



Taliban 2.0

Afghanistan's Central Asian Neighbours Weigh Different Approaches

Gyorgy Busztin

Series Introduction

The Afghanistan Crisis: Anxieties and Trigger Points

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has prompted a geopolitical free-for-all situation in the country, with regional, if not, extra-regional implications. It ceded the country swiftly to Taliban control, with China, Russia, and Iran all poised to forge close relationships with the new Afghan government.

International players like Qatar, Turkey and Pakistan, which have had functional relations with the Taliban, have sought constructive engagement with the new government, to the extent of opening a pathway for them into the international system. Others, particularly the Central Asian states, the UAE and

Saudi Arabia, are disquieted by security concerns, terrorism-related or otherwise. In Europe, the immediate impact of events in Afghanistan is having to manage a massive refugee crisis.

This series of *Insights* examines the implications of the US disengagement from Afghanistan, ranging from strategic openings in interstate relations to ground-level anxieties.

Cover photo: Taliban fighters walking along the Amu Darya River near the border with Uzbekistan on 27 October 2021. Wakil Kobsar / AFP.

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Gyorgy Busztin*

Three months into the spectacular collapse of the Ghani government and its demoralised armed forces, Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours are still watching intently to figure out whether they are confronting an unreformed Taliban or a new avatar, as far as cross-border relations are concerned.

Taliban 1.0 undoubtedly was a disaster for Afghanistan, allowing the incubation of world jihadism that culminated in the act of terror that brought down the Twin Towers first — and the Taliban themselves as a consequence. However, Taliban 1.0 did not explicitly attempt to export their version of Shari'a rule to their Central Asian neighbours. Rather, militants from these neighbouring states sought and found refuge in Afghanistan, from where they sporadically infiltrated their respective home countries.

Yet no significant act of terrorism launched against Central Asia by Afghanistan-based militants can be recalled during those years of initial Taliban rule. Tajikistan's bloody civil war was rooted partially in Islamic militancy but predated the Taliban regime.

Instead, what transpired was mounting support from Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours for the Northern Alliance (NA), the loose anti-Taliban movement battling to stem the Islamist group's tide in northern Afghanistan. The NA was in many ways an ethnic protection and emancipatory movement seeking to defend Tajiks and Uzbeks, the second and third largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan, from perceived Pashtun tyranny. Tajiks and Uzbeks in the Central Asian republics could not be indifferent to the fate of their brethren across the border. In the meantime, Iran took a firm position on the Shi'as of Afghanistan, most prominently the Hazara. But the role of the Central Asian republics became prominent only after the US-led invasion was launched. Both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan provided logistic support for the invasion while Iran was relieved to be rid of the irksome Taliban that it had narrowly avoided going to war against.

Global Jihad or Jihad in One Country?

What do Afghanistan's immediate neighbours have to fear from the Taliban this time? Not much, conventional logic would hold. For consolidating the deeply divided and impoverished country will be an arduous process the Taliban can hardly subordinate to cross-border adventurism.

Still, the Taliban's concept of jihad, just like that of Al Qaida's and the Islamic State's, is not just founded on the premise of fighting an invading non-Muslim state but also on the assumption that righteous Muslims everywhere will stand up and fight to rid themselves of tyrannical, un-Islamic regimes. This is exactly why it is unlikely that the Taliban — or for that matter, any polity espousing jihadist ideology — will forcibly curtail the movements of jihadists who wish to wage their

struggle in their home countries. Except when in dire straits, where they are at the moment.

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The crumbling of Afghanistan's economy and the looming danger of famine cannot escape the attention of the Taliban leadership, who can only rely on outside largesse, chiefly from Western donors, to keep the country afloat. According to data released by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in September 2021,¹ 11 million Afghans need humanitarian aid till the end of the year. However, only a third of humanitarian aid pledges by donors have materialised as of mid-October. Food insecurity has become endemic since the Taliban takeover, according to a study published in September 2021 by the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).² Summing up his impressions after a visit to Kabul, the secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, Jan Egeland, said in

¹ Cited in Reuters, “UN says basic services in Afghanistan are collapsing”, 7 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-says-basic-services-afghanistan-are-collapsing-2021-09-07/>

² Jamie Lutz and Jacob Kurtzer, “What the Taliban takeover means for Food Security in Afghanistan”, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 27 September 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-taliban-takeover-means-food-security-afghanistan>

October that aid groups are in a race against time to stave off famine before the winter sets in. He warned that the banking system could collapse and the economy spiral out of control — both dire prospects for the new rulers of Afghanistan as they try to consolidate their hold on power.³

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Will the new leaders in Kabul then clamp down on jihadists originating from across the border who are bent on exporting their brand of Islam into their own countries? Or is it unfounded to expect that such militants based in Afghanistan will not infiltrate across borders to exert significant pressure on the country's northern neighbours?

The current divisions among the Taliban leaders — as represented by the “moderates” like Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar vs the “extremists”, like those moulded in the image of the late militant Jalaluddin Haqqani (the Haqqani network) — could perhaps be compared with the disagreements among the leaders of nascent Russia that pitted the Trotskyites espousing world revolution against the

³ Pamela Constable, Across Kabul, evidence of Afghanistan's fast-unravelling economy under the Taliban is everywhere”, *The Washington Post*, 4 October 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-economy-taliban/2021/10/02/be142044-214b-11ec-a8d9-0827a2a4b915_story.html

Stalinists espousing “socialism in one country”. However, Taliban 2.0 will have learnt a lot and will be intent on not repeating their past mistake in harbouring Osama bin Laden. The geopolitical environment is different too from what it was two decades ago. China and Russia have sent unmistakable messages to Kabul that they will not brook any Taliban mischief. They have both signalled their stances through military moves: Russia conducted drills twice (in August and October) with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan’s forces along the latter’s border with Afghanistan while China decided to fund the establishment of a police base in Tajikistan in an area bordering both Afghanistan and China’s Xinjiang province. Meanwhile, the “stans” of Central Asia have consolidated and are no longer the tinderboxes of seething internal tensions that their Islamist movements of yore could readily ignite.

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No reliable statistical evidence is available, but it is likely that the most fearsome jihadists of Central Asia were eliminated on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq while the others are holed up in Idlib (as attested to by the leader of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham jihadist group)⁴ and

⁴ Mohammed Hardan, “Jihadist group in Idlib vows to keep foreign fighters in Syria”, Al-Monitor, 15 September 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/jihadist-group-idlib-vows-keep-foreign-fighters-syria>

eliciting intensified Russian air attacks⁵ (or perhaps in other theatres of the jihadist struggle as far away as North Africa). Vladimir Putin left no doubt about the intensity of the Russian campaign to hunt down and eliminate jihadists in Syria, making sure none would ever return. “It is up to God to decide what He wants to do with them ... my duty is to send them to Him”, the Russian leader reputedly said in a quote attributed to him on social media, which a Russia Today TV journalist repeated in a tweet but later retracted, claiming it was a false statement.⁶ Whether the Russian president uttered such telling words or not, in Syria alone 1,633 terrorists of Central Asian origin have been killed and another 2,220 detained, according to a study by Nodirbek Soliev.⁷

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Granted, the threat is there. But the Taliban leaders in Kabul, bolstered by wise Qatari and Pakistani advice, are likely to play it safe. Doha has as much influence on the movement as Islamabad does — if not more, given its deep pockets.

⁵ Mohammed Hardan, “Russia intensifies Idlib attacks ahead of summit with Turkey, Iran on Syria”, Al-Monitor, 23 September 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/russia-intensifies-idlib-attacks-ahead-summit-turkey-iran-syria>

⁶ Lee Min Kok, “Putin's quote about sending terrorists to God was false, says news anchor who tweeted it”, *The Straits Times*, 19 November 2015.

⁷ Nordibek Soliev, “Tracing the Fate of Central Asian Fighters in Syria: Repatriates, Returnees and Relocators”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, No. 4, August 2021.

Qatar was host to the US-Taliban talks that were quite unprecedentedly convened in February 2020 with the fully legitimate Kabul government locked out. This opening was possible because Qatar had long built ties with the Taliban, providing them a safe haven and de facto recognition by hosting their representative office, an embassy all but in name. But, owing to this high-profile association with the Islamist movement that is still seen as a terrorist group by the world at large, Doha now needs to prove that its protégés are listening to its calls for moderation. Otherwise, the hyperactive emirate might suffer a serious dent to its carefully crafted image, especially if some heavyweights, outraged over Taliban atrocities, were to stay away in protest from the World Cup that Qatar is hosting in 2022. Qatar has been advocating international recognition for the Taliban, maintaining that quarantining the regime will push it into even more extreme positions.

Likewise, Pakistan has now joined Doha's "recognise the Taliban" chorus in the hope that recognition will serve to moderate the movement. Islamabad seems to have sobered up at the sight of the Frankenstein it had created, which, imbued with a life of its own, began invigorating all the extremists of Pakistan and millions of Pakistani Pashtuns. This is despite the fence that Islamabad had built at huge cost on its border with Afghanistan.

Cross-border and Other Concerns

The worries of Afghanistan's southern neighbours are no doubt shared by its northern neighbours too. The latter's exposure is different, however.

The Central Asian states are domestically stable today, unlike in the mid-1990s, when the Taliban first came to power. Russian military

bases in the region provide a welcome security backup for them (as amply demonstrated by the recent joint military exercises between the forces of Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan). Notwithstanding the cross-border ethnic tensions and water-sharing disputes that divided them in the past, the Central Asian states have a shared interest in preserving regional security and stability amid a revived threat of Islamist radicalism emanating from the Taliban's return to power. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are the most concerned about the threat arising from Taliban rule since they share borders with Afghanistan. However, each of the Central Asian states perceives the Taliban from slightly different lenses.

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The least inclined to be a partner in a Central Asian anti-Taliban alliance is Turkmenistan. Long the maverick in the region on account of its vaunted policy of permanent neutrality, Ashgabat is for appeasing rather than deterring. On the heels of the Taliban takeover, it made some low-key but unmistakable diplomatic gestures to indicate it wants no animosity with the new leaders in Kabul, going as far as calling them “brothers”.

Turkmenistan's reluctance to join an openly anti-Taliban front may have three fundamental reasons. First, joining an anti-Taliban front would go against Ashgabat's concept of permanent neutrality, which is not only enshrined in the constitution of Turkmenistan but also was

recognised in a UN General Assembly resolution at the country's insistence. Second, it could push Ashgabat into the arms of Moscow, an eventuality that Turkmen president Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov wants to avoid, remembering his humiliating experience of wrangling over gas prices with Moscow that ended in the latter shunning him for cheaper supplies from its closer neighbour, Azerbaijan. Third, Ashgabat's long-time dream of building a transnational pipeline to transport its gas supplies to Pakistan (and India too, based on the original plan but now a remote option) relies on Taliban goodwill as it would have to traverse Afghan territory. No surprise then that Berdymukhamedov joined his Uzbekistan counterpart during their recent meeting in Tashkent to call for engagement with the Taliban.

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Like Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are directly exposed to cross-border threats emanating from Afghanistan. It merits attention that both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan clamped down recently on what they called terrorist elements linked to Afghanistan.⁸ However, the two countries see the Taliban through slightly different optics. Dushanbe declared that it would not recognise a Taliban government unless such a government includes the country's minorities (meaning the Tajiks). No similarly tough language emerged from Tashkent, which may have a stake in preserving a modicum of cooperation with a country that for long served as a refuge for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),

⁸ Umida Hashimova, “Will the Taliban's takeover inspire Central Asian extremists?” *The Diplomat*, 12 October 2021.

a ferocious jihadist group. Uzbekistan's leadership even hinted at dialogue, referring to the Taliban as "dear neighbours".

In fact, the two liberation heroes that ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks gave Afghanistan's Northern Alliance may be evocative of the difference in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan's approaches. Ahmed Shah Masood, the Sorbonne-educated, articulate but resolutely anti-Taliban icon who was assassinated by Al Qaida elements the day before the Twin Towers came down, is a national hero of all Tajiks, both in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Dubbed the "Lion of Panjshir" (in reference to his stronghold in Afghanistan's Panjshir valley), his legacy cannot be forsaken by Tajikistan's leadership and adds to their reluctance to take a more transactional approach to the current rulers of Afghanistan.

In contrast, Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek Afghan, is a controversial character who has survived by constantly switching allegiances. Having first served in the Soviet-backed Afghan army and fought the mujahideen until the withdrawal of Soviet troops and disintegration of Afghanistan, he teamed up with different insurgent groups and established a foothold in the north, served in the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani, then joined the insurgency before again serving Rabbani, fled the country when the Taliban came to power, and eventually returned as part of the NA. He served in the government of Hamid Karzai and later that of Ashraf Ghani, in which he was vice-president. Accused of torturing and sexually abusing his rivals, he fled to Turkey in early January 2017 only to return in 2018 and clinch an appointment as army marshal. Dostum is seen as a veritable bandit who exploited his positions in government for his scandalous money grabs. Uzbekistan's president Shavkat Mirziyoyev may have little to fear in decoupling from a figure seen as a liability.

The Central Asian countries that do not share borders with Afghanistan — Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan — are less concerned but not altogether unperturbed by the return of the Taliban. They are aware that any destabilisation in the region is a threat to commercial and energy networks and to their development plans.

The closing of ranks among the Central Asian countries despite their differences was highly evident at the Dushanbe summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in September 2021. The meeting cemented the unity of the partners in the face of a shared menace and ceremoniously co-opted Iran into its ranks.

How the relationship between Afghanistan and its immediate northern neighbours will play out is hard to predict at the moment. It will almost certainly be influenced by internal power struggles within the ruling Taliban. Still, an outright confrontational line from Kabul is unlikely. Instead, the Taliban may work on two tracks, scoring points with the international community for being civil to their neighbours while at the same time continuing to rough up the Afghan people with impunity and increasing the misery of Afghan society.

* ***Dr Gyorgy Busztin** is Visiting Research Professor at the Middle East Institute, NUS. A career diplomat and an academic, he has served as Hungary's ambassador to Indonesia and subsequently to Iran. Between 2011 and 2017, Dr Busztin served as deputy envoy of the UN in Iraq, with the rank of Assistant Secretary General. He was responsible for the mission's political, analytical, electoral and constitutional support components. Dr Busztin holds a degree in Arabic history from Damascus University, Syria, and a doctorate in Arabic and Semitic philology from Lorand Eotvos University in Hungary. He believes strongly in political and intercultural dialogue and has engaged leading politicians, intellectuals, religious leaders and representatives of civil society.*



29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Block B #06-06
Singapore 119620
Tel: +65 6516 2380; Fax: +65 6774 0458
Email: contact.mei@nus.edu.sg
www.mei.nus.edu.sg

