. Industrial work came to a sudden halt.<sup>7</sup> The entire economy is standstill until the uncertainty prevails over the formation of stakeholder government and its prospects. There seem to be several pitfalls encountered by the new regime whilst handling the fragile economic situation of the nation. The situation is so grim that the people are left with no other options other than to sell their furniture, utensils, kitchenware items, and even their clothes

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<sup>5</sup> Parkin, B. & Bozorgmehr, N. (2021, August 31). Afghanistan confronts economic meltdown after Taliban takeover. *Financial Times*. <https://on.ft.com/3lhUetc>

<sup>6</sup> ABC News (2021, September 3). Afghanistan's economy on the brink of collapse after Taliban takeover. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-03/afghanistan-taliban-us-economy-hunger-war-terrorism/100430828>

<sup>7</sup> Nagesh, A. (2021, August 25). Afghanistan's economy in crisis after Taliban take-over. *BBC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-03/afghanistan-taliban-us-economy-hunger-war-terrorism/100430828>

in order to raise some money either for food or for preparations to leave the country.<sup>8</sup> It portrays a plausible picture of Afghanistan's plunging economy and a sense of desperation of Afghan people which forces them to sell even their dearly prized possessions.

The UN World Food Program claimed that around 14 million Afghans, or a third of the population, is already facing hunger and an acute shortage of food supplies which is more likely to get severe with time.<sup>9</sup> Afghanistan is currently grappling with three situations that can have unadorned catastrophic consequences if not acted upon soon enough. Firstly, it is suffering under a conflict which has fair chances of turning into another civil war. Secondly, the nation is already witnessing a soaring price increase of daily use commodities and food items. Still, the pressure is added by the second severe drought experienced by the country in the last three years, which certainly will curb the supply of vital crops in the region. Thirdly, the pandemic has already weakened the country's economy, and the health infrastructure has suffered a major blow which will have consequential repercussions. Economists and strategic experts around the world are painting a dire picture of Afghanistan's economy as major financial institutions such as World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have currently stopped the funding. Governments around the world are contemplating whether to engage with the Taliban or not and legitimise the Islamic radical group.

Western powers have spent billions of dollars in their two-decade-long pursuit to establish a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan. Yet, today the country is standing in the shackles of the worst economic crisis, further pushing its people into the clutches of poverty-driven life.

### **Drugs Trafficking and the Golden Crescent**

Afghanistan has a long history of opium cultivation and production. According to UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) report, as of 2021, Afghanistan is responsible for more than 80% of global opium production.<sup>10</sup> There was a sharp descend in the Opium cultivation post-2001, but it was subsequently increased in the Taliban occupied areas. The Opium harvest from Afghanistan alone ends up accounting for more than 80% of the world's supply. According to UNODC, in 2018, opium production in Afghanistan contributed close to 11% of the country's economy.<sup>11</sup> The US State Department states that opium production under Taliban rule significantly increased from 41,000 hectares in 1998 to around 64,000 in 2000.<sup>12</sup> The cultivation was most predominant in the Taliban fortified Helmand province, accounting for nearly 38% of the world's illicit opium production. Over the years, the area under opium cultivation saw a steep increase. The total area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan was estimated at 163,000 hectares in 2019, a decrease of 38 per cent or 100,000 hectares compared with 2018. The area under cultivation was the lowest observed since 2013. The overall income generated by domestic consumption,

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<sup>8</sup> The Guardian (2021, September 7). Our children are hungry”: economic crisis pushes Afghans to desperation. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/sep/07/our-children-are-hungry-economic-crisis-pushes-afghans-to-desperation>

<sup>9</sup> Associated Press (2021, August 18). The Latest: Food agency warns of hunger in Afghan conflict. <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-the-latest-866995f930eb9bf8ceb9e3344bef3cf8>

<sup>10</sup> BBC News (2021, August 25). Afghanistan: How much opium is produced and what's the Taliban's record? <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58308494>

<sup>11</sup> UNODC (2019). Afghanistan opium survey 2019 [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/20210217\\_report\\_with\\_cover\\_for\\_web\\_small.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/20210217_report_with_cover_for_web_small.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> US Department of State (2021). 12/20/00: Fact sheet: The Taliban And The Afghan Drug Trade. [https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/sa/facts\\_taliban\\_drugs.html](https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/sa/facts_taliban_drugs.html)

production and exports of opiates in Afghanistan was estimated at between \$1.2 billion and \$2.1 billion in 2019. The gross income from opiates exceeded the value of the country's officially recorded licit exports in 2019. According to the US State Department, the Taliban mostly profits by directly levying heavy taxes on opium crops and indirectly gaining a percentage of cut-through processing and trafficking.<sup>13</sup> Around 10% cultivation tax is reportedly collected from opium farmers. These taxes were also directly collected from the laboratories converting opium into heroin and other traders and farmers who smuggle illicit drugs. Taliban's estimated share of illegal drug revenue ranges from \$100-\$400 million. However, these figures are debatable among various subject experts. US Commander General John Nicholson in the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction Report (SIGAR Report) estimates that the drug trade accounts for up to 60% of the Taliban's annual revenue share.<sup>14</sup>

Afghanistan is heavily dependent on opium production and cultivation. It is almost impossible to suddenly terminate the opium production nexus and switch to other agricultural practices, which is virtually impossible considering the inhospitable environment and rugged terrains. Opium farming is a major source of employment in Afghanistan. According to UNODC Opium Survey Report, in 2019 alone, opium harvesting created nearly 120,000 jobs. Opium income was increasingly used for everyday expenses in Afghanistan. Food, medical expenses, and debt repayment were the three most common uses of opium income reported by farmers in 2019.<sup>15</sup> Fewer farmers said they had invested in property, education, or other activities that could potentially build alternatives to opium poppy cultivation. However, the Taliban cannot entirely depend on an opium driven economy as it might have been enough to fund insurgency projects against the foreign powers. Still, it will definitely not help in the day-to-day administration of such a humongous country like Afghanistan.

The new regime in Afghanistan is confident enough to bring the production and cultivation level to zero again.<sup>16</sup> They even denied the fact that earlier there was no opium production when they were in power. It will be intriguing to watch how a country which is predominately rich in opium cultivation and production of various illicit drugs and is famous throughout the world for its notorious drug activities will become opium free under the new Taliban.

Another element that fortifies the opium trade in the region is the existence of the 'Golden Crescent. Asia is one of the two crucial areas of illicit opium production located in Central, South and Western Asia. The crescent is defined by the mountainous terrain marking three countries, namely Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. It has become one of the most important opium-producing centres in the world. Today, Afghanistan has become the largest producer of illicit opium, surpassing Myanmar. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was followed by a prolonged civil

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<sup>13</sup> Daily Sun (2021). What's the Taliban's record on opium production? <https://www.daily-sun.com/post/572598/Whats-the-Talibans-record-on-opium-production>

<sup>14</sup> Sopko, J. F. (2018, June). Counternarcotic: Lessons From The U.S. Experience In Afghanistan. *Sigar Special Inspector General For Afghanistan Reconstruction*. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-18-52-LL.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> UNODC. (2019). Afghanistan opium survey 2019. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/20210217\\_report\\_with\\_cover\\_for\\_web\\_small.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/20210217_report_with_cover_for_web_small.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> BBC News (2021, August 25). Afghanistan: How much opium is produced and what's the Taliban's record? <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58308494>

war that ravaged the poor country in many aspects.<sup>17</sup> Still, among all, it created ideal conditions for the cultivation of opium poppies. Opium cultivation was a necessity rather than an agricultural activity contemplating the chaos inflicted on the Afghans. The US, too, have a role to play in the increased production of Opium in Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the Mujahedin experienced a steep decline in aid and assistance from the foreign powers.<sup>18</sup> The financial assistance almost plummeted, prompting the local rebel forces to jump into the opium production business. The demand for opium in the drug market tempted more and more Afghans to join the cultivation and production process since they had no other employment opportunities knocking on their doors. Since then, the Golden Crescent drug trafficking route has been flourishing. Although after the 2001 US invasion, the drug trade experienced some minor setbacks but it soon recovered.

Heroin made from opium grown in Afghanistan makes up 95% of the market in Europe alone. But India, too, is at a significant risk given the new geopolitical dynamics of the region. Jampacked between the two notorious drug trafficking routes of the world, i.e., Golden Crescent and Golden Triangle – India is the most vulnerable to the trafficking of narcotics.<sup>19</sup> Since a terrorist organization is now in charge of a war-torn country and Pakistan and China are its greatest ally, it will become more difficult for countries like India to wage war on narcotics and substance abuse. India is already paralysed in the northern, western frontiers with states like Punjab and Haryana and north-eastern states like Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur, where the drugs use among the youths are high. Law enforcement agencies are vigilant and monitor the drug trafficking cartels along the borders of India.<sup>20</sup>

### **Migration, Human Trafficking and Challenges to Humanitarian Assistance**

The political instability in Afghanistan is going to have prolonged repercussions and consequences. The war-torn country has already pushed the majority of its population into the clutches of poverty. The chaos that emerged from the Taliban's return has left people displaced with no livelihood and a crashing economy. Even before the Afghans witnessed the August 2021 crisis, the country has suffered long through the conflict inflicted by the rival internal and external power struggles wreaking insecurity and large-scale displacement. With the lowest HDI (Human Development Index) and a heavy dependence on agricultural practices in an inhospitable, hostile and drought-prone climate which forces millions of Afghans every year to take refugees within different parts of the country and many times beyond its borders.<sup>21</sup> With the US waging war on terror, the power struggle became more intense and abyssal, leaving innocent civilians dead, orphaned and homeless. The displaced Afghans especially orphaned and young children and women, are susceptible to the human trafficking circuits working across Europe and South Asia.

<sup>17</sup> Sen, S. (1992). Heroin Trafficking in the Golden Crescent. *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles*, 65(3), 251–256. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0032258X9206500310>

<sup>18</sup> McCoy, A. W. (2018, January 9). How the heroin trade explains the US-UK failure in Afghanistan. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/09/how-the-heroin-trade-explains-the-us-uk-failure-in-afghanistan>

<sup>19</sup> Business Standard (2020, February 15). India is vulnerable to trafficking of narcotics: Officials. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/india-is-vulnerable-to-trafficking-of-narcotics-officials-120021500874\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/india-is-vulnerable-to-trafficking-of-narcotics-officials-120021500874_1.html)

<sup>20</sup> Special Correspondent. (2021, August 16). Agencies brace for rise in drugs trafficking. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/agencies-brace-for-rise-in-drugs-trafficking/article35945099.ece>

<sup>21</sup> Rahimi, L. (2020, December 29). Thinking More Deeply About Human Development in Afghanistan. *Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/thinking-more-deeply-about-human-development-in-afghanistan/>

These circuits promise safe passage to neighbouring countries by shepherding the dispossessed and vulnerable through illegal means and channels. Author Loretta Napoleoni in her book "Merchants of Men: How Jihadists And ISIS Turned To Kidnap, and Refugee Trafficking Into A Multi-Billion Dollar Business", tries to explore the surge of the migrant influx in the European countries through illegal trafficking and smuggling of people across countries.<sup>22</sup> In the book, she describes the traffickers who supply skilled refugees and migrants to the European buyers in an underground multi-billion-dollar dark industry that works silently. Thousands of displaced Afghan refugees will undoubtedly signal the ushering in of a new chapter for these merchants of men. Pakistan, which is tackling the overburdened Afghan refugee crisis, had to deploy its army along the borders with Afghanistan in order to block an anticipated wave of migrants from entering its territory.<sup>23</sup> Highly swamped and overcrowded refugee camps are the perfect place for nefarious elements to exploit the lack of law and order and security. Young Children and women often become victims of physical abuse and sexual harassment since they are at the mercy of the camp staff and officials.<sup>24</sup> These places also become a primary recruitment hotspot for terrorist organizations like ISKP, Al-Qaeda and other small and local militias.<sup>25</sup> They lure children and young adults by either brainwashing them or offering them worldly things that they find fancy and attractive.

The possible challenges to humanitarian assistance are myriad. The first and foremost challenge will be pertaining to the legitimacy of the Taliban at the international level. Whether countries and international institutions worldwide will accept a Taliban ruled Afghanistan or not is a big question. It is still early to predict the nature of the global response the Mullahs (Taliban or the so-called learned Islamists) will be receiving. But whatever the course of action may be. It will have a direct impact on the present and future of the people of Afghanistan. Secondly, if the Taliban regime is placed under sanctions for not meeting the criteria and requirements signed during the Doha Peace process, facilitating humanitarian assistance will become even more challenging to achieve. Embargoed Taliban will probably jump into drugs trafficking and weapon smuggling practices, given that the US has left behind arms and ammunition worth billions of dollars.<sup>26</sup> Thirdly, the international aid agencies will struggle with manifold problems stemming from perilous ground realities. Misinformation, Vaccine Hesitancy and orthodox extremist ideologies driven by religious motifs are some of the challenges that will stomp the humanitarian work. Fourthly, Limited access to resources and technical aid can again be a significant hurdle in the relief and assistance process. The biggest challenge emerging out of the chaotic situation is the danger to the personnel of

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<sup>22</sup> Napoleoni, L. (2016). *Merchants of Men: How jihadists and ISIS turned kidnapping and refugee trafficking into a multibillion-dollar business*. Seven Stories Press: New York.

<sup>23</sup> Nikkei Asia (2021, August 7). Pakistan shuts door to further Afghan refugees. [https://s.nikkei.com/https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Afghanistan-turmoil/Pakistan-shuts-door-to-further-Afghan-refugees\\_/3tAXP9H](https://s.nikkei.com/https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Afghanistan-turmoil/Pakistan-shuts-door-to-further-Afghan-refugees_/3tAXP9H)

<sup>24</sup> UNHCR (2017). UNHCR study uncovers shocking sexual violence against Syrian refugee boys, men. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2017/12/5a27a6594/unhcr-study-uncovers-shocking-sexual-violence-against-syrian-refugee-boys.html>

<sup>25</sup> UNODC. (2017). Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook\\_on\\_Children\\_Recruited\\_and\\_Exploited\\_by\\_Terrorist\\_and\\_Violent\\_Extremist\\_Groups\\_the\\_Role\\_of\\_the\\_Justice\\_System.E.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Andrzejewski, A. (2021, August 24). Staggering Costs – U.S. Military Equipment Left Behind In Afghanistan. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adamandrzejewski/2021/08/23/staggering-costs--us-military-equipment-left-behind-in-afghanistan/?sh=3ad3745341db>

international and local aid agencies from hostile groups in the region, for example, ISKP, Al-Qaeda and Haqqani Network.

### Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan: Ideologies of Violence

On August 26, 2021, the Kabul Airport blast made it evident that the Taliban were not alone in the race to capture and take over Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> One more radical extremist outfit is looking for the perfect opportunity to make some territorial gains and declare a caliphate. There are stark ideological and functional differences between the two dreaded outfits. Both their aims and objectives are different and work for distinct causes. Author and Pakistani Expert, Madiha Afzal in her book 'Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State' lucidly explains the origins of the Taliban.<sup>28</sup> She referred to the group as the Afghan Taliban and dwelled on its functional methods and ideologies. According to her, "the Afghan Taliban is an Islamist fundamentalist group that came into power in Afghanistan in 1996 after years of fighting between various groups of mujahideen (Soviet war-era fighters) over control of post-Soviet Afghanistan." The Afghan Taliban believed in forming the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* with Sharia law as its holy constitution. Post 9/11, the Afghan Taliban was ousted from Afghanistan by the US invasion. Following the US forces boots on the ground situation, the Afghan Taliban leadership sought refuge within Pakistan. An interesting point to note here is that for Pakistan – the two Taliban's, i.e. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or Pakistan Taliban and Afghan Taliban are two separate entities, and the Pakistani government treats them differently. The former is a foe, whereas the latter is kind of an ally. During the last two decades of war, the Afghan Taliban has attacked American forces, the Afghan government, and civilian targets. As they describe it, its jihad was mainly against the US forces, NATO forces, and the US-backed Afghan government in Afghanistan.

The ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province) – is the regional affiliate of the Islamic State Group.<sup>29</sup> It is now considered as one of the most feared radical outfits based out of Afghanistan. ISKP was launched in 2014 during the peak of Islamic State militancy in Iraq and Syria. A military operation in Pakistan carried out by the Pakistan army in the Waziristan area against the TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) led to the professing of allegiance to the Islamic State by a group of disgruntled Taliban fighters who broke away from the TTP. The extremist group members are recruited out of Afghan and Pakistani jihadists, especially members of the Afghan Taliban. The latter is influenced by the parochial ideology of the Islamic State and the dream of establishing a caliphate. The word "Khorasan" refers to a historical Islamic empire spanning from Iran to the western Himalayas from the 6<sup>th</sup> century covering parts of modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan and further dwelling into the South Asian region by territorial accession.<sup>30</sup> Through 2018 and 2019, the ISKP was engaged in fierce battles to retain its strongholds, especially in Afghanistan's Kunar and Nangrahar provinces.<sup>31</sup> ISKP strongly believe that the Afghan Taliban have abandoned the real jihad for a peace settlement with the foreign powers. The group considers the Afghan Taliban as

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<sup>27</sup> Kottasová, I. (2021, August 26). First images emerge from scene of explosion near Kabul airport. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/26/asia/afghanistan-kabul-airport-blast-intl/index.html>

<sup>28</sup> Afzal, M. (2018). *Pakistan under siege: extremism, society, and the state*. Penguin Random House: New York.

<sup>29</sup> Gardner, F. (2021, August 27). Afghanistan airport attack: Who are IS-K? *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58333533>

<sup>30</sup> Shinkman, P. D. (2021). EXPLAINER: What is ISIS-K? *US News & World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/explainer-what-is-isis-k>

<sup>31</sup> Subramanian, N. (2021, September 2). Explained: Islamic State chapter in Afghanistan, and the turf war with Taliban. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/kabul-airport-attack-isis-chapter-in-afghanistan-7472749/>



'apostate' and render their killing lawful under the interpretation of Islamic law. ISKP attacks primarily target Afghan security forces, Afghan political leadership, Taliban leadership and its fighters, civilians, other minority groups, including Shia Muslims belonging to the Hazara community in the region, and Western powers and international aid and assistance organizations. Since 2018, the coordinated attacks by ISKP have been on the rise, targeting hospitals, Kabul University and other prominent crowded places.

### **A Cloddish Narrative: Good Terrorists & Bad Terrorist?**

A cloddish narrative stem from the entire Afghan fiasco, whether there are any Good Terrorist and Bad Terrorist, and if so, who are they? The West is again leading with a baton by forming a credible thesis on the subject. With the US partially installing Taliban as the new in-charge of Afghanistan after twenty years of bloody war and blaming ISKP for the Kabul airport blast, the Good Terrorist and Bad Terrorist narrative are already in motion. The former being the Good while the latter being the Bad. The Taliban are trying hard to portray themselves as the so-called Good Terrorist. They deny their involvement in Opium production, funding terrorist activities, and even claimed that Bin Laden (Al-Qaeda leadership) had nothing to do with the 9/11 terror plot.<sup>32</sup> Since ISKP is now the sworn enemy of the Taliban.<sup>33</sup> The odds are working in favour of the Taliban. With the Pentagon publicly acknowledging that the US is ready to work with the Taliban on Counterterrorism issues, such actions legitimise the group and paint them as excellent and credible.<sup>34</sup> Pakistan, a staunch believer of this thesis, already advocates for the Afghan Taliban as the Good Terrorist. As the geo-strategist Brahma Chellaney rightly points out, "drawing distinctions between those who threaten US security and those who threaten others is a sure recipe for failure, as terrorist cells and networks must be targeted wherever they exist on a sustained basis to achieve enduring results against the forces of global jihad."<sup>35</sup> The West needs to ask itself the tricky question – Is ISKP the real enemy? That being said, does the Taliban becomes a friend?

There is no good and bad terrorist. They are all the sworn enemies of peace and humanity working towards the wrong causes in the name of religion and extremist ideologies. They are all the same. Another problem that needs to be highlighted stems from the fact that the foot soldiers and fighters (whether of Taliban or ISKP) tend to switch over among various groups since they are not officially employed by a single entity and only swore allegiance to the leadership. Possible changes in the top leadership position, mainly from their timely demise or being killed in action, often prompt these foot soldiers and fighters to switch over to other groups. It all boils down to whether the particular group by whom they are being recruited appears to be robust and extremist in their approach or not. They are influenced by the equivocal tactics employed by these groups and how perfectly they can enunciate their message among their fellow fighters. The group's success lies in the mastery of apposite and evocative verbal images. The greatest future challenge

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<sup>32</sup> Pannett, R. (2021, August 26). Taliban spokesman says “no proof” bin Laden was responsible for 9/11 attacks. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/26/taliban-bin-laden/>

<sup>33</sup> Burke, J. (2021, August 27). The west has to ask itself: if IS is the enemy, does that make the Taliban our friends? *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/27/islamic-state-enemy-taliban-afghanistan-kabul-airport-bombers>

<sup>34</sup> Guardian staff reporter. (2021a, September 2). “It’s possible”: US military chief could work with Taliban on IS counter-terror strikes. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/02/its-possible-us-military-chief-could-work-with-taliban-on-is-counter-terror-strikes>

<sup>35</sup> Chellaney, B. (2021b, September 12). A global war on terror with no tangible results. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-global-war-on-terror-with-no-tangible-results/article36421212.ece>

for the Taliban will be to test its fighters' loyalty – whether or not they chose to switch over sides or remain loyal to the core of the Taliban's ideology. There is an all-time possibility of a full-fledged civil war between the two faction groups. The West will probably be allying up with the Afghan Taliban to take out the unenviable extremist group.<sup>36</sup> Taliban, too, will have to gear up with the foreign forces since the presence of ISKP in Afghanistan is a direct challenge to the Taliban's sovereignty and legitimacy.

### The Pandemic and Global Health Challenges

After decades of chaos, conflict and inflicting insuperable pain and suffering, Afghanistan witnessed a hostile transition of an Islamist extremist group amidst tangling with the greatest pandemic, which has wreaked havoc across the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has devastating effects on the entire health infrastructure and economy of the world by disrupting the free flow of goods and services among nations. With millions of registered deaths worldwide, the deadly pandemic is in no mood to ease off. The problems on Afghans are surmounting with each passing day. The economy is on the verge of total collapse, inflation is on the rise, there are indications of severe food shortage in the near future, and to top it all – the COVID pandemic. When physical distancing, wearing of masks, and vaccination are the three key elements mandatory for fighting the virus, the Afghan's are struggling under the Taliban regime. The entire world witnessed the photos and videos of people thronging Kabul's airport in a bid to leave the country.<sup>37</sup> Refugees were seen huddling in jampacked camps triggering fear that the overcrowded scenario would result in an abrupt surge in coronavirus cases. The deepening health and security crisis in the country will have enduring drastic impacts on the social and physical being of the people. According to UNICEF, covid immunization fell almost 80% in the last week of days leading up to the Taliban's victory.<sup>38</sup> According to WHO estimates, less than 5% population of Afghanistan is fully vaccinated. During the Taliban's surge in capturing various provinces of Afghanistan, there was a 77% decline in virus testing in both public and private laboratories. When the coronavirus gradually mutates to its most potent form, the lack of immunization and physical distancing practices will worsen the Afghan crisis. There is another factor that adds to the surmounting problems in the country. Most people in Afghanistan are predominantly vaccine-hesitant, i.e., they avoid being inoculated since they have reservations about the vaccines and do not trust the country's medical system and leave the rest to providence.<sup>39</sup> These reservations and blind-faith tutelage are primarily the results of misinformation campaigns running on social media. Taliban is no exception. Being a patriarchal hardcore orthodox extremist outfit, the Taliban does not support vaccination. The group was

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<sup>36</sup> Lucas, S. (2021, September 2). To combat ISIS-K, the West may have to ally with the Taliban and Haqqani Network. *Scroll*. <https://scroll.in/article/1004332/to-combat-isis-k-the-west-may-have-to-ally-with-the-taliban-and-haqqani-network>

<sup>37</sup> Reuters (2021a, August 17). Chaos, desperation at Kabul airport as Biden defends withdrawal from Afghanistan. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/talibans-rapid-advance-across-afghanistan-2021-08-10/>

<sup>38</sup> Cunningham, E. (2021, August 25). Taliban takeover could drive covid crisis in Afghanistan as vaccinations plummet, U.N. warns. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/25/afghanistan-coronavirus-pandemic-taliban/>

<sup>39</sup> Msisoncabi. (2021, August 20). Taliban ban on jabs may trigger COVID-19 spike. *SciDev.net*. <https://www.scidev.net/global/news/taliban-ban-on-jabs-may-trigger-covid-19-spike/>

responsible for banning the covid vaccination process in Eastern Afghanistan in the early week of August 2021.<sup>40</sup>

Another global health challenge that finds its origin in the Taliban's orthodox ideology is 'Polio Virus'. The previous Taliban regime has opposed polio vaccination, and indeed Afghanistan is one of the two countries where the wild poliovirus still exists.<sup>41</sup> The other country is its neighbour Pakistan.<sup>42</sup> Poliovirus is transmitted through contaminated water, food or by coming in contact with an infected person. The wild poliovirus is transmitted through person-to-person contact. According to the data collected by GPEI (Global Polio Eradication Initiative), there were 56 cases of the 'wild polio' virus reported in the country in 2020. All efforts made by the international community and the WHO to eradicate the wild poliovirus from the country went in vain when the Taliban claimed Kabul and declared their heroic victory. It now seems impossible to cure Afghanistan of the wild poliovirus. To top it all, the fear of spreading the wild poliovirus throughout the world makes the situation even more baneful and pestilent. More than 1.2 lakh Afghans have been evacuated from Afghanistan after the crisis unfolded.<sup>43</sup> They are refugees in various countries around the world. Even if a single Afghan refugee were infected with the wild poliovirus, the world would be witnessing another global health catastrophe. It will be a colossal disaster, rendering WHO's decades of efforts abortive. It's difficult to imagine that the American blunder in Afghanistan can have devastating effects on global health.

### **China, Pakistan and Taliban: A Forged Nexus**

The forged nexus between China, Pakistan and the Taliban can be intimidating for India and the rest of South Asia. China's active role in Afghanistan's political landscape makes sense on many levels. Firstly, Afghanistan is famously rich with rare earth metals and copper, a jackpot for the Chinese tech and space industry.<sup>44</sup> Secondly, China is eyeing Afghanistan as its last piece of BRI's (Belt and Road Initiative) jigsaw puzzle, which is of strategic value to the Chinese interest in the region to fulfil its connectivity projects and build up a resilient supply chain in South Asia.<sup>45</sup> Thirdly, China's heavy and dearly investment in the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) would be at risk if China cannot hold on to Afghanistan for its strategic interest. Such a tactical move will expand the production bases for the Chinese firm and provide enormous Eurasian and European market access. Fourthly, China is confident about the investments in the CPEC and adjoining regions, which further stretches into Afghanistan and brings together a more significant

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<sup>40</sup> WION News. (2018). Taliban ban COVID-19 vaccine in Eastern Afghanistan's Paktia province: Report. <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/taliban-ban-covid-19-vaccine-in-eastern-afghanistans-paktia-province-report-405235>

<sup>41</sup> Farmer, B. (2021, June 3). Third of Afghan children go without polio drops thanks to Taliban's door-to-door vaccination ban. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/third-afghan-children-go-without-polio-drops-thanks-talibans/>

<sup>42</sup> World Health Organization (2019, January 4). Pakistan and Afghanistan: the final wild poliovirus bastion. <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/pakistan-and-afghanistan-the-final-wild-poliovirus-bastion>

<sup>43</sup> BBC News (2021, August 31). Afghanistan: How many refugees are there and where will they go? <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58283177>

<sup>44</sup> Holmes, F. (2021, August 31). Afghanistan Is Sitting On A Gold Mine. Literally. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2021/08/30/afghanistan-is-sitting-on-a-gold-mine-literally/?sh=4f86ce437ca8>

<sup>45</sup> Mint (2021, September 3). China eyes BRI extension to Afghanistan as it awaits Taliban to form govt. <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/china-eyes-bri-extension-to-afghanistan-as-it-awaits-taliban-to-form-govt-11630678935241.html>

part of the Indian Ocean littoral and Eurasia through high-speed rail networks, pipelines maritime linkages.<sup>46</sup> But some peculiarities need to be straightened out first. Probably, China will have to look out for the terrorist networks in the region, which can create hurdles in business processes. The recent suicide attacks in Kabul and Gwadar especially considering the latter one, which was predominantly targeted towards the Chinese workers in the region, can be an indictment of the resurgence of the terrorist networks in the area.<sup>47</sup> No matter how much the Chinese leadership try to keep Pakistan and Taliban regimes in confidence regarding their commitment and understanding for emulating peace and development in Afghanistan, in reality, things stand out in contrast. Pakistan, too, can be a tricky business for the Chinese to handle with care. Pakistan's economy wavers with major setbacks now and then because of the dynastic politics, Islamist violence and corruption in every sphere of public life.<sup>48</sup> There is an obnoxious dependence of the political clique on the military leadership. Whether domestic or international, every policy decision is motivated by vested interests, mainly the army running the show. China will probably have to look out for the ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) – a radical militant group active in the Xinjian province fighting for the liberation of the Uyghur Muslims in the region.<sup>49</sup> ETIM is believed to have close ties with the Taliban.

The stakes for Pakistan are possibly very high in Afghan politics. Firstly, it was quite palpable for Pakistan to keep Indian engagement to the very least as much as possible. It was not in Pakistani interest to have a substantial Indian presence in the region. Given the scale of Indian investment in Afghanistan and the vital essence of Indian public diplomacy, it was the perfect opportunity for Pakistan to get its ducks in a row. Secondly, Pakistan's active role in Afghanistan and close ties with the Taliban regime will help check the rapacious Pakistan Taliban, also known as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Since its emergence in 2007, its principal target remains the Pakistani State.<sup>50</sup> It works with the sole aim of removing Pakistan's democratic political structure and replacing it with the imposition of Sharia. However, the group have close ties with the Afghan Taliban, but their aims and objectives are distinct in functioning. According to Madiha Afzal, some members of TTP became radicalized from their involvement in the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>51</sup> The ISI Chief Faiz Hameed's surprise visit amidst the formation of interim government in Afghanistan makes total sense given the changing political paradigm shift in the region. It is important for Pakistan's government to closely monitor the situation in Afghanistan, given the TTP presence in the region. Thirdly, Pakistan's quixotic policy approach towards the geopolitics of South Asia is now undergoing an eccentric shift. Ever since the Doha negotiations started, Pakistan tried to maintain a dominant image by wilfully trying to broker a

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<sup>46</sup> Shuli, R. (2021, August 19). Afghanistan may turn China's Belt and Road into a \$282-bn creditor trap. *Business Standard*. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/afghanistan-may-turn-china-s-belt-and-road-into-a-282-bn-creditor-trap-121081900650\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/afghanistan-may-turn-china-s-belt-and-road-into-a-282-bn-creditor-trap-121081900650_1.html)

<sup>47</sup> Yousafzai, G. (2021, August 20). Two killed in suicide bombing targeting Chinese nationals in Pakistan. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/two-killed-suicide-bombing-targeting-chinese-nationals-southwest-pakistan-2021-08-20/>

<sup>48</sup> Siddique, A. (2021, May 25). How Pakistan's Economy Is Failing Its People. *Gandhara*, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-failing-economy/31272373.html>

<sup>49</sup> Kinling, L. (2021, August 30). China holds firm on Xinjiang as neighbouring Afghanistan poses security concerns. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3146879/china-holds-firm-xinjiang-neighbouring-afghanistan-poses>.

<sup>50</sup> Giustozzi, D. A. (2021, August 12). The Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. *The Royal United Services Institute*. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/resurgence-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan/>

<sup>51</sup> Afzal, M. (2018). *Pakistan under siege: extremism, society, and the state*. Penguin Random House.

peace agreement between the Taliban and Biden Administration. Pakistan did play an important role in approving the Taliban to negotiate a peace deal. It wants to portray itself in the best possible light considering the entire world closely monitors the Afghan situation. Such tactics will help Pakistan find its place in the changing security dynamics of the region. Fourthly, Pakistan's ultimate accolade can only be achieved by nudging Afghanistan's new policymakers in building anti-India rhetoric, which they can present before the international community and add more weightage to their domestic and foreign policy orotundity. It will also help Pakistan flex its muscle in the region, mainly along the Indian border, with increased infiltration and cross-border terrorism. Lastly, the debacle in Afghanistan provides Pakistan with a golden opportunity to establish friendly ties and regain the trust and confidence of the international community, which was on the decline ever since the Trump Administration accused Pakistan of being a propellant of state-sponsored terrorism.<sup>52</sup> President Trump even suspended the \$300 million aid to Pakistan over its perfidiousness to take action against the militant groups.<sup>53</sup> The current scenario facilitates a chance for Pakistan to portray itself as a responsible nation obligated by the international rules and norms for maintaining peace and stability in the region.

The set of responsibilities dangling over the Taliban's head are myriad. The first and foremost peculiarity which Taliban will probably have to straighten out is that - to decide whether it will again make their country a sanctuary for extremist groups. The country already has several thousand foreign fighters, whose ranks could swell with extremists coming in from Iraq and Syria and threaten the security of all neighbouring states. The second priority for the Taliban rests with gaining international confidence and legitimate recognition of a government. Considering China and Pakistan have already placed their eggs in the Taliban's basket by giving them full-fledged support and recognition, the extremist group is probably moving ahead with the right strategy.<sup>54</sup> Russia will sometimes join the clique, considering it's working on some reservation towards the radical group.<sup>55</sup> International recognition and legitimacy are of utmost importance for the Taliban. The Afghan economy is in shackles, foreign aid has completely dried up, and the country's GDP has contracted poorly.<sup>56</sup> Humanitarian Assistance and Foreign support can only help the country get back on its feet without collapsing further. Thirdly, the Taliban will have to assiduously watch and guard its border and stop the sudden influx of fighters and terrorists from various radical outfits trying to enter Afghanistan in search of a sanctuary. Taliban fighters will probably have to stay vigilant and show the utmost dedication to Kabul's government to prevent such crossovers into their territory. Fourthly, Afghanistan's new government will have to take account of the law-and-order situation in the country to avoid any mishappening which can result in large casualties and infrastructural damages. This further stresses the point that the Taliban will also have to look out to the possibility of a full-fledged civil war in the country between various terrorist outfits and

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<sup>52</sup> Janjua, H. (2018). Nothing but lies and deceit”: Trump launches Twitter attack on Pakistan. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/01/lies-and-deceit-trump-launches-attack-on-pakistan-tweet>

<sup>53</sup> BBC News (2018, September 2). *US military to cancel \$300m in Pakistan aid over terror groups*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45386278>

<sup>54</sup> Economic Times (2021a, August 22). As China, Pakistan weigh recognising Taliban, experts warn long-term losses, US ire. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/as-china-pakistan-weigh-recognising-taliban-experts-warn-long-term-losses-us-ire/articleshow/85533435.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>55</sup> Business Standard (2021, August 17). Moscow in “no rush” to recognise Taliban govt, says Russia’s top diplomat. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/moscow-in-no-rush-to-recognise-taliban-govt-says-russia-s-top-diplomat-121081701161\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/moscow-in-no-rush-to-recognise-taliban-govt-says-russia-s-top-diplomat-121081701161_1.html)

<sup>56</sup> Afzal, A. (2021, September 11). Afghanistan is on the verge of economic collapse – and Pakistan should be ready for the fallout. *Scroll.in*. <https://scroll.in/article/1004991/afghanistan-is-on-the-verge-of-economic-collapse-and-pakistan-should-be-ready-for-the-fallout>

the extremist group. ISKP will try to take advantage of the security lapse within the country. Syria and Yemen's situation emulating Afghanistan is a near-future possibility with a lack of confidence-building measures. The troika of China, Pakistan and the Taliban certainly have much to work on within close coordination. The challenges are entwined and significant and can only be solved with trust and cooperation among the three. Given the problematic and unscrupulous nature of the trio, it will be interesting to see how they keep their differences at bay and work towards a common cause for maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan and South Asia as a whole.

### **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: Formation of an Inclusive Government or Resuscitating Old Regime?**

The Taliban's resurrection into the mainstream political milieu of Afghanistan has been quite overwhelming for the entire world. There was a lot of uncertainty around the Taliban's approach towards forming an inclusive government in Afghanistan, which the radical group squashed on September 7, 2021, when its official spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, addressed a press conference announced the formation of '*Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*'.<sup>57</sup> A total of 33 cabinet positions were reported, out of which Pashtuns poise 30, the ethnic Tajiks proclaimed 2, and a single post was awarded to an Uzbek. The Taliban are primarily of Pashtun descent, making approx. 40% of Afghanistan's ethnically diverse population of around 40-45 million. The most exciting part of the cabinet formed is that about 17 members who swear an allegiance to look after Afghanistan in the official capacity are on the UN sanctions blacklists.<sup>58</sup> These include the head of the Taliban formed government, Mullah Hassan Akhund and Sirajudin Haqqani, the leader of the dreaded Haqqani Network responsible for the 2008 attack on the Indian Embassy in Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup>

The all-male dominated Cabinet portfolios, which were announced somewhat, have an uncanny resemblance to the 1990s Islamic Emirate notoriously famous for its approach towards women rights and other human rights abuses. Considering the list of cabinet ministers comprising mainly of the Taliban's core and the Haqqanis, one thing is clear the Taliban is not committed to the signed Doha Accords. The Taliban repeatedly used the narrative that the formation of the inclusive government in Kabul will have representations from all ethnic communities of the Afghan society.<sup>60</sup> It's a clear message for the governments worldwide to decipher that they are the true rulers of Afghanistan, and it's their sovereign right to govern it in whatever ways they deem it fit or necessary. Taliban's preponderance in the region appears to be stronger than their previous rendezvous in the 1990s. Back then, only three nations recognized the Islamic Emirate, and the Taliban never controlled Afghanistan in its entirety as Panjshir has always been out of the Taliban's reach. Considering the current geopolitical power play, more regional powers are now ready to engage with the newly resurrected Islamic Emirate, including China, Russia, and Pakistan, looking after the entire transition. The new regime with more muscle power, courtesy of the Haqqani Network, will exorbitantly strengthen its grip over the entire nation.

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<sup>57</sup> Al Jazeera. (2021, September 7). Taliban announces new government in Afghanistan. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/taliban-announce-acting-ministers-of-new-government>

<sup>58</sup> Johny, S. (2021, September 11). The Taliban regime: Return of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-taliban-regime-return-of-the-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan/article36407047.ece>

<sup>59</sup> Subramanian, N. (2021, September 9). Explained: Who are the Haqqani Network, the most powerful group in the Taliban government? *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-who-are-the-haqqani-network-the-most-powerful-group-in-the-taliban-government-7497369/>

<sup>60</sup> BBC News (2021b, September 7). Hardliners get key posts in new Taliban government. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58479750>

## Subsiding into the Pernicious New Normal

Taliban's ideological pragmatic approach towards the governance of Afghanistan is emanating colossal challenges, which is undoubtedly going to be a setback for growth and development achieved in the last two decades. The radical outfit articulates that they are not the same 90s Taliban which the world still believes them to be. The 90s Taliban ruled with an iron fist. They ruled Afghanistan with regressive, draconian interpretations of Sharia law. It required women to be covered with head-to-toe burqa; women and men were treated in separate hospitals; music and television were forbidden. Anyone in violation of such rules was severely punished, often in public. However, nothing much has been changed, and it's noticeable in their style of governance. They are dealing with the women with the same patriarchal attitude and abhorrence. A few days after the Taliban ran over Kabul and claimed their victory, they issued a statement directing all working women to stay at home until proper systems were in place.<sup>61</sup> Days after forming the interim government, Taliban fighters effectively banned demonstrators, with dire warnings to violators that they would face severe legal action according to Sharia Law.<sup>62</sup> In another incident reported from Kabul, Taliban fighters pugnaciously dispersed women protesters who staged a protest against the Taliban and were trying to enter the presidential palace.<sup>63</sup> The hardcore jihadist group even used whips and sticks to dismantle the women protestants.<sup>64</sup> The Taliban came down heavily on the Journalists too, which can only be portrayed as suppressing free and independent speech. Two journalists were manhandled, thrashed and detained for hours by Taliban fighters for covering the women protests in the capital city.<sup>65</sup> The Taliban has reportedly said that people found guilty of stealing or theft will have their hands cut off, as dictated by Sharia.

Presumably, there is no place for human rights in Afghanistan. In a place where women have no rights left, one can easily assume the status of education in that particular country. Afghanistan's newly appointed education minister made some not so surprising statements on education. According to Sheikh Maulvi Noorullah Munir, PhDs and Master's degrees are not helpful because Mullahs do not have them, even though they are 'the greatest of all.'<sup>66</sup> Apparently, under the Taliban rule governed by Sharia law, one does not need any formal education to administrate. All they need is fighters with radical, brainwashed ideology, and they are the perfect fit for the job. Following the Sharia doctrine, a day after forming the inclusive government, as Taliban claims, women were banned from taking up any sports activity and are entirely forbidden from participating in any such

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<sup>61</sup> BBC News (2021, August 24). Afghanistan: Taliban tell working women to stay at home. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58315413>

<sup>62</sup> Beaumont, P., Wintour, P., & Mohammad, A. (2021, September 8). Taliban ban protests and slogans that don't have their approval. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/08/taliban-ban-protests-and-slogans-that-dont-have-their-approval>

<sup>63</sup> Hindustan Times (2021, September 4). Taliban violently stop women protesters from marching to Presidential Palace. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/videos/world-news/taliban-violently-stop-women-protesters-from-marching-to-presidential-palace-101630776328965.html>

<sup>64</sup> Spark, L. & Lister, T. (2021, September 9). Taliban fighters use whips against Afghan women protesting the all-male interim government. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/08/asia/afghanistan-women-taliban-government-intl/index.html>

<sup>65</sup> The Workers Rights (2021, September 9). Journalists Manhandled Over Covering Women Rights Protests.. <https://www.theworkersrights.com/journalists-manhandled-over-covering-women-rights-protests/>

<sup>66</sup> WION (2021, September 08). Taliban Education Minister says PhD and Masters degrees worthless, mullahs greatest without them. <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/watch-taliban-education-minister-says-phd-and-masters-degrees-worthless-mullahs-greatest-without-them-411612>

activity where a part of their body or face is exposed.<sup>67</sup> The Universities across Afghanistan have resumed normal functioning, but with a slight change, the classrooms have been divided among male and female students with the help of a curtain.<sup>68</sup> As of now, the Taliban is allowing women students to attend class, but there is still a lot of uncertainty over the future of women rights in Afghanistan. There seems to be a stark contrast between the Taliban's commitments they promised to fulfil, and their vested interests, which are governed by practices of Islam, Sharia law and patriarchal dogmas. One can only gainsay their claims.

### **The Caveat**

The unabashed news of the nonchalant US withdrawal during the deep middle of the night and the subsequent takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban fighters has left the international community dismayed. A hostile Afghanistan with a major terrorist network nesting within its territory is undoubtedly a cause of concern, primarily for India and the rest of the world. It will be challenging for India to counter expansionist China and watch out for the cross-border terrorism practices in Afghan soil sponsored by Pakistan. The debacle in Afghanistan was a warning that will undoubtedly have ripple effects worldwide, right from the upsurge in opium cultivation and production, flourishing drugs and human trafficking cartels, an unprecedented influx of migrant refugees, challenges to illegal migration and increased terror activities. Also, the upsurge in the nefarious terror recruitment drive, youth radicalization, insuperable global health challenges, and a plummeting economy would take the country and the region into a more challenging time. Although, the most critical aspect of the Afghan crisis is whether the Taliban will be recognised as the legitimate ruler of Afghanistan or not and, eventually, how the world will react to the challenges prompted by this pugnacious extremist group.

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<sup>67</sup> Beaumont, P. (2021, September 8). Afghan women to be banned from playing sport, Taliban say. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/08/afghan-women-to-be-banned-from-playing-sport-taliban-say>

<sup>68</sup> Reuters (2021, September 6). A curtain divides male, female students as Afghan universities reopen. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/curtain-divides-male-female-students-afghan-universities-reopen-2021-09-06/>



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