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Map No. 3958 Rev. 7, UNITED NATIONS
 Department of Economic and Social Affairs
 Geographical Section

Afghanistan, Map No. 3958 Rev. 7, June 2011, United Nations

Introduction

The Afghanistan Monitor is a regular publication from Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Pakistan that covers the political, economic and humanitarian situation since the Taliban takeover. Each issue features experts' analysis of the country's latest development. The third issue summarizes the events from January to March 2023.

Since August 2021, the situation in Afghanistan has continuously evolved with the attainment of power by the Afghan Taliban. Having been in power for nearly 20 months, the group appears to have consolidated their position as the de facto and not de jure political authority in Afghanistan. The Taliban have come a long way from the 1990s when they were widely regarded as anomalies in the modern world of politics. While they have exhibited certain positive changes in terms of attaining overall security throughout the country,¹ pragmatism regarding the economy, and clamping down on corruption and poppy cultivation, concerns continue to remain regarding political and social cohesion, and the development of social, political, and economic structures.

The continued violation of women's rights, the implementation of authoritarian policies, the lack of an inclusive government, and the Taliban's sheer reluctance to honor

basic yet fundamental human rights does not only cast a shadow over the Taliban's ability to be a legitimate political entity but also impedes international engagement with Afghanistan, limiting international organizations' ability to respond to one of the world's largest humanitarian crisis; with two-thirds of Afghanistan's 28.3 million population in dire need of humanitarian assistance.² While overall security has improved, the threat of terrorism persists, particularly, the presence of transnational terrorist groups based in Afghanistan, such as the Daesh regional affiliate Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKAP) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), continue to challenge the future of Afghanistan and the region at large.

While the Taliban continue to be the only recognizable de facto authorities in Afghanistan, concerns persist regarding weak governance, particularly the group's lack of expertise in running ministries and utilizing resources effectively. In addition to internal constraints/shortcomings, the Taliban are confronted with challenges emanating from a fragile economy, weak institutions, and continuing humanitarian crisis. According to the UN, an estimated 20 million people face acute hunger in Afghanistan, with 6 million people at 'emergency' levels (one step away from famine), resulting in one of the world's highest figures in absolute terms.³

The persistent oppression of and discrimination against women is of grave concern. Pledges of reform made by the Taliban supporting women in public life and their right to education and work have been replaced by a shrinking space for Afghan women. Moreover, pledges by the group pertaining to inclusivity and adequate representation of ethnic minorities remain unfulfilled. Mounting restrictions on women by the group has led to the US imposing new visa restrictions on certain existing Taliban members, non-state security group members and others (whose names have not been disclosed) believed to be involved in repressing the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.⁴

The Taliban's rigidity and refusal to deliver on their pledges of reform agreed to in Doha in 2020, is not only creating a sense of fatigue and frustration within the international community towards the group, but is further adding to their international isolation, dampening the group's aspiration to be a legitimate entity.

Political Situation

Since August 2021, the Taliban have continued to function as an interim or de facto government,

and not de jure, governing as an authoritative entity whose policies are highly influenced by their limited interpretation of Sharia. The current interim set up is based on the same system of governance exercised by the Taliban during their stint in power in the 1990s, with a supreme leader and a prime minister heading the government and additional deputy prime minister posts.

While the group has yet to establish a recognized and formal structure of governance, it continues to govern through ministries established by the former Afghan government.* Moreover, the Taliban claim to have retained around 500,000 members of the previous administration, while at the same time increasing the size of the public sector.⁵

It appears that this current system of governance set up by the Taliban - while termed as 'interim' - will continue for the foreseeable future. Moreover, the previous Afghan constitution of 2004 has been suspended by the Taliban, who are yet to formulate a new constitution.

The Taliban's cabinet remains exclusively male, lacking any female representation. Although the group has included a few 'token' members from the Uzbek, Tajik and

* The Taliban replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs by the Ministry of Vice and Virtue. Subsequently no other ministry has been replaced or abolished.

Hazara ethnic community, the set up continues to be overwhelmingly Pashtun, thus failing to represent an inclusive setup the group had initially agreed upon.⁶

Despite flaws in the Taliban's structure of governance and ethnic makeup, the group has been able to establish relative stability and centralized authority throughout the country, under the leadership of Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's supreme leader.

Mullah Akhundzada continues to exert complete control and influence over the group and the functioning of the government, including key issues, appointments, and policy decisions.⁷ On March 18, 2023, Mullah Akhundzada issued a decree warning member of the group to avoid appointing individuals based on nepotism and personal relations, further declaring the sacking of Taliban officials' relatives appointed in state institutions.⁸

Since the establishment of the interim set up on September 7, 2021, the Taliban have focused on governance, institutional changes, remodeling and building state institutions, including security institutions. In an important development, Mullah Akhundzada, for the first time, visited the 215 Azam Army Corps and related units in Helmand. During his visit Akhundzada not only assured the

Army Corps of the support of the Taliban, but emphasized the need for the military forces to protect the country's territorial integrity and also to provide help in serving the people.⁹ Akhundzada's visit is being viewed as a conscious effort on the part of the group to quell any reports of differences and divisions within the group as well as to strengthen morale of the security forces.

Exerting his executive powers, Mullah Haibatullah made some institutional changes which include a decree transferring the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre's jurisdiction to the Taliban's Military Court,¹⁰ re-establishing the National Procurement Commission, previously abolished by the Taliban¹¹ and the transfer of the Director General for Huqooq (rights) from the Ministry of Justice to the Supreme Court.¹² The Taliban's Ministry of Interior has also announced the establishment of 25 new districts across the country to improve access to services,¹³ resulting in a total of 419 districts.¹⁴

Apart from administrative issues, in January 2023, many changes were made within the interim Taliban cabinet, where senior Taliban officials were reshuffled, such as the Taliban's former acting finance minister, Mullah Hidayatullah Badri, who was appointed as governor of Afghanistan's central bank.¹⁵ Subsequently, additional appointments were

made, including five deputy ministers in the Ministries of Higher Education, Urban Development and Land, for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, and the Afghanistan Natural Disaster Management Authority. A new governor for Kabul as well as 15 district governors were also appointed.¹⁶

While the Taliban have yet to deliver on forming a truly representative government, the group did appoint Abdul Hameed Khorasani, an ethnic Tajik and Panjsher's former deputy police chief as the new district governor of Ahmadabad in Paktia Province.¹⁷

Moreover, in a continuous effort to encourage Afghans to return back to the country, the Taliban's 'Commission for the Return of and Communications with Former Afghan Officials and Political Figures,' also referred to as the 'Commission of Liaison and Repatriation of Afghan Personalities', established in March 2022, claims that around 513 Afghan figures including former ministers, governors, and deputy governors, have returned to Afghanistan as a result of the work of the Commission.¹⁸

Subsequently, in an effort to muster up support for the group from within the country, the Taliban have been regularly engaging with political, ethnic, and religious groups at various levels. Moreover, the process of establishing Ulema Councils,¹⁹ to oversee the functioning of the Taliban's provincial administrations* has continued. So far 22 Ulema councils have been established.²⁰

In January, Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi, the administrative deputy prime minister of the Taliban, met with a delegation of prominent Shiite scholars and leaders, headed by Muhammad Hassan Sharifi Bakhabi, who is a prominent Shia cleric and former member of the Afghan parliament from Sar-e-Pul.²¹ During the meeting, Mr. Balkhabi while expressing support for the Taliban, also asked the government to pay special attention to the needs of the Shia community as well as implementation of development projects in Daikundi and Bamiyan provinces and other Shia areas.²²

According to a UNSC Report, 23 armed groups that oppose the Taliban's rule are operating in Afghanistan,²³ a claim that the Taliban reject.²⁴ These groups include the

* Ulema councils have been established by a decree of Mullah Akhunzada, to oversee the functioning of the local government, advise local officials on governance and handle legal issues through direct contact with Taliban leadership. The councils are made up of religious scholars and elders of the respective province.

National Resistance Front (NRF) led by Ahmad Massoud, the Afghanistan Islamic National and Liberation Movement, launched on February 16, 2022, a solely Pashtun anti-Taliban group, headed by Abdul Mateen Sulaimankhail, a former Afghan Army special forces commander.²⁵ And the Afghanistan Freedom Front, established on March 11, 2022, allegedly headed by General Yasin Zia, a former defense minister and chief of general staff.²⁶ More recently, Rahmatullah Nabil, the former Head of Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, launched a new political party, the Afghanistan National Liberty Party (ANLP) in January 2023.²⁷ According to Nabil, the aim of the ANLP is 'not only to oppose the Taliban but work for greater cohesion among active political and civil groups by presenting a roadmap for a transition period'.²⁸

Although these anti-Taliban groups remain steadfast in their opposition towards the group, they have however, failed to garner sufficient domestic and international support against the Taliban.²⁹ Despite claims by the NRF regarding the launch of operations against the Taliban in Panjshir, Kapisa, Helmand, Nangarhar, Nuristan, Kabul and Kandahar,³⁰ including an attack on the Taliban's special forces training center in Kabul

on March 28, 2023, killing several Taliban,³¹ 'armed opposition attacks and armed clashes with the Taliban have continued to decline', according to the UNSC report.³² Therefore, it appears that for the time being these groups do not pose any serious threat to the group.³³

While the Taliban have not given details, according to the group's Ministry of Justice, so far, 73 political parties have received permits from the Taliban;* however, the leaders of many of these parties are outside Afghanistan.³⁴

While the Taliban as a group have remained united, differences over policy issues, particularly those pertaining to girl's education and banning women from working in NGOs continue to highlight internal differences and divisions.

Initially, Anas Haqqani, brother of the Taliban's acting Interior Minister Serajuddin Haqqani, expressed dissatisfaction regarding the country's situation in a poem after the group banned women's education.³⁵ Since then, other prominent members have also begun to publicly express their dissatisfaction. The Taliban's acting defense minister, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, in an event marking the 34th anniversary of the Soviet withdrawal

* For a complete list of Political Parties that have received permits from the Ministry of Justice please see <https://moj.gov.af/en/registered-political-parties>.

from Afghanistan, held in Kabul on February 15, 2023, said that the group 'should always listen to the legitimate demands of the people.'³⁶

Moreover, Serajuddin Haqqani, the acting Interior Minister, while speaking at a religious gathering in Khost, in February 2023, without mentioning names, criticized the group's leaders for 'monopolizing power, which could no longer be tolerated'.³⁷ He further went on to state that the Taliban administration should 'desist from adopting policies that would drive a wedge between the [ruling] system and the people'.³⁸ In a meeting with a visiting Ulema delegation from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to Kabul in March, Serajuddin Haqqani reaffirmed the Islamic Emirate's commitment to both men and women's education in the country.³⁹

Serajuddin Haqqani is among a handful of Taliban leaders* who have also been voicing support for women's rights, including their right to education. Thus, despite the Taliban's denial of reports pertaining to internal splits within the group,⁴⁰ apparently differences have been growing over policy issues, and public criticism from senior members is a testament to this - something unseen within the group in the past.

However, despite visible strains, strict adherence to the group's ideology and respect for the supreme leader appears to be preventing these differences from splitting the group.⁴¹ At best, differences will remain limited to statements alone, as the group continues to function as a relatively cohesive entity, where allegiance continues to be centered in Kandahar.⁴²

This was highlighted by the remarks of chief Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, while talking to reporters, in Kabul, Zabiullah not only dismissed reports regarding internal rifts within the group, but also stated that 'the Taliban's Islamic ethics forbid the group from publicly criticizing or vilifying the emir, a minister or a government official, ...instead criticism should be conveyed privately and safely, so no one else hears it.' Subsequently, the deputy Taliban minister of justice, Abdul Ghani Faiq, while speaking at a graduation ceremony of defense attorneys in Kabul, warned officials against undermining the ruling dispensation.⁴³

* Prominent Taliban members who have voiced support for women's rights include ShahabUddin Delawar, Abbas Stanakzai, Anas Haqqani, and Mullah Yakoob.

Ongoing Projects under the De Facto Authorities

Within governance, while the primary focus of the Taliban has been on exploring avenues to generate economic activity, by supporting local and foreign investors,⁴⁴ the group claims to have also been actively focusing on infrastructure development, constructing and repairing roads, highways, bridges, and canals, development projects revolving around agriculture, water, minerals, mining, as well as health and education.

Without mentioning details, the deputy spokesperson of the group, Bilal Karimi, stated in March that the Taliban had invested in major mining and water management projects in different parts of the country.⁴⁵

According to the Taliban's acting commerce minister, Haji Nooruddin Aziz, in January 2023, 40 companies took part in an auction for an iron mine in Herat and a lead mine in Ghor province. The outcome of the auction is yet to be announced.⁴⁶ Moreover, according to the group, Afghanistan's mining sector, which has been valued at more than \$1 trillion has immense potential to attract foreign investment as a number of foreign firms have shown interest

in investing.⁴⁷ Despite the Taliban's appeal to attract domestic and foreign investment, there is hesitation on the part of potential financiers to invest within Afghanistan due to political uncertainty, sanctions, lack of transparency and unpredictability regarding the Taliban's political, economic, and trade policies.⁴⁸

According to the Taliban's National Procurement Commission (NPC) under the Deputy Prime Minister's Office for Economic Affairs, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund, projects worth \$2 billion (480 billion Afghanis) have been approved in Kabul, Herat, Farah, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Lagman and Balkh, to name a few.⁴⁹ These include the construction and maintenance of roads, dams, electricity, and water supply, as well as the establishment of green areas (parks, public gardens etc.).⁵⁰

In particular, the group has been focusing on the development of the Qosh Tepa Canal project on the Amu River in Balkh. According to the Taliban, over 100 kilometers of canal has been constructed.⁵¹ In March 2023, Uzbekistan expressed its willingness to work with the Taliban through technical teams in order to maximize the benefits of the Qosh Tepa canal project, in addition to other infrastructure projects. This was agreed to during a meeting between an Uzbek delegation headed by Abdulaziz Kamilov, the advisor to the

National Security Council and special representative of the Uzbek President in foreign policy, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund in Kabul on March 22, 2023.⁵² The Qosh Tepa Canal project is of immense significance as it will divert water from the Amu Darya River for irrigation, which according to the Taliban, will convert 550,000 hectares of desert into farmland.⁵³

In January, the Taliban claimed that as a result of the group's decision to prohibit the export of scrap metal, domestic production has increased significantly, which is helping local industry.⁵⁴

To revive the economy, the Taliban government has been actively engaging with a number of international stakeholders in pursuit of seeking foreign investment. In January 2023, the group secured a major deal between its Ministry of Mines and Petroleum and Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC) to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin and develop an oil reserve in the provinces of Faryab, Sar-e Pul, and Jowzjan.⁵⁵ The deal marks the first public commodities extraction deal the Taliban has signed with a foreign company since assuming power in 2021. The 25-year contract with CAPEIC will include a \$150m annual investment, which would increase to \$540m in three years. Moreover, the Taliban will have 20 percent of the

project, which can be increased to 75 percent. It is believed that the project will generate 3,000 jobs.⁵⁶

Subsequently, a Chinese state-owned company is also in talks with the Taliban over the revision of a contract it had signed with the former Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani regarding the Aynak copper mine in Logar.⁵⁷ Although the exact details of the revision remain vague, the Chinese company wants the high fees being charged for power, security, and transportation to be rationalized. The company has reportedly sought the support of the Taliban and requested that the cost of electricity purchased from the national grid be reduced, while also calling for a reduction in the fees for the security and transportation of workers and cargo.

In January 2023, the Taliban's electricity authority, *Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat*, announced extensions of electricity import contracts for 2023 with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan⁵⁸ and Tajikistan.⁵⁹ Similarly, during the twenty sixth meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Economic Cooperation Organization, held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in January 2023 participating members (Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey) stressed the need for engagement with the caretaker government and reiterated their support for assisting reconstruction,

development, and socioeconomic progress in Afghanistan.⁶⁰ Furthermore, in continuation of the former Afghan government's agreements for sending Afghan laborers abroad, the Taliban's Ministry of Public Works had announced in November 2022 that 65,000 Afghan workers would be sent abroad for work, including 15,000 to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to work with livestock.⁶¹ The first batch of these workers left in January 2023.

In order to promote Afghan businesses, a three-day exhibition was held in Kabul in March 2023, where more than 250 investors participated, including 120 women investors.⁶² The Afghan Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce also took part.⁶³ Subsequently, a women-only shopping Centre in Mazar-e-Sharif, previously called Noor was reopened by the Taliban under a new name, Khadijat al Kubra. According to female shop owners, the local administration has lowered the rent of the stalls from \$400 dollars to \$5 to help encourage business.⁶⁴

Apart from infrastructure, the Ministry of Public Health announced a polio vaccination campaign in collaboration with international partners such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Agency, where vaccination will be provided to 9.4 million children under the age of five.⁶⁵

Humanitarian Situation

Afghanistan, whose population stands at 43 million, continues to be suffering from one of the world's largest and most severe humanitarian crises.⁶⁶ The country continues to suffer from economic instability heightened by sanctions, the loss of international assistance and aid, rising inflation, limited means of livelihood, widespread food insecurity, and repercussions of climate change.⁶⁷ According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), a record 28.3 million people, two-thirds of the population, are in need of humanitarian aid, and protection assistance.⁶⁸ Moreover, nearly 20 million people are acutely food-insecure, including more than 6 million who are on the brink of famine.⁶⁹

As estimated by OCHA, the required funds needed to avert the humanitarian crisis for the year 2023 are \$4.6 billion, but so far only \$251 million have been allocated for Afghanistan.⁷⁰

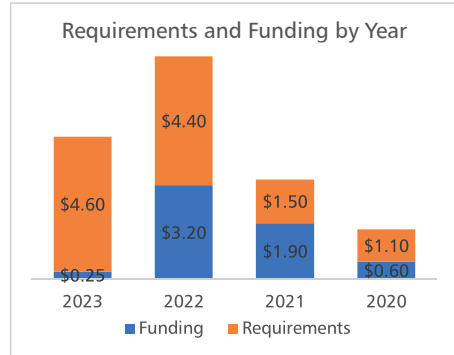
In addition to the existing humanitarian challenge, the Taliban's recent restrictions on women, including the ban on female Afghan NGO staff, have further exacerbated the country's needs.⁷¹ According to Jan Egeland, Secretary General of

the Norwegian Refugee Council, (NRC), the ban on women’s right to work could result in 6 million people falling into famine, 600,000 children without education, 13.5 million people without safe water supply and 14.1 million with no protection services.⁷²

Currently, 8.2 million Afghans, including 2 million registered refugees, are collectively living in five neighboring countries: Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Recently the UN launched the *Regional Refugee Response Plan for the Afghanistan Situation 2023*, which seeks US\$613 million to support Afghans living in these countries.⁷³ According to the UN, more than 70 per cent of these refugees in need are women and children.⁷⁴ Separately, the UN has launched a plan seeking \$4.62 billion to respond to the humanitarian needs of 23.7 million Afghans inside Afghanistan for the year 2023.⁷⁵

It is of note that the Taliban government managed to gain the release of 524 Afghan nationals, including 54 women and 97 children, who were detained in Pakistan due to invalid travel documents. According to the Taliban, expenses of these Afghan nationals were managed by the Afghan embassy in Islamabad.⁷⁶ Similarly, the Taliban was also able to ensure the release of 274 Afghan nationals imprisoned in Iran

(individuals with illegal documents, and those involved in petty crimes) as a result of an agreement between the two countries.⁷⁷



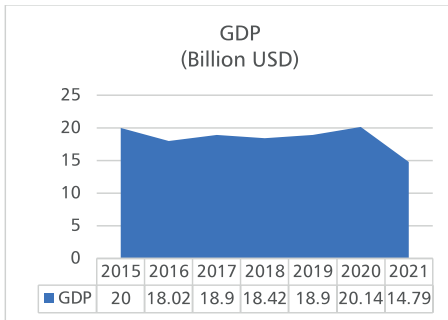
All figures are in billion USD

Economic Situation

Since the Taliban assumed control, they have been trying to revive the economy by clamping down on corruption, generating domestic revenues and domestic production, focusing on economic self-sufficiency through trade and attracting foreign investment. According to *Transparency International*, Afghanistan was ranked 150 in the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) in 2022 out of 180 countries, highlighting that Afghanistan has climbed 24 places compared to 2021, when the country was ranked 174 out of 180 countries.⁷⁸

According to a World Bank report on Afghanistan from January 2023, Afghanistan’s economy has shown overall progress and a positive

assessment of the economy in the first nine months of the fiscal year 2022.⁷⁹ The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Afghanistan was worth 14.79 billion US dollars in 2021, according to official data from the World Bank. The GDP value of Afghanistan represents 0.01 percent of the world economy.



Source: Trading Economic World Bank

According to the World Bank, inflationary pressure in Afghanistan has eased since July 2022, decelerating by half to 9.1 percent in November 2022, while most basic food and non-food items are still widely available.⁸⁰

Between March and December 2022, revenue collection remained strong, reaching \$1.54 billion in line with 2020 results, with revenues mostly coming from taxes collected at borders, and from non-tax sources, coal mining royalties and fees.⁸¹ In terms of trade, Afghan exports went up by 90 percent to \$1.7 billion compared to the full year 2021. Whereas from January to June 2022, Afghanistan imported \$2.9 billion worth of goods.

According to the World Bank assessment, most government workers in Afghanistan have received salaries regularly, with women reporting they are being paid more regularly than men, however overall challenges persisted due to a lack of cash in banks when withdrawing their salaries.⁸²

However, despite these positive news, the country continues to be in a state of crisis.⁸³ According to a report by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the political and economic isolation of Afghanistan by the international community has contributed to the country's current economic crisis and reliance on humanitarian aid.⁸⁴ Besides, efforts have largely focused on Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis and ongoing restrictions on women, whereas "little attention has been given to the challenges involved regarding trade with Afghanistan, and the domestic repressions, such as its negative impact on supply chains of essential goods necessary to sustain the Afghan people".⁸⁵

According to the Taliban's Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MoIC), in 2022, Afghanistan had \$7 billion worth of imports, whereas Afghan exports increased to \$2 billion, with a major proportion of exports going to Pakistan, India, the UAE and Uzbekistan, with domestic products contributing to more than 50 percent of the exports.⁸⁶ Amongst the exports

were agricultural products which contributed 52 percent, followed by minerals accounting for 28 percent and textiles contributing 9 percent.⁸⁷

In an attempt to increase economic activity and attract investors particularly in the fields of mining and agriculture, the Taliban's Ministry of Industry and Commerce claims to have established a service desk at Kabul airport in December 2022, where more than 100 foreign investors have received visas.⁸⁸ According to the ministry, since then, 5,000 permits in the trade and investment sector, as well as 7,000 business passports, have been issued.⁸⁹ In addition, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, is, according to Qudratullah Jamal, Deputy Minister of Industry and Commerce, in the process of establishing five export processing zones in Kabul and in other provinces to increase exports and standardize products.⁹⁰

Moreover, in its efforts to encourage self-sufficiency and attract international trade and investment, according to the Taliban's acting commerce minister Haji Nooruddin Azizi, the Taliban have established a consortium of companies, including 14 Afghan businessmen and foreign companies, some based in Pakistan, Russia, and Iran, which would focus on power, mining and infrastructure projects worth up to \$1 billion.⁹¹

Furthermore, discussions have been underway with China, Iran, and Russia on the establishment of Chinese industrial parks and thermal power plants, with involvement from Iran and Russia.⁹² Under a deal signed with Russia in September 2022,⁹³ Afghanistan has already begun to receive shipments of oil, gas and wheat by road and rail from Russia through Central Asia.⁹⁴ The group has also decided to convert former foreign military bases into special economic zones for businesses, which will be managed by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce.⁹⁵

In an effort to encourage women's participation in the economy of the country, apart from holding trade fairs and exhibitions, and establishing women-only shopping centres, the Taliban claim to have allocated 5 acres of land for a permanent exhibition center and hub for women-led businesses.⁹⁶ According to the Taliban, over 8,000 women work in various sectors, particularly in agriculture and handicrafts.⁹⁷

In an effort to destroy poppy fields ahead of the harvest season, the counter-narcotics department and its Special Forces branch of the Taliban reportedly began an operation in Herat, Ghor, Badghis, Nimroz and Farah provinces. The exercise is in continuation of the poppy ban the group enforced in April 2022. Since the ban has been in place, farmers

have been calling on the Taliban to provide them with alternative agricultural products to poppies, but so far, the group has failed to provide alternate means of livelihoods or crops, yet still the eradication process has been going on.⁹⁸

Foreign Engagement

While the Taliban government has yet to attain international recognition, the de facto authorities continue to engage extensively with countries in the immediate neighborhood as well as the larger international community, through visiting foreign delegations, foreign visits by members of the regime, or their participation in international and regional initiatives.⁹⁹ Since August 2021, the Taliban have participated in more than 375 diplomatic interactions with over 30 countries.¹⁰⁰

Since assuming power in August 2021, the Taliban have taken charge of Afghanistan's diplomatic missions in 14 countries, with around 65 foreign posts, out of 45 embassies and 20 consulates, including in its immediate neighborhood, China, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Russia, Central Asia (except Tajikistan), and other Muslim, Arab and African countries,¹⁰¹ and efforts are underway to take charge of additional diplomatic missions abroad.

Recently, the Taliban made three new appointments to their mission in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, and Iran: Abdur Rahman Feda was appointed as the Taliban's new consul general to the UAE;¹⁰² Gulmat Khan Zadran was appointed as the Afghan Consulate General in Istanbul;¹⁰³ and Fazl Mohammad Haqqani as the Taliban's charge d'affaires in Tehran.¹⁰⁴

However, many Afghan missions, primarily in the West, continue to be run by officials of the previous government.¹⁰⁵ According to the Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid diplomats of the former government have continued their activities in coordination with the Foreign Ministry.¹⁰⁶

During the period of January to March 2023, there were reports of high-level delegations visiting the Taliban in Afghanistan. These delegations included representatives from various regional countries, international organizations, and political groups from Islamic countries, as well as from Russia. The fact that these high-level delegations visited the Taliban suggests a degree of de facto recognition for the group, despite it being labeled a terrorist organization by some countries. However, the implications of these visits for the future of the conflict and the region as a whole remain uncertain. Following are the reported visits in chronological order:

- On January 8, 2023, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund, and acting Minister of the Interior, Serajuddin Haqqani, met with a delegation of Islamic scholars from Egypt, Sudan and Palestine, headed by Mohammad Al-Saghir.¹⁰⁷ Another delegation of Muslim clerics from the UAE paid a visit to Kabul, on March 17, and met Taliban officials including acting Interior Minister Serajuddin Haqqani.
- On January 17, the Taliban's acting Interior Minister, Serajuddin Haqqani, discussed with members of the European Union delegation to Afghanistan, headed by Raffaella Lodice, the EU's humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people and the safety of its aid workers in the country.¹⁰⁸
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, paid a visit to Kabul on January 15, 2023, where he held talks with the Taliban's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.¹⁰⁹ During the meeting, Kabulov assured the Taliban of Moscow's continued support for stability and development in Afghanistan as well as cooperation in different fields, adding that 'Russia does not want to criticize Afghanistan and interfere in its internal affairs like Western countries.'¹¹⁰ He added that Kabul can play an important role in the development of trade between Pakistan, Central Asia, and Russia.¹¹¹
- On January 19, 2023, the UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed and the Executive Director of UN Women Sima Bahous met with Taliban officials in Kabul, where they 'stressed the need to uphold human rights, especially for women and girls.'¹¹²
- On March 22, an Uzbek delegation headed by the advisor to the National Security Council and special representative of the Uzbek President in foreign policy, Abdulaziz Kamilov, paid a visit to Kabul, and held meetings with the Taliban leadership including Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund in Kabul to discuss the issues of expanding bilateral trade, increasing the volume of transportation, and expediting transport and energy projects, such as the Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar railway and the laying of a power line along the Surkhan–Puli-Khumri route.¹¹³

Similarly, a high-ranking defence delegation from Pakistan, including

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, Inter-Services Intelligence Director, General Lt. Gen. Nadeem Anjum, and Pakistan's special envoy on Afghanistan, Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq, paid a visit to Kabul on February 22, 2023, where talks were held with Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Beradar Akhund, Defence Minister Mawlawi Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid, acting Interior Minister Serajuddin Haqqani and Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.¹¹⁴ The visit revolved around security matters including the presence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan and subsequent counter-terrorism measures, particularly after an increase in attacks by the group.¹¹⁵

The Taliban have denied allegations regarding the presence of TTP on Afghan soil, terming such claims as provocative and baseless.¹¹⁶ The Taliban Foreign Ministry condemned the TTP's attack on a mosque in Peshawar in December 2022, which killed more than 100, by referring to the victims as 'martyrs' and saying such an attack was in 'contradiction to the teaching of Islam.'¹¹⁷ This is the first time the group openly condemned an attack by the TTP.

In pursuit of regional cooperation in terms of connectivity, trade, infrastructure, education, professional links, vocational training, and healthcare, thirteen employees of the

Afghanistan Railway Authority (ARA) have been sent to Turkmenistan to undergo a three-month-long technical training.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the Taliban's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the Indian embassy in Kabul had agreed to provide diplomatic training to Afghan Foreign Ministry officials in March 2023.¹¹⁹ On March 21, the Taliban Minister of Education signed an agreement with the Qatar Fund For Development (QFFD) to fund projects aimed to enroll 30,000 out-of-school children, 50 percent of them being girls, in several provinces across Afghanistan.¹²⁰

Security Situation

Numerous reports have documented that Afghanistan has witnessed an overall improvement in terms of security, with significant declines in armed conflict and civilian casualties, paving the way for far greater accessibility of humanitarian aid, people and goods throughout the country.¹²¹ According to the *Crisis Group's Watch List*, Afghanistan has been facing less armed violence compared to the past, in fact, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' Conflict Induced Displacements Dashboard, the number of Afghans forced to flee their homes after the Taliban seized power has been 93 percent

less compared to fourteen months prior.¹²²

However, the presence of transnational terrorist groups, primarily the rising threat posed by the Daesh regional affiliate Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), is a major issue of concern not only for Afghanistan but the immediate neighborhood as the ISKP continues to challenge the security of the region. The ISKP has been responsible for major attacks in the country post-August 2021 against civilians, minorities like ethnic Hazara Shia Muslims and Sikhs, foreign missions, and the Taliban. ISKP claimed responsibility for numerous bombings and armed attacks against Hazaras in 2022, causing over 700 casualties alone.¹²³

Since January 2023, the ISKP has been responsible for major attacks, including the attack in January at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that killed at least five people and injured dozens. This was followed by another in an attack in March near Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry, leading to six casualties.¹²⁴

Simultaneously, the ISKP has been engaged in fighting the Taliban and initiating a concerted effort to target important Taliban members. As a result, dozens of Taliban, including

prominent members, have been targeted. These have included: Samiullah Maiwand, a prominent Taliban commander from Chaak district in Wardak province, who was killed in an attack on a Taliban post in the Karte Naw area of Kabul in February 2023;¹²⁵ and Mohammad Dawood Muzamil, the governor of Balk province, who was the second-most senior Taliban leader killed in an attack by the ISKP in March 2023.¹²⁶ Muzamil was not only a senior official and close aide of the Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Akhunzada, he was also responsible for conducting successful anti-ISKP operations in Nangarhar province.¹²⁷ Prior to Muzamil's death, in December 2022, the Taliban police chief of Badakhshan Abdulhaq Abu Omar, was also killed in an attack by the group.¹²⁸

Subsequently, the Taliban have initiated a major crackdown on the ISKP and affiliate groups,¹²⁹ including an increase in raids against those responsible for attacks on the Russian, Pakistani, and Chinese diplomatic missions in 2022.* The Taliban have been successful in targeting numerous members of the ISKP, particularly the ISKP chief for the Indian subcontinent, Ijaz Amin Ahanga aka Abu Usman Al-Kashmirir, and ISKP's intelligence chief Qari Fateh, in February 2023. Both targets were of immense significance for

* See Afghanistan Monitor vol. 2/2023.

the Taliban.¹³⁰ In March, the General Directorate of Intelligence of the Taliban announced the killing of three key figures of the group: Mawlavi Ziauddin (second-in-command and shadow governor of ISKP); Abu Omar Afridi (member of the ISKP Shura;¹³¹ and Ustad Salman Tajikistani, (one of the officials of ISKP's military training unit).¹³²

As a result of these operations, the Taliban claim that ISKP is not as big a threat as it was a year ago. In an interview in April, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that since August 2021, 1600 to 1700 ISKP members have been arrested and more than 1100 have been killed in operations against ISKP hideouts across the country.¹³³ In contrast, the US CENTCOM commander General Michael Kurilla stated in March that the ISKP is stronger in 2023 than in 2022 and could conduct attacks against US assets or interests abroad within six months.¹³⁴

Human Rights and Women's Rights

Since assuming power in August 2021, the Taliban have not only backtracked on their pledges to uphold and honor basic and fundamental human and women's rights, they have enforced policies that have led to the continuous curtailment of

the rights of women pertaining to education, the right to work, public space and freedom of movement through more than 40 decrees.¹³⁵ According to Amnesty International Secretary General, Agnès Callamard, Afghanistan's human rights situation is deteriorating rapidly, and the Taliban's relentless abuses continue.¹³⁶

In March, the group reiterated its policy of banning women from secondary educational institutions, which came with much international condemnation as well as criticism from some Taliban members. While the policy to curb women's education continues, the group appears to be promoting education for males. The acting Minister of Higher Education, Nida Mohammad Nadim, announced efforts to bring about reforms in higher education institutions, by establishing a commission to eliminate the challenges male students face from private universities.¹³⁷ Moreover, the Department of Information and Culture of Badakhshan Province announced free education for 500 male students in private educational centers,¹³⁸ highlighting a visible bias in the group's educational system and prejudice against women, wherein male education is not only being reformed but rather encouraged.

The Taliban have continued to target human and women's rights activists and academics through unlawful detentions and arbitrary arrests.¹³⁹

Amongst those arrested is Matiullah Wesa, founder and president of Pen Path, a local nongovernmental group that launched a door-to-door campaign to promote girls' education.¹⁴⁰

Apart from curbing the role of women, the Taliban has also continued to target media and civil society organizations, many of which have been forced to close.¹⁴¹ Those involved in any sort of opposition, be it peaceful protesters or perceived opponents, continue to face arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention.¹⁴² The Taliban's acting Minister of Higher Education, Nida Mohammad Nadim, while speaking at a graduation ceremony in Kandahar in March, warned that those undermining or opposing the government would be suppressed and deserve death.¹⁴³

On January 7, 2023, Mortaza Behboudi, a dual French and Afghan citizen and journalist, was arrested in Kabul, his name is believed to be on a Taliban blacklist of undesirables, which includes many journalists. According to *Human Rights Watch*, since August 2021, an estimated 80 percent of women journalists have either lost their jobs or left the profession.¹⁴⁴ According to the *Afghan Independent Journalists Union*, 50 percent of the media outlets have

closed. As a consequence, around 1,900 journalists and media workers have lost their jobs since the Taliban assumed power, including over 1,000 women.¹⁴⁵ The ongoing crackdown on journalists by the Taliban continues to be a grave challenge for the media community.

Opinion Corner

Pakistan and Afghanistan: Perpetually Strained Relationships Between Two Neighbors, but Can They Ever Be Fixed?

Dr. Omar Zakhilwal

Afghanistan and Pakistan are two brotherly nations with relations that have remained impaired since the outset. The relationship that needed to be special has hardly ever been even ordinary. This did not change with the pro-Pakistan Afghan Mujahideen and then Taliban Governments in the 1990s and neither is it expected to change materially under the current “pro-Pakistan” Taliban Government in Kabul. Although the two countries have never been in any declared state of hostility, at the same time they have hardly been at peace with each other. The factors might be few but at the core has been a deep mistrust. The mistrust initially was limited to the governments of the two countries and their state institutions, however, over time unfortunately it has also trickled down to some common mindsets – something that should be of serious concern to the responsible leadership on both sides.

In Afghanistan, Pakistan is viewed as the least friendly country towards Afghanistan and the belief that the former has played a pivotal role in the successive destructive Afghan wars and instabilities of the past four decades. In Pakistan, Afghanistan is seen as the second least friendly country towards Pakistan. These perceptions have hurt not only Afghanistan, as the mistrustful environment certainly contributes to its continued instability, but they have also hurt Pakistan. The security threats and perceptions and the resultant overall image have already taken a significant toll on Pakistan’s economy and continue to hurt it more.

Moreover, as a result of the prevailing mistrust, both countries continue to miss opportunities to be positive regional players: a situation having a negative impact on both their own stabilities and prosperities but on the region as well. Without peace and stability in Afghanistan and the most cordial relationship between the two countries, Pakistan cannot become a “Gateway to Central Asia” and Afghanistan a “Land-bridge between Central and South Asia” as we both brand and aspire ourselves to be. If there is anything that has the potential to revolutionize the economies of the two countries, it would have to be our geographic role if it was activated. Therefore, it would be inconceivable to believe that durable peace and stability in Afghanistan could not be

in the national interest of Pakistan and that the latter could not, out of its own interest, support stability in Afghanistan as a matter of its state policy. However, quite ironically this has not happened yet.

In spite of lingering issues from both sides, there is a virtual unanimity among a vast cross-section of people in the two countries that Afghanistan and Pakistan have to find a way to live not only in peace with each other but become the friendliest of any two neighbors. These potential brotherly feelings are based not only on shared needs but also on shared religious, historical, cultural, social and other commonalities that bind the two countries together. If the thick wall of mistrust is not removed, it will continue to prevent the two states from a genuine cooperation and engagement that could result in peace and stability and, therefore, prosperity for both nations.

However, genuine friendship will not be possible unless the two neighboring countries don't state what their issues including grievances, fears and ambitions are, and are open to discuss them as frankly as possible. One of the difficulties with past efforts in these regards precisely has been the lack of sustained genuine dialogue and interaction between the two States and in some instances gross mismanagement of bilateral relationships on both sides. Some

of the international community's mishandling and mis-investments have not helped either. The question is: can the prevailing state of estrangement between Afghanistan and Pakistan change for the better, particularly, given that attempts in this regard so far have had little success?

The answer is yes, but with a different approach and sequencing of issues:

First, the two countries need to start by responding to their mutual misperceptions. If they can find ways and allow the mutual perceptions to be corrected it can be possible to restore a considerable amount of trust at the outset, which in turn can give the environment and momentum to work on the real issues.

Second, the two countries need to engage in a genuine frank and direct interaction as there is absolutely no alternative to that. A special relationship, that is the desire of the two people and the need of both countries, cannot be forced or persuaded from outside, neither can it advance by talking at each other instead of to each other. The intentions must come from within and so should its management and forward progress.

Third, the two countries need to sequence the issues such that they start with the ones in which quick progress is possible. This would give them the confidence and trust and

the space to move on to more difficult ones. Such issues can include trade and transit facilitation by removing existing impediments, refugees and problematic treatment of people, both within their respective countries and at crossing points, and the facilitation of people-to-people interaction.

Fourth, the two countries need to broaden their interactions and make all stakeholders in their relationship to be part of the broader discussion. This includes in addition to state officials, civil society, the business community, media, parliamentarians, women's groups, academia, youth, etc. In this respect visits of leaders from both countries to interact directly with political leaderships, as well as of people hailing from divergent backgrounds in an effort to remove the misconceptions that may have been sown over time could be encouraged and organized. In addition, social, sporting and media interactions to help generate positivity in both countries to redress the past and give momentum to the future shape of relations can be encouraged and organized.

Fifth, both countries should give convincing assurances at the very outset that the national interest of either country cannot be to the detriment of the other.

Sixth, both countries should give convincing assurances that they fully

respect the sovereignty of each other and as Sovereign Nations each has the right to foster relationships with whatever other nations it so desires, and that each's policy for the other is independent and irrespective of each's relationship with any third country.

Seven, both countries should state that they support peace and stability in each other, not out of favor or sympathy or a gift but out of their own national interests and therefore as a matter of their own national policies.

Eight, both countries should resolve and demonstrate not to allow their respective territories and spaces to be used against the peace and stability of the other.

Ninth, both countries need not be against legitimate stakes in one another. These include a special civilized relationship, regional economic facilitation, free movement of people and goods between and through their respective countries, promotion of bilateral private investments and more.

Tenth, International partners of the two countries should acknowledge that their presence and policies in the region to date have had difficulties and were counterproductive, and therefore, are to be revisited. Both countries should convince their international partners that for their

support to peace and stability in our region they invest to foster the relations between the two countries and define them together.

The pre-condition for the success of the above efforts, however, is national legitimacy and international acceptability of the state institutions that manage and lead them. In other words, they will have to be institutions that get their mandate and legitimacy from the general public through a genuine democratic process and are politically inclusive. A State that is fragile, unstable, lacks national legitimacy and rules by force and intimidation nationally cannot be a productive partner.

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China's Afghanistan Policy: Frameworks and Practices.

Dr. Haiyun Ma

That Afghanistan directly neighbors with the Xinjiang region of west China in many ways helps define the nature of China-Afghanistan relations since the mid-18th century, when Qing China and Durrani Afghanistan began to expand and encounter each other in Badakhshan. The Qing expansion into the Tarim basin around the 1750s pushed local Tarim Sufi leaders into exile in the Badakhshan region seeking refuge. Facing the coming expeditionary Qing military forces and for fear of a Qing invasion of Badakhshan, the local ruler Sultan Shah handed over the exiled Tarim religious leaders to the Qing. Deporting Muslim leaders to an infidel power in Muslim-populated Central Asia undoubtedly constituted a premodern "takfir" practice. The rising Afghan empire under Ahmad Durrani quickly utilized this opportunity to expand territories and influences by supporting Kunduz chieftain Babad Khan to conduct a punitive expedition against Badakhshan.

The descendants of the Tarim leaders soon fled to the Kokand empire of Central Asia with closer ethnic and

historical ties with Turkic Muslims. It is from Kokand that the Tarim leaders' descendants took revenge on Qing China by constantly attacking their borderlands from the late 18th century to the early 19th century. To deal with these asymmetric borderland insecurities posed by Tarim revengers from the Muslim Kokand empire, Qing China had to sign the first unequal treaty in the 1830s with Kokand providing several concessions to Kokandi merchants in the Tarim oasis cities such as extraterritorial rights and tax exemption. This security-for-economy (or narrowly, peace for trade) relational approach guided the Qing-Central Asian relations. It is the geographic, religious, and economic frontier character of Xinjiang that clarifies and even defines the nature of China's relations with neighboring countries including Afghanistan.

The 9/11 attack and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan to some extent revived the historical concern of China over cross-borderland connections between Tarim Uyghur militants and Al Qaeda/Taliban in Afghanistan. On the one hand, the US pressure of "you are either with us or against us" drove China to side with the US in its "war on terror" in Afghanistan. While on the other hand, the reported presence of Uyghur militants in Afghanistan and their partnership with Al Qaeda reinforced the Chinese concern about possible Uyghur separatism since the

collapse of the former Soviet Union in Central Asia. To balance external pressures and domestic concerns, China instead launched a domestic counter-terrorism campaign in its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The US invasion of Afghanistan and China's domestic adoption of a counter-terrorism campaign provide contexts and even conditions for defining China-Kabul relations. Under the US-China counterterrorism (CT) cooperation, not only did the US quickly accept the Chinese demand to designate the East Turkistan Islamic Movement or ETIM as a terrorist group in September of 2002, but also facilitated closer Beijing-Kabul relations. Not surprisingly, counterterrorism was the backbone of China-Kabul relations. Consequently, the new Afghan government constantly arrested and deported Uyghurs from Afghanistan to China.

The Chinese did their part in this relationship by rewarding the Kabul regime for handling China's security concerns. It is interesting to note that during the US invasion of Afghanistan, China helped Kabul consolidate its power by offering police training and by building a regional security mechanism that includes not only Afghanistan and China but also Pakistan and Tajikistan. The major bulk of Chinese reward is economic, notably that China had invested in several large projects such as the

Aynak copper mines and Amu Darya oil fields. This Kabul fighting-Uyghur and China offering reward revives and indeed repeats the historical Kokandi-Chinese relations involving the Tarim issue. In this security-for-economy relational approach, China clearly took the upper hand demanding Kabul to eliminate or deport Uyghur militants, for counterterrorism was proclaimed to be the common mission of the US, China, and the US-backed government in Kabul.

The Doha agreement between the Taliban and the US has caused a chain reaction ranging from regime change in Kabul and the (re)formation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) to the IEA's domestic and foreign policy shifts. The realities on the ground in post US-exit Afghanistan have complicated IEA-China relations. On one hand, the US exit reduced the Chinese strategic concerns at a time when two major powers are quickly becoming rivals. While on the other hand, the end of the US-China counterterrorism cooperation and the disappearance of the US counterterrorism capacities there put China in a dilemma in the face of Uyghur militants in Afghanistan. Even worse, the Taliban Jihad ideology and the alliance with Al Qaeda and Uyghur militants, among others, impose a serious challenge to China's free-ride counterterrorism strategy under the Kabul regime.

At the same time, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to Kabul suggest some positive signals. First, within the context of the US-China rivalry, the US exit from Xinjiang's borderland has increased a sense of security for China from a great-power competition perspective; second, the battle-hardened Taliban now armed with the US weaponry has become a power in Central Asia, which could be hostile to the US and, thus, beneficial to China; third, the Taliban united Afghan territories and standardized administration, which might create conditions for future Chinese state companies' investments.

Facing the relational dynamics between the US and China and in Afghanistan, the previous security-for-economy approach facilitated by the US simply stopped functioning. The Chinese-perceived Uyghur threats emanating from Afghanistan, however, have remained and even increased after the return of the Taliban. To address these new changes and challenges, the IEA-China relations have been modified: the IEA has constantly promised to protect Chinese interests in Afghanistan and will not allow Afghanistan to be used against foreign countries including China. Regarding the Uyghurs, it is reported that the IAE removed Uyghur militants from Badakhshan neighboring China's Xinjiang.

Interestingly enough no news about Chinese requests for deporting Uyghurs back to China or IAE's arrests of Uyghur militants has been reported. Such subtle policies and practices illustrate a new modified relational approach between the IEA and China: economy for security. Under this new relational approach, the IAE has obvious leverage that it will not fight or deport the Uyghurs (unless they are ISKP members) but to lose-rein them, meaning that the Uyghurs will not be allowed to attack China or Chinese interests and China cannot pursue the Uyghurs in Afghanistan as it did before.

The pros and cons of this relational approach are clear: both the IEA and China have maximized their interests in the new context while avoiding conflicts or wars involving the Uyghurs. Either "security-for-economy" under the US-backed Afghan government or "economy-for-security" under the IEA, this relational approach dictates a basic principle: input needs to match output. In other words, the IEA's expectation of China's economic contribution is measured by the frontier security cost brought about by the perceived Uyghur militants in Afghanistan. After all, the nature of the China-Afghan relationship is largely defined by the Xinjiang issue.

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