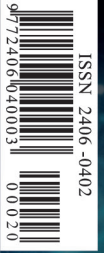


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HOPE AGAINST HOPE IN AFGHANISTAN

James M. Dorsey

FEW in the international community, including Afghanistan's neighbors and near-neighbors, are holding their breath that the Taliban will make good on their promises to respect human, women's, and minority rights, uphold freedom of the press, and appoint a more permanent, truly inclusive government.

Hopes for Taliban cooperation with the international community are perhaps highest when it comes to the group's pledge to police militants on Afghan soil and ensure that they do not launch cross-border or transnational attacks. Yet, even there, the Taliban's track record is chequered, notwithstanding the fact that the group only recently took control of Afghanistan. The record already casts doubt on the Taliban's willingness and ability to impose its will on various militant groups. So does the Taliban's failure to capitalize on its fight against the Islamic State's Central

and South Asian affiliate, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K), as well as IS-K's brutal campaign against minority Hazara Shiites.

A THREE-PRONGED APPROACH

Armed Taliban fighters in captured police pickups showed up in early September 2021 in remote Shiite villages in the Tagabdar Valley in the central Afghan province of Daykundi. They summoned the villages' men to issue an ultimatum: they and their families had two weeks to leave their villages. According to *Der Spiegel* journalists Christoph Reuter and Thore Schroeder, the fighters warned the villagers that deadly force would be used if they did not leave voluntarily. The villagers were served with a notice from the governor of Daykundi informing them that they must leave their lands.

"But where are we to go?" one of the men summoned by the Taliban asked.

"Doesn't matter," the Taliban answered, "just depart this Garden of Eden surrounded by an inhospitable landscape." Many of the hundreds of families forced to leave had nowhere to go, including Jamilah, a 45-year-old widow, who lives out in the open with her six children since leaving home. They are exposed to the elements, with little food or water. "Now, we are forced to sleep in the open. We are hungry and thirsty. What will we do when it's winter?," she told Ghandara, an online news service.

The villagers had good reason to take the Taliban threat seriously. Hazara Shiites, who account for 20 percent of the Afghan population, had not fared well during the Taliban's first stab at government in the 1990s, until they were swept from power by the 2011 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The Taliban, like jihadists and other Sunni ultra-conservatives, view Shiites as heretics. Hazaras have warned for months that a renewed Taliban takeover posed an existential threat to their community.

Even worse, IS suicide bombings of Shiite mosques in Kunduz in the north and Kandahar—the Taliban's heartland in the south—two months after the forced evacuations in Daykundi, suggested that the Hazara were caught in a pincer movement by two sworn enemies. The Islamic State, in a rare move apparently designed to capture China's attention and complicate relations

between the Taliban and Beijing, disclosed the ethnicity of the perpetrator of the Kunduz attack, saying he was an Uyghur. By the same token, the attack was likely to cast a shadow over efforts to forge a working relationship by both the Taliban and Iran, which views itself as the protector of the Shiite Muslim world.

Taken together, the bombing and the evacuations indicated that the fight with the Islamic State would in part be fought over the backs of Shiites. The attacks raise the question of whether the Taliban's effort to control jihadists and other militants operating on Afghan soil amount to more than a dogfight between equally bad alternatives. They also raise the specter of Iranian failures to find a *modus vivendi* with the Taliban because of its inability to protect Shiites.

The evacuations, a potential prelude to ethnic cleansing, belied the notion of a Taliban 2.0 that was supposed to be more inclusive and empathetic to others' rights. They were the side of the coin the Taliban preferred to keep out of sight. Taliban protection of recent Shiite religious celebrations may have been equally sincere but served the purpose of promoting the image of a more moderate and gentler Taliban.

That is not to say that the effort to control other militants is not serious and perhaps as existential to the Taliban as is the threat Hazara Shiites

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are facing. For much of the international community that has *de facto* accepted Taliban rule, the determining factor for *de jure* recognition is likely to be the Taliban's ability to prevent militants from using Afghanistan as a launching pad for cross-border or trans-national attacks.

As a result, the Taliban developed a multi-pronged strategy involving confrontation of the Islamic State that opposes Taliban rule because the group was willing to negotiate with the United States; negotiations with various other militant groups, including Al-Qaeda, that have produced at best-mixed results; and reliance on a potential paradigm shift in jihadist strategy away from transnational attacks and towards local governance.

Consider in this context the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, at this point the Taliban's most formidable opponent as a result of having demonstrated credibly its potency inside Afghanistan. The Kunduz and Kandahar bombings followed the attack on Kabul airport that killed 13 U.S. soldiers and 169 Afghans as the United States was evacuating the countries. The Islamic State has since also launched multiple smaller-scale

attacks, including assassinations, kidnappings and beheadings of Taliban fighters on patrol.

Violence is one aspect of the group's methodical, multi-faceted strategy that

also involves reaching out to tribes and other groups, stamping out dissent among more moderate Salafis and carrying out jail-breaks, assassinations, and attacks on Taliban personnel. "Package all of that together, that is an entire method of insurgency the Taliban is not equipped to handle," said extremism scholar Andrew Mines. Tens of tit-for-tat killings in

Nangarhar, an IS stronghold, illustrate the Taliban's difficulty to impose law and order—a cornerstone of its appeal throughout the group's history.

The Taliban botched an opportunity to inspire confidence when acting Afghan interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani convened family members of Taliban suicide bombers to celebrate the actions of their loved ones. Rather than apologizing to the victims, Haqqani—who has a \$10 million bounty on his head due to close ties with Al-Qaeda—told the gathering that the bombers' "sacrifices are for religion, for the

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country, and Islam." Ironically enough, the gathering took place in Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel, which was twice targeted by the group. He added that the Taliban would not have been able to fight the United States without the support of suicide bombers.

Doubts about the Taliban's ability and willingness to live up to its promises are fed even more by the composition of the group's caretaker government, which includes multiple figures designated by the UN and/or the U.S. as terrorists. The concern is not limited to the notorious Haqqani family, but also other members of the clan's network such as Mullah Tajmir Jawad, Afghanistan's new deputy intelligence chief. Before being appointed, Jawad allegedly ran a suicide bombing network that orchestrated some of the most lethal attacks in Afghanistan of the past two decades.

Similarly, Mawlawi Zubair Mutmaeen, who once ran Taliban suicide bombing squads in Kabul that struck the presidential palace, a CIA office, and the Kabul Serena hotel, is now a police chief in one of the Afghan capital's districts. To Mutmaeen it is all the same: mediating marital disputes, helping debtors recover their funds, and assisting applicants find

jobs as opposed to gathering intelligence, finding weak spots in targets, ordering suicide bombings, and operating a web of informers inside the previous government. "Previously I was serving Islam, and now I'm also serving Islam. There is no difference," Mutmaeen said.

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"Until last month he was running a suicide bombers' training camp—that's how favorable an environment [Afghanistan] has become [for Al-Qaeda]. The kind of people that Al-Qaeda treats as their peers or supporters are now moving straight out of the suicide-bomber training camps into running the intelligence service," said Michael Semple, a Dari-speaking former United Nations advisor on Afghanistan and EU representative in the country. He was referring to Jawad but could just as well have been Mutmaeen:

If you are a member of Al-Qaeda trying to make arrangements to keep your leaders and key operatives safe and out of view and avoiding trouble from the local authorities, what more could you dream of than to have your well-wishers take over the Interior Ministry?

American national security officials fear that perceived Taliban reluctance or inability to control

militant groups means that it is only a matter of time before the IS and Al Qaeda will be able to relaunch attacks in the West. U.S. Undersecretary of Defense Colin Kahl recently told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the IS would regroup in the next six to 12 months while it could take up to two years for Al Qaeda to follow suit.

The doubts are further informed by the Taliban's adoption of a governance model built on an alliance between the state and the clergy that has been part of the Muslim world's problem rather than the solution to its multiple troubles for centuries. As a result, the Taliban's vision of what an Islamic state should look like as well as its emerging attitude since its takeover of Afghanistan towards human, women's, and minority rights as well as and freedom of the press adds to questions about how reliable a counterterrorism partner the group may be.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan wrote in a *Washington Post* oped that he is

convinced the right thing for the world now is to engage with the new Afghan government to ensure peace and stability. The international community will want to see the inclusion of major ethnic groups in government, respect for the rights of all Afghans and commitments that Afghan soil shall never again be used for terrorism against any country [...]. Taliban leaders will have greater

reason and ability to stick to their promises if they are assured of the consistent humanitarian and developmental assistance, they need to run the government effectively. Providing such incentives will also give the outside world additional leverage to continue persuading the Taliban to honor its commitments.

Khan's oped was published three days after 22 Republican senators introduced a bill that, if approved, would mandate the U.S. government to investigate Pakistan's support for the Taliban, as a precursor to the imposition of sanctions. The oped came days before the country's Finance Minister Shaukat Tareen was scheduled to meet in Washington for a review by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) of Pakistan's lending program. Khan didn't help Pakistan by earlier celebrating the Taliban victory as "breaking the chains of slavery."

These doubts and questions go to the heart of a debate about how to coax the group against the backdrop of diminishing Chinese, Russian, Iranian, and Qatari hopes that the Taliban may prove themselves more compromising on the back of their recent victory. China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Qatar favor lifting sanctions and maintaining relations even if they are not about to unconditionally recognize the Taliban government. Conversely, the United States and the EU have opted for a more coercive approach, involving sanctions

and international isolation. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are hedging their bets, taking their lead from Washington.

Part of the hope that the Taliban may ultimately be more malleable is rooted in the fact that the group is increasingly populated by a generation that came of age during the American-led occupation but has yet to make its mark. Reflecting on the issue, Afghan journalist Fazelminallah Qazizai said:

Routinely portrayed as archaic and extreme by critics and opponents, the new generation of Taliban are in fact a product of their times: more open to the prospect of gradual social change than their forebears yet politically more militant; English-speaking but mistrustful of the West; well-read yet wary of free expression; keen to help their country move forward but defined by its past.

THE TALIBAN'S QUAGMIRE

The Taliban's quagmire was evident when Qatari foreign minister Sheikh Mohammed Abdulrahman Al-Thani described in late September 2021 the Taliban's repressive policies towards women and brutal administration of justice as "very disappointing" and taking Afghanistan "a step backwards." The minister warned that the Taliban risked misusing Sharia law:

We have [...] been trying to demonstrate for the Taliban how Muslim countries can conduct their laws, how they can deal with the women's issues [...].

One of the examples is the State of Qatar, which is a Muslim country; our system is an Islamic system [but] we have women outnumbering men in workforces, in government, and in higher education.

"And not only in Qatar. You have Malaysia, you have Indonesia, you have actually all the other Muslim majority countries. [The Taliban] will be just the odd example," added Assistant Foreign Minister Lolwah Rashid al-Khater, the Qatari ministry's spokeswoman. "What we're trying to say is that we're coming from within. We come from within Islam itself. [...] We're trying to push through other tracks, like Muslim scholars or imams, to go and speak to them independently from us, from any other government. We encourage them to do that."

The Qatari foreign ministry's effort to position itself as a model of Islamic governance was not only a bid to offer the Taliban an alternative but also an attempt to garner brownie points in a competition with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for religious soft power in the Muslim world and international recognition as an icon of an autocratic, yet 'moderate' interpretation of Islam. Hoping for Taliban moderation may, however, be wishful thinking. "Policies are pitched at the group's lowest common denominator to preserve concord. That makes it difficult for the Taliban to change," as *The Economist* noted in October 2021.

Al-Khater suggested that the failure of the international community to lay out a roadmap for the Taliban was part of the problem. As he stated:

What is it that we're asking from the Taliban? I know that many of us, including ourselves, we put out statements, general statements about women's education, about inclusive government, but is there a piece of paper that is endorsed by the international community that says, "This is what we expect from you. This is roughly the timeline, and this is what you're getting in return?" This has not happened yet, and it's adding complexity over the complicated situation.

As a result, Afghanistan has become the latest arena where religious soft power meets defense, security, and counterterrorism policy. The complexity of that space was evident in the balancing act that Saudi Arabia performed as it sought to distance Islam as practiced in the Kingdom from the Taliban's interpretation of the faith.

Against the backdrop of the rivalry over the ability to project religious soft power, the stakes in Afghanistan are highest for Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both wishing to clearly distance themselves from the Taliban, the UAE competes with Qatar in having made significant progress on women's rights, while Saudi Arabia has substantially enhanced women's professional and social opportunities since the rise

of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Yet, alongside Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the only countries to recognize the first Taliban government in 1996. Saudi Arabia, moreover, created the Taliban cradle by funding and arming the mujahedeen, helping accelerate the 1980s Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal recently distinguished Wahhabism, the kingdom's ultra-conservative strand of Islam, and Deobandism—another ultra-conservative interpretation of the faith that originated in India—which constitutes the theological wellspring of the Taliban.

Media reports suggested that Prince Turki secretly met Taliban leaders in August 2021. He unsuccessfully sought to convince the group to moderate its policies and put flesh on the notion of a changed Taliban 2.0. As head of Saudi intelligence from 1979 to 2001, Prince Turki dealt with the mujahedeen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and sought to persuade the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden after Al-Qaeda bombed American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

The need to distance Islam as practiced in conservative Gulf states from the Taliban interpretation of the faith takes on added significance amid doubts about America's reliability, reinforced by

its withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is where religious soft power meets defense and security policy in a court of public opinion that may not delve into the nuanced differences between Wahhabism and Deobandism.

TESTING TALIBAN COMMITMENTS

The Taliban willingness and ability to control militants on Afghan soil may be put to the test sooner than expected. It's only a matter of time before China knocks on Haqqani's door demanding the extradition of Uyghur fighters.

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The Taliban, in a potential bid to preempt a Chinese demand for extradition, have reportedly moved Uyghur fighters out of Badakhshan, the Afghan area that shares a 76-kilometre border with China. The Uyghurs were relocated to Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan. The relocation constituted a copycat of what the Taliban did when they were in power before 2001. They were replaced by ethnic Tajik fighters, like their brethren on the problematic borders between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, armed with recently captured American-made equipment. The maneuvers belie earlier Taliban claims that all Uyghur fighters had left Afghanistan.

The replacement appeared to be part of a much larger fortification of the Tajik border involving the dispatch of thousands of fighters to Badakhshan and the neighboring province of Takhar that borders on Tajikistan to counter what the Taliban called "possible threats."

At the same time, China appeared to be stepping up its drone surveillance activity using an undeclared forward base in Badakhshan that has been manned by Chinese and Tajik forces and no Afghan contingent since the Taliban took Kabul in mid-August 2021. Tajikistan has since offered full control of the bases in exchange for military aid. It also authorized the construction of a second Chinese base on the Tajik side of the Afghan border.

A Chinese demand for extradition would be challenging not only because of the Taliban's consistent rejection of requests for the expulsion of militants that have helped them in their battles. The Taliban already made that clear two decades ago when they accepted the risk of a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 by repeatedly refusing to hand over Osama bin Laden. There is little in Taliban 2.0 that suggests that this has changed. If Haneef Atamar,

the foreign minister in the U.S.-backed Afghan government of former president Ashraf Ghani, is to be believed, Uyghurs, including one-time fighters in Syria, contributed significantly to the Taliban's most recent battlefield successes in northern Afghanistan.

A demand to extradite Uyghurs to China would also be challenging because Haqqani himself is a wanted man, with a \$5 million U.S. bounty on his head. Moreover, the United Nations has sanctioned Haqqani's prime minister, Mullah Hasan Akhund, and various other members of the caretaker government.

"It's hard to see a wanted man turning over someone who is wanted for similar reasons," said a Western diplomat.

Likewise, honoring extradition requests could threaten unity within the Taliban ranks. "Taliban actions against foreign jihadist groups to appease neighboring countries would be especially controversial because there is quite a widespread sense of solidarity and comradeship with those who fought alongside the Taliban for so long," said Afghanistan scholar Antonio Giustozzi.

Unanswered is the question of whether and why China would go along with

an unspoken international consensus not to seek extraditions if the Taliban keep their word about not striking targets beyond Afghanistan. Assertions that 35 Uyghur militants escaped Afghan prisons during the chaos of the Afghan takeover are likely to call into

question any confidence China may have had in the Taliban ability to police foreign militants.

Counterterrorism experts and diplomats, moreover, argue that if forced, the Taliban would quietly let foreign militants leave their country rather than hand them over. That would make it

difficult to monitor these individuals. Haqqani's interior ministry announced in early October 2021 that it has begun issuing Afghan passports, prompting concern that militants would be among the beneficiaries.

China has in recent years successfully demanded the extradition of its Turkish Muslim citizens from countries like Egypt, Malaysia, and Thailand and has pressured many more to do so, despite them not being suspected of participation in the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). The UN Security Council had designated TIP's predecessor, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, as a

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terrorist organization. There is little reason to assume that China would make Afghanistan—a refuge from Syria for Uyghur fighters—the exception.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi made that clear when he hinted at possible extradition requests during July 2021 talks with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the Taliban and the new government's first deputy prime minister. Wang demanded that the Taliban break relations with all militant groups and take resolute action against the TIP. While the TIP may constitute China's major concern, it also worries that China could be targeted in other countries in South and Central Asia by groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), more commonly known as the Pakistani Taliban.

The Taliban have probably destroyed any image of reliability in the eyes of the Chinese by demonstrating early on that they speak a different language than the international community, even when they use the same words. The Taliban made clear that their definition of inclusivity was very different than that of other international stakeholders. The Taliban formed an overwhelmingly ethnic, all-male government that was anything but inclusive by the universally agreed meaning of the word. Adding fuel to the fire, Haqqani and his colleagues,

including the new military chief of staff Qari Fasihuddin Badakhshani—a Tajik and one of only three non-Pashtuns in the new 33-member government structure—is believed to have close ties to Uyghur, Pakistani, and militants from other countries.

DISAPPOINTMENT GALORE

Already, China is signaling, as is Russia, that it has very few illusions about the Taliban.

Already, China is signaling, as is Russia, that it has very few illusions about the Taliban. Russia has twice held military exercises in different formats near

Afghanistan's borders with its Central Asian neighbors since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. A bilateral exercise with Tajikistan and, more recently, by the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), were designed to caution the Taliban and reinforce Russia's security role in the region.

Contradictory statements by the Taliban and members of the ousted government of President Ashraf Ghani about whether members of the TIP were in Afghanistan "confirms largely Chinese-Taliban relations really as not very warm," said Niva Yau Tsz Yan, an expert on China's relations with Central Asian nations. "Despite China's various strategies to kind of build this friendship with the Taliban over the last ten years, it hasn't worked."

China's more skeptical attitude was evident when it dropped its reference to Islam in calls for a new Afghan government to pursue stable and productive economic policies only a day after the Taliban took Kabul. China has also subtly suggested that Afghanistan's mineral riches, including copper, lithium, and rare earths such as cerium, lanthanum, and neodymium, may be less attractive than meets the eye at first glance.

China scholars Matthew P. Funaiole and Brian Hart noted that China has learnt the risks of doing business in Afghanistan the hard way. In 2007, two state-owned companies, Jiangxi Copper and China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC), signed a \$2.8 billion deal for a 30-year lease to mine copper at Mes Aynak. The companies reportedly spent \$371 million toward developing the area before putting it on hold amid allegations of corruption and concerns that countless artefacts and ancient Buddhist and Zoroastrian structures could be destroyed. In the same vein, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a 25-year deal to develop an oil field in Amu Darya. Production started in 2012 but was halted a year later.

Similarly, Afghanistan's rare earths are 'light' and more easily found elsewhere, including in China, which is believed to have 37 percent of global reserves that are economically viable and more easily accessible for extraction, including the

world's single largest reserve in Inner Mongolia. Likewise, China's efforts to meet its demand for lithium are focused on Latin America's 'Lithium Triangle,' home to 53 percent of the world's economically viable reserves, rather than Afghanistan, which is closer to what was once described by the Pentagon as the potential

"Saudi Arabia of lithium."

By the same token, Taliban hopes of benefitting from China's infrastructure, telecommunications, and energy-driven Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are unlikely to be fulfilled. China and Afghanistan agreed in 2016 to cooperate on BRI. Afghanistan was a year later included in the initiative as part of the \$45 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China's single largest BRI investment. Yet China never extended that investment into Afghanistan. The nearest China came to looking at infrastructure in Afghanistan were studies on the potential joint development of railroads.

Analysts read China's insistence on the Taliban maintaining good relations with all its neighbors as an effort to position Central Asian nations as a counterweight to the baggage that comes with ties to Pakistan and Iran.

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China worries that Taliban discrimination and persecution of Hazara Shiites, who account for 20 percent of the Afghan population, could persuade the Islamic Republic to covertly support resistance to the group's rule.

China is also concerned that the Taliban will be reticent about entertaining Chinese-backed Pakistani requests for the handover of members of the TTP. The TTP last year joined forces with several other militant Pakistani groups, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a violently anti-Shiite Sunni Muslim supremacist organization. The Shehryar Mehsud Group rejoined the TTP in October 2021, pledging allegiance to Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, the TTP's emir.

China fears that the fallout of the Taliban's sweep across Afghanistan could affect China beyond Afghanistan's borders, perhaps no more so than in Pakistan, a major focus of the People's Republic's largest BRI-related

investment. The killing of nine Chinese nationals in a July 2021 attack on a bus transporting Chinese workers to the construction site of a dam in the northern mountains of Pakistan raised the specter of Afghanistan-based religious

militants jihadists targeting China. Until now, it was mainly Baloch nationalists that targeted the Chinese in Pakistan.

EYEING PAKISTAN

The attack occurred amid fears that the Taliban victory would bolster ultra-conservative religious sentiment in Pakistan where many celebrated the group's success in the hope that

it would boost chances for austere religious rule in the world's second-most populous Muslim-majority state. "Our jihadis will be emboldened. They will say that 'if America can be beaten, what is the Pakistan army to stand in our way?'" said a senior Pakistani official.

Scholar Muhammad Amir Rana suggested that it may not just be jihadis who are emboldened. "Pakistan's religious landscape is fertile for radical ideologies. As the moderates struggle to make themselves relevant in society, the clergy declares them 'innovators' or *bid-dati*, who, they say, reject the traditional tenets of the religion," Rana argued.

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The clergy in Pakistan is largely literalist in its understanding of religion and takes pride in being the so-called custodian of tradition. A literalist mind sees the world through very narrow lenses [...]. Such a mindset is not healthy for the legal, jurisprudential, and academic discourse of religion, more worryingly when it becomes a political stakeholder it tends to absorb radical tendencies easily.

Indicating concern in Beijing, China has delayed the signing of a framework agreement on industrial cooperation that would have accelerated the implementation of projects that are part of CPEC, a crown jewel of BRI.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid recently kept the Taliban's relationship with the TTP ambiguous, a move seen as de facto rejection of Pakistani extradition requests. "The issue of the TTP is one that Pakistan will have to deal with, not Afghanistan. It is up to Pakistan, and Pakistani Islamic scholars and religious figures, not the Taliban, to decide on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their war and to formulate a strategy in response," Mujahid said during an interview on a Pakistani television program. The spokesman stopped short of saying the Taliban would abide by a decision of the scholars. Afghan sources suggest that the Taliban advised the TTP to restrict their fight to Pakistani soil and have offered to negotiate an amnesty and the return of the Pakistani militants with the Pakistani government.

The TTP is a coalition of Pashtun Islamist groups with close ties to the Afghan Taliban that last year joined forces with several other militant Pakistani groups, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Intelligence sources estimate that it has up to 5,000 fighters in Afghanistan.

"Our fight against Pakistan will continue until we establish it as an Islamic state. We will not spare their dollar-dependent soldiers and politicians," said TTP commander Molvi Faeer Mohamad. A wanted man in Pakistan, Mohamad was speaking to Al Jazeera after having been freed from jail in one of the Taliban's many prison breaks. The U.S.-backed government of Ashraf Ghani had refused to extradite Mohamad to Pakistan. Rejecting a Pakistani government offer to grant TTP members amnesty and negotiate, the group's spokesman Muhammad Khurasani insisted "amnesty is generally offered to those who commit crimes, but we are quite proud of our struggle. We can pardon the Pakistani government if it pledges to implement Sharia rule in the country."

Increasingly, the TTP is framing its struggle as a nationalist Pashtun rather than a jihadist quest. "We will free our land from the occupation of the Pakistani forces and we will never surrender to their atrocious rule. We want to live on our land according to Islamic laws and tribal traditions. We are Muslims and Pashtuns," said TTP leader

Nur Wali Mehsud in March 2021. In separate remarks three months later, Mehsud insisted that "the independence of Pakhtunkhwa and the Pashtun tribal areas is national and religious for all Pashtuns." Pakistan catered to Pashtun identity when it renamed the North-West Frontier Province as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2010. The region straddles the 2,600 kilometer-border, named the Durand Line by the British, which has never been recognized by Afghanistan.

A few analysts have pointed to what would constitute the greatest threat to Pakistan: the potential coalescing of a campaign of TTP violence with the notion of merging Pashtun-populated areas of Pakistan with Afghanistan. The intertwining of Pashtun national identity and Islam resounds in a Pashto poem quoted by Anas Haqqani, a senior Taliban official and brother of Sirajuddin Haqqani: "The essence of my Pashto is so Islamic. Were there no Islam, I would still be a Muslim." Haqqani quoted the couplet while discussing Pashtun identity with no reference to geopolitics.

Former UK ambassador to Pakistan Tim Willasey-Wilsey predicted that Pashtuns of the Afghan Taliban will, after a few years in power, find common cause with their Pashtun kinsmen in Pakistan. [...] There are plenty of Pakistani Pashtuns who would prefer the

whole of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa [i.e., the former North-West Frontier Province] to be part of a wider Pashtunistan.

Afghans in the Pashtun-majority south of Afghanistan, the Taliban's cradle, have welcomed the security and semblance of law and order that the group's victory has brought about. It was that service provision that first propelled the Taliban in the 1990s to be a force to be reckoned with, in line with Israeli Golan Brigade soldier-turned-economics professor Eli Berman's thesis that the world's most sustainable militant groups trace their roots to service provision. "If we civilians hadn't given them bread, the Taliban wouldn't have won the war," said Mohammad Daoud, a resident of Muezzin Qala, a town in Helmand Province.

Some analysts have privately argued that a Pakistan-dominated Pashtunistan embedded in a broader Asian confederation would counter the various threats Pakistan is concerned about, including the TTP, ultra-conservatism, and secession. The views of these analysts embody the Pakistani military and government's worst fears: the undermining of Islam as Pakistan's glue by ethnic cleavages. It is a fear that was first expressed by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the country's founder, who warned against the "poison of provincialism." The fear was reinforced by the secession of predominantly Bengal East Pakistan to form Bangladesh in 1971.

“The time is now ripe for America and its allies to marginalize the remnants of radical Islamdom in South-Central Asia as a first step in generating a mega-confederation of free peoples extending from Pashtunistan in the West all the way to and including Indonesia in the East,” said a former Western government official-turned-scholar.

The key step for Pakistan in countering the extremism of radical Muslims trained by the Saudi Wahhabis is simply to absorb the western half of Pashtunistan, which includes the southern two-thirds of Afghanistan, and the eastern half which makes up most of the western third of Pakistan, into a new Province of Pashtunistan in a greater Pakistan confederation as a model for the world and especially for the looser confederation extending across India to Indonesia.)

In 2020, Pakistan cracked down on the Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement, or PTM, a non-violent protest movement demanding rights for Pashtuns in Pakistan’s former Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Pakistan is completing a physical barrier to any changes along the Durand Line that separates it from Afghanistan, with the construction of a \$500 million wall.

The wall, conceived to keep militants and potential refugees on the Afghan side of the border, is being bolstered by state-of-the-art surveillance technology and multiple fortresses. Pakistan

closed 75 of its 78 border crossings in the wake of the Taliban takeover. Much of the border is mountainous and, in the words of a former Pakistani military officer, “good territory for guerrillas to operate and hide in.”

The notion of Pashtunistan or a confederation that includes archrivals Pakistan and India as well as countries as diverse as Indonesia may be far-fetched, to say the least, but is certain to ring alarm bells in Islamabad. Those bells rang louder after Taliban official Sher Mohammed Abbas Stanekzai declared in a rare statement on foreign policy that “we give due importance to our political, economic, and trade ties with India and we want these ties to continue. We are looking forward to working with India in this regard.”

Concern about a Pashtun nationalism that could threaten Pakistan’s territorial integrity underwrites criticism of Prime Minister Khan’s description of the Pakistani Taliban as an expression of Pashtun nationalism rather than religious ideology. “This argument is dangerously flawed. The TTP is a terror outfit that fuels its narrative with religious aspirations instead of nationalistic ones. [...] The TTP’s acts of terror should not be framed in a manner that may accord it an ounce of legitimacy, especially at a time when it has yet again unleashed violence”—to quote from a recent editorial in *Dawn*, Pakistan’s foremost English-language newspaper.

Critics charge caution against reading too much into the predominance of ethnic Pashtuns among the Taliban. Linking “the Taliban, Pashtun nationalism, and religious fanaticism [...] represents a gross falsification of the lived Afghan socio-political realities at worst, and an inability to grasp the same at best. Undeniably the Taliban’s core leadership is made of Pashtuns; however, to translate that into the Taliban by default representing Pashtun social, cultural, and political ethos is empirically flawed,” said international affairs scholar Bilquees Daud. Daud argued that the Taliban have rejected two tenants of Pashtun nationalism:

Pashtunwali, the Pashtun’s secular tribal code that predates Islam, and the notion of a jirga, a council, which arrives at decisions by consensus and has no head. The Taliban declared the jirga system to be un-Islamic a quarter of a century ago.

Nonetheless, scholar and author Pervez Hoodbhoy implicitly appeared to suggest that in some ways the train may have already left the station. “Like it or not, Af-Pak has become reality. Despised in Pakistan because of its American origin, this term rings true. Geographical proximity is now augmented by the ideological proximity of rulers in both countries.

Taliban-style thinking is bound to spread through the length and breadth of Pakistan,” Hoodbhoy said. AfPak was a term used by the U.S. government to signal that Afghanistan and Pakistan constituted a single theater of operations in the War on Terror.

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Pessimists suggest that may already be happening. Jamia Hafsa, the girls madrasa associated with Islamabad’s notorious Red Mosque, has recently flown the Taliban flag from its roof on several occasions while Maulana Abdul Aziz, the radical cleric associated with the

mosque, was photographed carrying a weapon. The mosque and its madrasa were raided in 2007 by the Pakistani security forces. At least 100 people were killed in a week-long stand-off with militants inside the compound.

“The coming of the Taliban was an act of God,” Abdul Aziz said. “The whole world has seen that they defeated America and its arrogant power. It will definitely have a positive effect on our struggle to establish Islamic rule in Pakistan, but our success is in the hands of God.”

SHOWING THEM A FIST

Recent attacks on Pakistani military personnel by the TTP notwithstanding, neither the Taliban nor

Al-Qaeda are believed to want to risk a repeat of actions that prompted the 2011 U.S. invasion. "Al-Qaeda would not like to waste the Taliban's victory again but might like to use their presence in the country to strengthen their regional affiliates in the subcontinent, Yemen, Somalia, and the Sahel," said Abdul Basit, a research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

Similarly, Sir John Sawers, former head of the UK's MI6 intelligence agency, argued that

the Taliban will want to focus on consolidating its position in the country. They've also got some important relationships they have got to get right, particularly Pakistan, then Iran and China. All are complicated and none are going to be helped if they become the base of international terrorism.

The determination to operate in ways unlikely to spark the wrath of the United States without making an absolute rupture inevitable has created the basis for bridging theological and political differences between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Fine points of theology have prompted hardline Salafis, including the IS and at times elements of Al-Qaeda, to question the Taliban's

Muslim integrity. Politically, the Taliban are nationalists who want to integrate their Afghan emirate into the community of nations. Unlike Al-Qaeda, the Taliban do not seek to dismantle the existing world order.

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China's dilemma in dealing with the Taliban is reinforced by the fact that Russia with Central Asia as a buffer and a military base in Tajikistan feels less urgency in settling the Afghan issue. As a result, Russia rejected a Chinese

request that it recognizes the Taliban government and allows China to go second. "China is running out of instruments to engage with the Taliban," said Yau, the China scholar.

Instead, Russia is hedging its bets, as is Iran. Both countries had helped the Taliban as they rolled across the country in the months before the American withdrawal. The two countries provided funding and weapons and helped them cut deals with groups that paved their road to Kabul. It was those deals that made the difference in the final Taliban push for the defeat of American forces. "We did not anticipate the snowball effect caused by the deals that the Taliban commanders struck with local leaders," U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told the U.S. Senate.

Russia and Iran were, however, taken aback when the Taliban refused to form a truly inclusive government rather than one that was

overwhelmingly Pashtun at the expense of ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Shiite Hazaras. The prominence in the government of the Haqqani network, with its history of brutality towards Shiites, was particularly galling for Iran. Giustozzi, the Afghanistan scholar, suggested that Iranian concern about the Taliban predates the recent formation of their government and started with the earlier arrival of nationalist Iranian Baluchi fighters of Jaysh

ul Adl, a group that has intermittently attacked targets in the Iranian province of Balochistan while operating from Pakistan and with the support of the Haqqani network.

Russia was displeased with the breakdown in talks on a future government between the Taliban, former president Hamid Karzai, and former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah. Moscow has signaled its dissatisfaction by holding a series of joint war games in recent

weeks with troops from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the latter of which hosts a Russian military base and openly supports ethnic Tajik opponent of the

Pakistan is completing a physical barrier to any changes along the Durand Line that separates it from Afghanistan, with the construction of a \$500 million wall. The wall, conceived to keep militants and potential refugees on the Afghan side of the border, is being bolstered by state-of-the-art surveillance technology and multiple fortresses.

primarily Pashtun Taliban. The drills, which involved 2,500 troops from the three nations and some 500 military vehicles as well as artillery, were held close to the Afghan border and included Russian planes striking mock militant camps.

"If the logic of the United States is that its military presence might enhance security of Central Asia, the natural response for Moscow is that 'we can take care of

it, we have done it for a long period of time,'" said Andrey Kortunov, director-general of the Russian International Affairs Council. General Anatoly Sidorov, commander of the forces involved in the exercise, emphasized that it was deliberately a high-profile undertaking. He pointed out that his troops were "all visible, they are not hiding." Russia's approach, added Daniel Kiselyov, editor of the Central Asia-focused *Fergana*: "You can talk to the Taliban but you also need to show them a fist." ●