



# The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan

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## Principal Findings

**What's new?** The Taliban, mostly isolated by Western powers, are looking to build ties with foreign capitals closer by. These countries cannot simply say no: they must deal with the Taliban on security and economic issues. Regional engagement remains limited, however, due to both mistrust and hurdles raised by Western sanctions.

**Why does it matter?** Dysfunction in the relationships between Afghanistan and its neighbours affects lives and livelihoods across South and Central Asia. Kabul and its regional partners should explore ways of expanding trade, managing disputes over water and other shared resources, and combating transnational militancy. Failure could spell instability in a vast area.

**What should be done?** Instead of retreating from the many challenges of dealing with the stubborn Taliban, regional capitals should continue to develop a clearly defined format for broad-based security cooperation and economic integration. Western countries should support such efforts – or, at a minimum, refrain from blocking them.

## *Executive Summary*

As most of the world shuns the Taliban due to their violations of women's and girls' rights, countries in the region around Afghanistan are dealing with the regime to address their needs for security and economic stability. This region, as the Taliban broadly define it, spans the "Eurasian continents", from China in the east to Türkiye in the west and from Russia in the north to India and the Gulf monarchies in the south. It encompasses countries closer in, such as the Central Asian states, Iran and Pakistan. The Taliban, like previous Afghan rulers, view Afghanistan as a bridge connecting all these places. Regional countries' policies toward the Taliban vary enormously, though all believe contacts with the regime to be necessary, but so far, their engagement is limited. Kabul and its regional partners are struggling to develop a *modus vivendi* as regards issues of mutual concern, which range from boosting trade to managing disputes over water and halting transnational militancy. It is a fraught endeavour, but a worthwhile one, and Western capitals should not stand in the way.

The Taliban's denial of basic rights to Afghan women and girls and their imposition of draconian social rules since returning to power in August 2021 has sabotaged, at least for now, the chances that the UN and other international bodies might recognise their regime. Yet even as Western diplomats cancelled meetings with the Taliban, regional actors sought more dealings with Kabul. Some have condemned the Taliban's treatment of women and girls, particularly bans on girls' secondary and higher education, but overall regional officials tend not to put emphasis on women's and girls' rights. At the same time, they are convinced that the best way to secure their countries' interests and moderate the Taliban's behaviour in the long term is patient deliberation with Kabul, rather than ostracism. Channels between Kabul and regional capitals appear to offer the Taliban their best hopes for diplomatic engagement in the coming years.

Still, regional collaboration has fallen short of what some of Afghanistan's neighbours wanted. Some were aspiring to a "grand bargain" that would have traded diplomatic recognition for Taliban action to form a more inclusive government, particularly by empowering Afghan politicians whom they had sponsored in opposition to the Taliban in the past and with whom they remain friendly. The Taliban, however, rebuffed all attempts to coax them into including former enemies in the cabinet. Most regional players have therefore settled for piecemeal engagement with Kabul that addresses specific issues on a case-by-case basis. More by necessity than design, this approach aligns with the Taliban's own preference for transactional relationships that avoid the prospect of what they perceive as foreign meddling in Afghan affairs. Taliban talking points about respect for diverse cultural values and alternatives to the "Western-imposed" global order also chime with the interests of those regional powers.

At the top of the regional agenda are matters related to security. Regional officials have observed Kabul's novel methods of controlling Islamist militant groups with varying degrees of scepticism and anxiety. After the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan's neighbours feared that violence would spill across their borders to hotspots like Indian-administered Kashmir or the Fergana Valley in Central Asia. Those concerns proved

to be exaggerated; as the Taliban firmed up their hold on the country, militancy did not spread. The major exception is Pakistan, where attacks by the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) climbed during the Taliban's first two years in power, significantly raising tensions with Islamabad. The Taliban have used a standard playbook for answering regional concerns about nearly all militant groups: Kabul refuses to kill or capture suspected militants. Instead, it relocates them, helping them establish new lives in an effort to curb their ambitions and break down their command structures.

The first step toward better regional security cooperation could be cooling down the rhetoric on all sides and getting actors to agree on a set of facts, even if they have different priorities. Taliban forces have got better at corralling the most dangerous jihadists, those loyal to Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP), but even in that case the Taliban have not built enough confidence with regional partners to share information freely. Part of the problem is the gap between how Kabul prefers to deal with most of the Islamist militant groups in Afghanistan and how the region would like Kabul to deal with them. Overcoming this divide requires building a common platform for discussing regional security concerns and a common approach to addressing challenges. All sides would benefit from improved border management, customs integration and demarcation of Afghanistan's rugged frontiers.

The other main area of regional cooperation is economics. Decades of war in Afghanistan shelved ideas of multiplying trade corridors to rival the Silk Routes of old, but these began to regain currency as the Taliban's military victory brought greater stability and the de facto authorities started tackling corruption. Regional capitals are now seeing glimmers of commercial opportunity. They are dusting off plans to get trucks, railcars, gas and electricity moving across borders. The Taliban are impatient to start work on such projects, though some of the barriers will be insurmountable in the short term.

The logic for better regional economic connectivity is overwhelming, especially in the energy sector where Central Asian countries are in search of new markets while South Asia needs new supplies of oil, gas and electricity. Equally importantly, the region has strategic reasons to encourage ventures in Afghanistan as part of long-term planning for economic integration, which in turn would help with regional stability. Some regional actors think building Afghanistan into the regional economic architecture could increase regional influence, placate detractors of diplomacy among the Taliban and make the de facto authority a more predictable entity. Many among the Taliban, for their part, see such integration as a path to greater prosperity for Afghanistan and greater longevity for their regime.

Still, a multitude of factors inhibit economic cooperation between Kabul and the region. Economic restrictions and sanctions continue to stifle private investment. The desire of some donor states to limit aid to humanitarian assistance, and attempts by some to block development aid altogether, also contribute. The limited resources of some regional countries, coupled with inability to attract external financing, also impede serious economic collaboration between Afghanistan and the region. Equally importantly, the lack of a legal framework in Afghanistan continues to undermine private-sector confidence in the country, particularly as the Taliban embark on a cryptic ad hoc overhaul of laws they inherited from the government they overthrew.

Some of the Taliban's actions, including building water infrastructure without coordination with downstream countries, have also engendered tensions with Afghanistan's neighbours, particularly Iran and Uzbekistan. Disputes have occasionally contributed to skirmishes between the Taliban and neighbouring countries' forces. In such a febrile atmosphere, regional states might be tempted to scale back their ambitions for engagement with the Taliban. Doing so, however, would likely make it still harder to resolve such problems and put solutions to other challenges neighbours face in Afghanistan further out of reach.

Many steps toward regional cooperation do not involve Western donors, but those countries have a stake in the results. Europeans, especially, would benefit from a stable, self-sufficient region that is not a major source of illegal drugs, migrants or terrorism. Yet sanctions and other measures originating in the West that aim to signal disapproval of the Taliban are obstacles on the road to more functional relations between Kabul and regional capitals. Whether it is a vote at the World Bank on a water project, or permission to send equipment to Taliban border guards despite sanctions, much progress depends on Western support – or at least, acquiescence. While such practical steps should not imply recognising the Taliban regime, they would contribute to regional peace and security.

**Kabul/Brussels, 30 January 2024**

# The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan

## I. Introduction

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The Taliban takeover in 2021 transformed Afghanistan but not the circumstances arising from its geographical location.<sup>1</sup> Like many past governments in Kabul, the Taliban regime has advanced a foreign policy of neutrality and promoted Afghanistan as a profit-making link between nearby states. The Taliban authorities have pursued ambitious plans for cross-border railways, pipelines and electricity corridors.<sup>2</sup> But the country's neighbours remain wary, in keeping with a long tradition of treating it as, at best, a buffer protecting them from other regional powers and, at worst, a haven for militants and smugglers. Since the Taliban have a bad reputation of their own, they face major challenges in securing a role for Afghanistan in the region's security architecture and economic future.

This report examines the Taliban's regional diplomacy to date. "The region" is defined as the Taliban themselves understand the term, looking out from Kabul at adjacent states and others farther away, with Afghanistan as the middle ground between what the Taliban call the "Eurasian continents".<sup>3</sup> Neighbouring countries, such as Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, regard engagement with the Taliban authorities as a necessary evil if they are to address core concerns. Regional powers like China, India and Russia have also explored engagement as a means of addressing concerns and of supporting their allies in containing any spillover from Afghanistan. More distant countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates have also entered the diplomatic fray, partly to challenge the Taliban's Islamic exceptionalism but also spurred by the need to balance their own regional rivalries. Appendix B provides an outline of each of these countries' approach to Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover.

To illuminate its discussion of specific issues, the report explores the Taliban's way of interacting with the world – with limited transactions rather than strategic pacts – and assesses what regional actors want from their dealings with Kabul. Beyond top-level diplomacy, it also delves into practical aspects of cooperation in security and economic affairs, including how countries in Afghanistan's neighbourhood work together – or compete – in managing transboundary waterways. Its conclusions might apply to other foreign actors searching for strategies of political engagement with the Taliban.

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier work on Afghanistan's foreign relations includes Crisis Group Asia Reports N°320, *Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan*, 4 February 2022; and N°317, *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, 6 December 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, 2021-2023.

<sup>3</sup> Speech by Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi at 4th Foreign Ministers Meeting among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan, 13 April 2023. See tweet by Hafiz Zia Ahmad, @HafizZiaAhmad1, deputy spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2:34pm, 13 April 2023.

Research included dozens of conversations conducted over the course of 2022 and 2023 with government officials and various experts from Afghanistan and regional countries, in Kabul, Dushanbe, Istanbul, Ankara, Doha, Dubai, Brussels, London, New York and Washington, as well as others contacted remotely. Fieldwork was also carried out at border crossings in Afghanistan at Takhar, Kunduz, Herat, Kandahar, Khost and Nangarhar.



## II. Regional Diplomacy after the Taliban Takeover

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The collapse of the U.S.-backed government in Kabul sent tremors through regional capitals, where officials have spent the last two years grappling with how to deal with the new Taliban regime. Different governments have engaged with Kabul in different ways, but common themes have emerged in regional policy toward the Taliban, and, conversely, in the Taliban's approaches to the region. This section sums up Kabul's relations with the neighbourhood, while the individual approaches of regional actors are profiled in Appendix B.

### A. *The Quest for Recognition*

In their first months after seizing power, Taliban officials were hopeful that their government would obtain international recognition.<sup>4</sup> But not a single foreign government or multilateral organisation would formally acknowledge the Taliban-controlled government without concessions on women's rights and other matters.<sup>5</sup> The uniform refusal angered the Taliban's more conservative elements, splitting the movement into two camps: one, centred in the Kabul-based interim government, sought a thaw with the West; the other, gathered around the Kandahar headquarters of the hard-line emir, Hibatullah Akhundzada, rejected this notion.<sup>6</sup> The emir's camp, convinced that the U.S. would block any attempt at rapprochement, argued that the Taliban should bolster their movement's cohesion and their government's prospects for survival by reintroducing strict policies their earlier regime had decreed in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Rolling out a series of draconian edicts on women's rights in 2022 and 2023, the emir showed his defiance of the West and reassured his followers that the Taliban regime would not compromise.<sup>8</sup>

The Taliban's intransigence, particularly on gender policies, has fuelled a cycle of worsening relations with the West. Additional restrictions by the Taliban on the rights of Afghan women and girls prompted repeated condemnations by Western

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<sup>4</sup> These hopes persisted despite warnings at the 2018-2021 Doha peace talks, where diplomats told the Taliban in attendance the movement would be ostracised if it seized power by force of arms. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Doha and Kabul, 2020-2021.

<sup>5</sup> Diplomats never spelled out concessions they would demand in exchange for recognition, but they often raised concerns about the Taliban's flagrant discrimination against women and girls, as well as the regime's lack of political inclusivity. Graeme Smith and Ibraheem Bahiss, "The World Has No Choice but to Work with the Taliban", *Foreign Affairs*, 11 August 2023.

<sup>6</sup> The first camp argued that Kabul should seek many international patrons so as not to rely too heavily on any foreign country or fall into any geopolitical "sphere of influence". Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, 2021-2023.

<sup>7</sup> Since at least mid-2022, the Taliban have considered the U.S. to be the main obstacle to recognition. Regional countries also blame the U.S. for the Taliban's pariah status. For their part, U.S. officials say the Taliban have not taken necessary steps toward recognition, though they admit that domestic U.S. politics would likely make it impossible. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, 2021-2023. See also "U.S. cast as villain during meeting of Afghan neighbours", *Voice of America*, 14 April 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°329, *Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis*, 23 February 2023.

countries – to which the Taliban responded with further measures, in part because of constituents who praised them for rebuffing the demands of countries that had invaded Afghanistan. The space for diplomacy shrank ever further. While the Taliban maintained that they would not change domestic policy for the sake of outside acquiescence to their rule, public opinion in the West urged Western governments not to “normalise” a regime that may be guilty of “gender apartheid”.<sup>9</sup> Pressure mounted on Western states to keep up the sanctions, asset freezes and other forms of isolation they had imposed on the Taliban.

### B. *The Taliban Turn to the Region*

The standoff between the Taliban and Western countries placed the region in a bind. Several of Afghanistan's neighbours had opposed the group when it ruled in the 1990s, with only three of them – Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – recognising its government at the time. Others, including India, Iran, Russia and Tajikistan, had backed armed opposition to the first Taliban regime.<sup>10</sup> At the start of the Taliban's second administration in 2021, many of the same anti-Taliban groups in northern Afghanistan reached out to regional actors in hopes of renewed support. As a result, the first question for neighbouring countries after the Taliban's return to power was deciding whether to fight the regime or talk to it.<sup>11</sup>

Although regional actors also condemned the Taliban's discrimination against women, they decided to engage with Kabul over the following months. The extent of cooperation varied, and each actor was motivated by different considerations, but a common denominator was a tilt toward working with the Taliban rather than isolating them. Although the U.S.-led coalition had failed to bring peace to Afghanistan, it was widely perceived as having policed the country and its departure imparted a feeling of urgency in the region, especially regarding security threats.<sup>12</sup> As one diplomat put it, “the West is leaving the problem to regional countries”.<sup>13</sup> Since March 2022, when Taliban restrictions on women and girls got more severe, a pattern has emerged of increasing interaction between Kabul and regional capitals, even as engagement with the West has dwindled.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Experts: Taliban treatment of women may be ‘gender apartheid’”, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 11 July 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Opposition to the Taliban's first regime was led by a coalition of militias that found refuge with Ahmad Shah Massoud in northern Afghanistan. His son, Ahmad Massoud, now heads the National Resistance Front, one of the largest groups fighting the Taliban. The Front's leadership is largely based in Tajikistan. Crisis Group interviews, Dushanbe, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Kabul and Dushanbe, 2022. See also Samina Ahmad, Praveen Donthi, Ali Vaez, Amanda Hsiao, Olga Oliker and Oleg Ignatov, “With the Taliban Back in Kabul, Regional Powers Watch and Wait”, Crisis Group Commentary, 26 August 2021.

<sup>12</sup> A Western security official said regional countries, after having pushed for a U.S. exit from Afghanistan, are struggling to deal with the aftermath. “It's like a dog chasing a car and catching the bumper”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interview, regional diplomat, Kabul, October 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “Looking for Legitimacy: Taliban Diplomacy Since the Fall of Kabul”, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 15 August 2022.

As the Taliban gave up hope of winning over the West and shifted toward the region, they also adapted their rhetoric. The emir insisted that he would seek positive relations with the region and beyond.<sup>15</sup> Yet such statements were often paired with assertions that, as the Taliban do not interfere in foreign countries' internal affairs, others should not meddle in Afghanistan's.<sup>16</sup> Taliban officials also became more vocal about their dissatisfaction with Washington, a sentiment sometimes echoed by regional actors.<sup>17</sup> The region's overtures toward the Taliban appear in part to reflect that some countries (for instance, China, Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia) have their own reasons to seek alternatives to a U.S.-led unipolar order that dictates which regimes are acceptable and which are not.

Still, the neighbourhood's cautious embrace of Kabul appears to be based not primarily on anti-U.S. sentiment but on an assessment of what will yield the tangible results they seek. Regional governments concluded that talking with the de facto authorities was the best way to nudge them toward responsiveness to their agendas. Security and economic concerns came before those related to women's and girls' rights. "The world will not stop and wait for Western sentiment to shift in favour of the Taliban", a regional diplomat said. "We are here on the front lines".<sup>18</sup>

Having themselves maintained or re-established a diplomatic presence in Kabul, many regional countries have welcomed the appointment of Taliban envoys in their capitals, claiming that such representation does not amount to implicit or explicit recognition but is a "technical" prerequisite for managing co-existence with Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> These working-level relationships are likely to proliferate.<sup>20</sup> It is even possible that, in the future, some countries could break with the Western-led consensus and officially recognise the regime.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the Taliban emir's Eid message, sent via tweet by Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, @Zabehulah\_M33, 9:30am, 18 April 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. See also the prime minister's statement in tweet by Azam News, @azamweb, 3:30am, 28 November 2021.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, "The Taliban's claim: The U.S. is the key obstacle to recognition of our government", Voice of America Pashto, 19 June 2022 [Pashto]; "Acting defence minister says US is obstacle to intl recognition", TOLO News, 22 July 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, regional diplomat, Kabul, September 2022.

<sup>19</sup> At the same time, countries such as China have formally accredited the Taliban's ambassadors, perhaps signalling implicit acceptance, if not recognition, of their government.

<sup>20</sup> According to spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban government has sent diplomats to at least fourteen countries, though he does not name them. See "Taliban want control of more Afghan diplomatic missions", AP, 26 March 2023. According to the Taliban's acting foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, the government has dispatched representatives to China, Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. See "Annual Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs", video, YouTube, 7 October 2022 [Pashto].

<sup>21</sup> Regional scepticism about U.S. efforts to withhold recognition arises, in part, from the poor record of such isolation campaigns in recent history. Crisis Group interviews, regional diplomats, Kabul, 2022-2023. See also Daniela Linge, "Recognizing the Reality of Bad Actors: Afghanistan and the Taliban", *Creighton International and Comparative Law Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2023).

### C. *A Limited Partnership*

The Taliban's military dominance has convinced regional capitals that a more stable Afghanistan, albeit one ruled by a somewhat unpredictable regime, is a lesser evil than a return to civil war. The regional consensus is fragile, however, underpinned by the premise that Taliban rule will not devolve into the kind of factional chaos that plagued the country in the past. Should regional countries feel that the government cannot impose order inside Afghanistan's borders and contain transnational threats, this consensus may well unravel. If that happens, countries in the region could be tempted to pick sides in another intra-Afghan conflict, repeating the destructive pattern of past decades.<sup>22</sup>

The region's diplomatic posture should also not be mistaken for full recognition; even calling it "normalisation" may be going too far. The level of engagement is, for now, far from the ambitious goal sometimes discussed among Afghanistan's neighbours: a strategic pact, or "grand bargain", between themselves and the Taliban. Most versions of the idea, which thus far is informal, raise the prospect of recognition in exchange for the Taliban forming an "inclusive" government. Others see the Taliban as exclusionary, and not just in gender terms, pointing to the fact that their administration is made up almost entirely of their own members and not many non-Pashtuns. Nearby countries are pressing for a cabinet in Kabul encompassing other political and ethnic factions with which they enjoy historical ties.<sup>23</sup> The Taliban bluntly reject such proposals, their vision for maintaining control of the country being based on keeping a monopoly on the state machinery, with loyalists in all key positions. They have shot down the region's ideas about including politicians from the previous republican order. They promise to "broaden" their government in the future without providing details.<sup>24</sup>

Some regional actors are growing disillusioned with the Taliban and appear to have halted attempts at reaching an overarching agreement with them, instead limiting themselves to piecemeal negotiations over narrow areas of mutual concern. There has been little or no coordination among regional actors on these micro-engagements, but they are learning from one another about how best to deal with the de facto authorities. For example, diplomats have noticed that the Taliban's officials based in Kabul use conciliatory language but seem hamstrung in terms of what they can offer, as they are often undermined by their superiors in Kandahar. At the same time, attempts at bypassing Kabul to negotiate directly with Kandahar have borne no fruit,

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<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional experts, November 2022-May 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Afghanistan contains many ethnic groups, the largest of which are the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. Among these, the Tajiks have links with Tajikistan; the Uzbeks with Uzbekistan; and the Hazaras with fellow Shia in Iran. India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and other countries also have historical affiliations with Afghan political and ethnic factions.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and regional officials, 2021-2023. What inclusion the Taliban have allowed has typically involved low-level positions, such as the appointment of 22 Hindus and Sikhs to municipal posts in Kabul. See tweet by Kabul Municipality, @KblMunicipality, 9:31am, 16 October 2023.

partly because the emir spurns most diplomatic overtures.<sup>25</sup> Some neighbouring countries are still investing time and energy in opening channels with the emir, but their experience so far has been that Kandahar prefers to stay aloof.<sup>26</sup>

What remains, then, is a small cadre of regional diplomats posted to embassies in Kabul – often with modest staffing and tiny budgets – trying to deal with Taliban officials who are often constrained by their own organisational and political wrangling. These interactions are also limited by security considerations: Russian and Chinese diplomats, for example, have scaled back their movements in the Afghan capital due to jihadist attacks on their compatriots.<sup>27</sup> These difficulties aside, most regional diplomats have continued dogged efforts at engagement. On topic after topic – security concerns, including Islamist militancy, border clashes, weapons proliferation and counter-narcotics; and economic issues, such as trade, foreign investment, water management and climate change – they continue to reach out to the Taliban.

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<sup>25</sup> Although the Taliban leader reportedly receives Afghan visitors, he has only had two meetings with foreign dignitaries. One was with Qatar's prime minister, whom he reportedly saw in May 2023. "Qatar's prime minister met with top Taliban leader in Afghanistan earlier this month, sources say", CNN, 31 May 2023. More recently, Pakistani politician Maulana Fazlur Rahman also met with the emir. "Fazlur Rahman's visit to Afghanistan", *The Express Tribune*, 15 January 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional diplomats, 2021-2023.

<sup>27</sup> IS-KP has carried out several attacks against foreigners inside Afghanistan, including attacks outside the Russian and Pakistani embassies in late 2022 and an attack on a hotel housing Chinese tourists in December 2022.

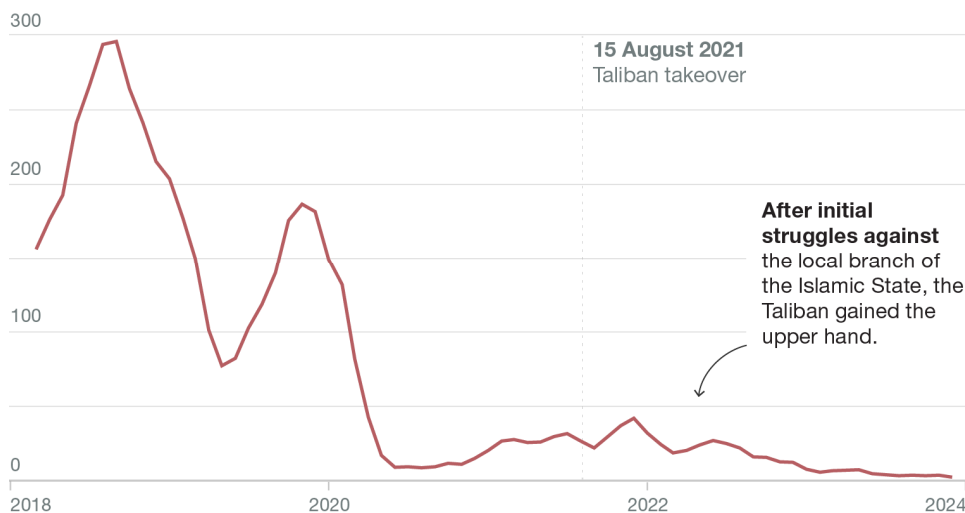
### III. Regional Security

Given Afghanistan's turbulent history, it is not surprising that regional governments see the country mostly as a security problem to be contained. Before the Taliban takeover, the task of containment fell to U.S. forces, whose counter-terrorism operations, for all their flaws, gave the country's neighbours a degree of comfort.<sup>28</sup> Although the UN reported numbers of transnational jihadist fighters in Afghanistan during those years dwindling to a few dozen, the Taliban's return to power left regional actors feeling exposed.<sup>29</sup> They worried about the potential for a return to civil war and expressed fears about militant groups, questioning the Taliban's willingness or ability to rein them in. They also harboured concerns that the rise of an Islamist government in their neighbourhood could galvanise Islamists within their own borders.

#### A. Islamic State-Khorasan Province

The security threat that Afghanistan's neighbours most frequently raise is that emanating from the local branch of the Islamic State, known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP).<sup>30</sup> In some ways, the growing concerns about IS-KP are paradoxical, as in reality, overall levels of violence related to the group have fallen over the past two years. As the Taliban improved their counter-insurgency efforts, IS-KP has launched fewer attacks and killed fewer people.

**Figure 1.** Incidents Associated with Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) in Afghanistan, 2018 to 2024



**Source:** Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); Crisis Group calculations.

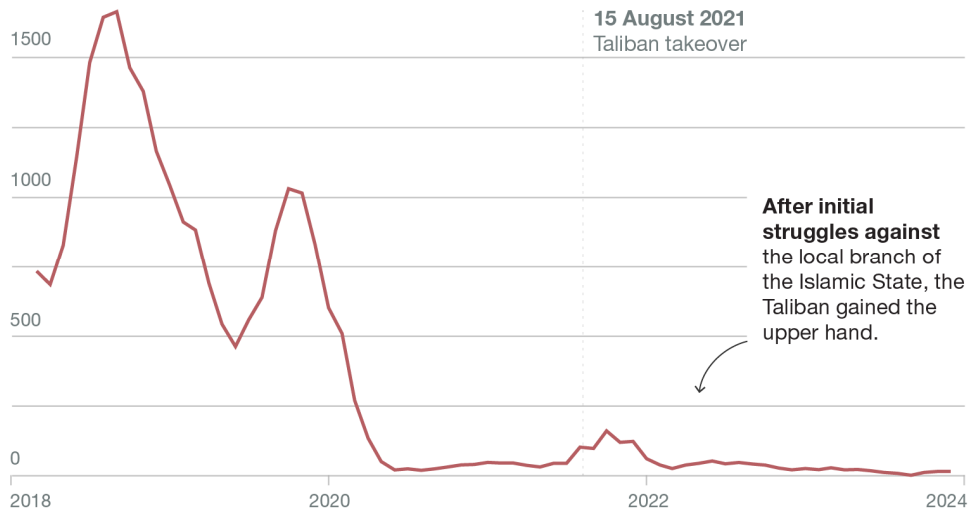
<sup>28</sup> Regional views of the U.S. and NATO presence were mixed: while appreciating Western counter-terrorism efforts, many countries also viewed the foreign troops as a threat and a source of instability. Crisis Group interviews, regional diplomats, 2013-2021.

<sup>29</sup> "Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban", May 2023.

<sup>30</sup> IS-KP emerged in 2015, primarily among Salafis in eastern Afghanistan. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°326, *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, 12 August 2022, pp. 8-11.

These three-month rolling averages include all violence involving IS-KP as a primary or associated actor in Afghanistan from 1 January 2018 to 1 January 2024.

**Figure 2.** Fatalities Associated with Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) in Afghanistan, 2018 to 2024



**Source:** Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); Crisis Group calculations.

These three-month rolling averages include all violence involving IS-KP as a primary or associated actor in Afghanistan from 1 January 2018 to 1 January 2024.

Still, regional actors are worried about IS-KP's continued capacity, and particularly its new emphasis on attacking citizens of neighbouring countries, both inside Afghanistan and outside.<sup>31</sup> The attacks on foreigners undermine the Taliban's claims to be security guarantors, disrupt their fragile international relations and help IS-KP recruit. Such incidents, though rare, have attracted significant attention. In April 2022, IS-KP fired a barrage of Katyusha rockets at Termez, a city on Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup> The next month, it launched a similar attack in Tajikistan. Neither appeared to cause casualties or major damage.<sup>33</sup> A more serious incident occurred that October, when IS-KP struck a Shia shrine in Iran, killing scores of worshippers.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the group has targeted foreigners in Afghanistan several times, including bombing the Russian and Pakistani embassies in September and December 2022, as well as a hotel that same December many of whose guests were Chinese nationals.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> IS-KP's targets have included Shia and Sufi places of worship; top Taliban officials and the religious scholars who back them; and foreigners inside and outside the country, with emphasis on the latter. Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State Khorasan claims rocket attack on Uzbekistan", Voice of America, 18 April 2022.

<sup>33</sup> A July 2022 attack on Uzbekistan inflicted no casualties and was not claimed by any group. "Five rockets fell on the territory of Uzbekistan", Uzbekistan National News Agency, 5 July 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State Attacks the Islamic Republic", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 31 October 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Tweet by TOLO News, @TOLONews, 9:59pm, 12 January 2023; and "IS-K claims suicide attack near foreign ministry in Kabul that killed six", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 28 March 2023.

As part of its efforts to boost recruitment, IS-KP has published propaganda in all major regional languages. It has tapped the grievances of non-Pashtun ethnic groups, not just those concentrated in Afghanistan's north, but also those in neighbouring Central Asian states.<sup>36</sup> IS-KP also maintains strong connections to Pakistan, where many of its founding members were born.<sup>37</sup> The group's leadership regularly calls on its supporters abroad to carry out attacks inside their home countries.<sup>38</sup> This incitement is tied to a surge of violence in Pakistan, where incidents related to IS-KP became more frequent after 2021.<sup>39</sup>

Rather than fostering international security cooperation, concerns about IS-KP have had the opposite effect in recent years, as foreign governments blame each other. In particular, Russian and Iranian officials claimed, absurdly, that the U.S. supports IS-KP.<sup>40</sup> Such allegations fuelled Kabul's paranoia, with Taliban officials at times echoing these claims, while in other instances accusing regional intelligence agencies of backing the group.<sup>41</sup> For example, some Taliban officials charge, perhaps equally risibly, that Pakistan provides a haven to IS-KP militants.<sup>42</sup> These statements have added to rising tensions between Kabul and Islamabad, as the latter accuses its neighbour of harbouring the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an insurgency that has mounted numerous attacks on the Pakistani army and police (see Section III.C). Taliban officials also frequently mention their suspicions that Tajikistan is a source of IS-KP recruits.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, "Islamic State Khorasan's expanded vision in South and Central Asia", *The Diplomat*, 26 August 2022; and Lucas Webber and Laith Alkhouri, "Perspectives: Islamic State recruiting Uzbeks to fight in Afghanistan", *Eurasianet*, 29 August 2022. See also "MW Weekly: ISKP propaganda targets India", *Militant Wire*, 7 September 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Don Ressler, "Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2015), p. 7. See also "Afghanistan and Pakistan: Extremism intensifies", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 6 October 2022 [Russian].

<sup>38</sup> "Islamic State in Afghanistan promises attacks on Chinese and Iranian cities, threatens Uzbekistan and Tajikistan", *Militant Wire*, 20 June 2022; and "ISKP's Eid message calls for attacks in South and Central Asia", *Militant Wire*, 11 July 2022.

<sup>39</sup> ACLED data from 1 January 2018 to 1 September 2023 show that IS-KP attacks in Pakistan grew from an average of about two per month before the Taliban takeover to almost five per month afterward. Because attacks vary in lethality, however, average monthly fatalities in the two periods were not significantly different. Crisis Group analysis, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> "US covertly sponsoring IS, says Russia", *The Siasat Daily*, 21 January 2023. See also "Qommi: IS-KP in Afghanistan is a continuation of the U.S. presence in that country", Sputnik News, 8 February 2023 [Dari]; tweet by Aamaj News @breaking24\_news, 8:54pm, 30 May 2022; and tweet by Ali Khamenei, @Khamenei\_fa, Iranian Supreme Leader, 8:15pm, 31 May 2022.

<sup>41</sup> In March 2022, for example, the Taliban's intelligence agency claimed that IS-KP was a "project" of the "foreign occupiers". See tweet by General Directorate of Intelligence, @GDI1415, 8:43pm, 20 March 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Leaked memoranda from the Afghan defence and interior ministries claim that IS-KP has training camps in the Tirah valley, in Pakistan's rugged Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province bordering Afghanistan, and that the group's leadership operates in the area. See, for example, tweet by Abdul Sayed, @abdsayedd, independent researcher, 10:47pm, 15 January 2023.

<sup>43</sup> The Taliban claimed that IS-KP, struggling to recruit Afghans, has turned to Central Asian militants, particularly Tajiks. See tweet by Hafiz Zia Ahmad, @HafizZiaAhmad1, deputy spokesman for Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10:08pm, 19 March 2023.



The public discord may mask a degree of behind-the-scenes intelligence cooperation. While information is scant, Iran has hinted that it is working with the Taliban in counter-terrorism, while other countries, such as the U.S., hold regular bilateral talks with Kabul on security issues.<sup>44</sup> Whatever the source of the Taliban's intelligence, their strikes on IS-KP have become much more effective and precise. Since mid-2022, the Taliban have carried out a series of raids that killed prominent figures in IS-KP, such as its alleged deputy leader, former interim leader, intelligence chief and head of judiciary. Possibly due to this crackdown, the number of IS-KP attacks has declined.<sup>45</sup> There are also indications that Taliban efforts to curb IS-KP recruitment, particularly on university campuses, might be enjoying success.<sup>46</sup>

Whether IS-KP could, in the future, become a more potent transnational threat remains an open question. So far, its operations beyond its original territory near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border have been limited. The Taliban reportedly eliminated the group's cells that targeted Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in late 2022, and the group has not launched further cross-border attacks since then.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, IS-KP still attracts recruits from disparate parts of Central and South Asia and encourages attacks outside Afghanistan, arguably making it the most dangerous armed group in the region.<sup>48</sup>

### B. *Militants in Northern Afghanistan*

Regional countries are also concerned about a plethora of other transnational jihadist groups operating from Afghanistan. Central Asian states understandably focus on militants in the country's north, near their borders, who have longstanding ambitions to foment rebellion in their home countries.<sup>49</sup> Many of these smaller groups consist of no more than a few dozen fighters, but however tiny, they remain a key priority for China, Russia and the Central Asian states because the militants in question often belong to Uyghur, Uzbek, Tajik and other ethnic groups with links to constitu-

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<sup>44</sup> See tweet by TOLO News, @TOLONews, 2.28pm, 15 September 2023. Ayaz Gul, "US says it's working to hold Afghan Taliban to anti-terror pledges", Voice of America, 10 July 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Lucas Webber, "Islamic State Khurasan down but not out under increased Taliban CT and spy pressure", *Militant Wire*, 13 May 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, "An Unfamiliar Challenge: How the Taliban are Meeting the IS Threat on Afghanistan's Campuses", Royal United Services Institute, May 2023.

<sup>47</sup> "Taliban: Those responsible for firing rockets into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have been killed", Voice of America Pashto, 17 July 2022 [Pashto].

<sup>48</sup> In June 2023, for example, Turkish police arrested a Tajik national who was believed to be responsible for sending foreign recruits to IS-KP in Afghanistan. See "Turkish police arrest 'high-ranking' Daesh/ISIS terrorist in Istanbul", Anadolu Agency, 22 June 2023. For background on Turkish counter-terrorism efforts, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°267, *An Enduring Challenge: ISIS-linked Foreigners in Türkiye*, 28 February 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Other than IS-KP and the TTP, regional states claim that Afghanistan harbours al-Qaeda; its local branch, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent; Jamaat Ansarullah; Katiba-e Imam Bukhari; East Turkistan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party; Islamic Jihad Group; Katibah al-Tawhid wal Jihad; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan; and others. "Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban", UNSC S/2023/95, 13 February 2023.

encies in their countries.<sup>50</sup> It is partly for this reason that Afghanistan's neighbours have pushed the Taliban to form a government that reflects the country's ethnic diversity: they fear the lack of inclusion could stir unrest with these ethnic-based armed groups that might, in theory, spill across borders.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, most regional engagement with the Taliban on security issues does not involve pushing for an overhaul of government; day to day, diplomats are making requests for Taliban action against particular bands of gunmen. These entreaties sometimes get results: the acting defence minister personally answered a call from a neighbouring country to disband a militant group in a border province.<sup>52</sup> The Taliban are unwilling to eliminate these groups, however, eliciting frustration and bewilderment from the region.<sup>53</sup> For example, in this instance, the Taliban, instead of imprisoning the jihadists, reportedly split the 75 fighters into three contingents, relocating each to a separate location on the other side of the country. Allegedly, the Taliban integrated some of these militants into the security forces to keep a close eye on them and provide them with a source of income.<sup>54</sup>

Such gambits are risky. The Taliban actively seek diplomatic relations with regional countries, while harbouring groups that want to overthrow the same governments. As a regional diplomat put it: "Afghanistan continues to remain a safe haven for terror groups; now, it is just not as blatant as in the 1990s".<sup>55</sup> The risks are even greater when all sides are not forthright about security concerns. The most notorious case of Taliban secrecy involved al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, whose death in a Kabul house controlled by the acting interior minister raised questions among neighbours about whether the Taliban could be trusted. After U.S. forces killed Zawahiri, the region grew more vigilant about the Taliban providing other militants with safe havens – even accusing them of giving foreign fighters Afghan residency and citizenship documents.<sup>56</sup> Prompted by this newfound distrust, a number of regional actors issued warnings that likely exaggerated the number of foreign fighters in Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> "Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban", UNSC S/2022/419, 26 May 2022.

<sup>51</sup> For example, China has called for an "open and inclusive political structure" in Kabul. "China's Position on the Afghan Issue", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 12 April 2023. No regional diplomat has admitted to tension between calls for pluralism in Afghanistan and the scarcity of such political diversity in their own countries.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, regional official, August 2023.

<sup>53</sup> A Taliban crackdown on the smaller groups discussed in this section is likely only if a group joins hands with anti-Taliban movements or carries out attacks outside the country. Otherwise, the Taliban often treat foreign militants as political refugees. Crisis Group Report, *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, regional official, August 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview, regional diplomat, October 2022.

<sup>56</sup> "Taliban issues 3,000 passports to terrorists, says Tajik interior minister", *Afghanistan International*, 19 October 2022.

<sup>57</sup> For example, in January 2022, Tajikistan's president stated that nearly 6,000 foreign militants were located near the country's Afghan border. Such figures do not accord with Western estimates. See "Over 6,000 militants located near CSTO southern border – president of Tajikistan", TASS, 10 January 2022.

Despite their neighbours' misgivings, the Taliban seem determined to experiment with their own way of controlling militant groups: weakening them, relocating their fighters and curbing their independence. As a rule, Kabul seeks to integrate jihadists into civilian life rather than cracking down on them or extraditing them.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, the mistrustful region is exploring ways to fortify its rugged borders with Afghanistan to avoid infiltration. Tajikistan, in particular, has been lobbying nearby states to create a "security belt" around the country, strengthening patrols along the frontier.<sup>59</sup> China, which feels confident about having secured its own short border with Afghanistan, is also assisting Dushanbe to guard against militants crossing into China via Tajikistan.<sup>60</sup>

### C. *Militants in Eastern Afghanistan*

While militants in northern Afghanistan are mostly a dormant threat to neighbouring countries, more serious transnational risks have emerged in the country's east. New Delhi is concerned about the alleged continued presence in Afghanistan of Lashkar-e Tayyiba and Jaish-e Muhammad, two pan-Islamist groups that have conducted attacks on Indian soil for decades.<sup>61</sup>

Islamabad, for its part, has reason to worry about the TTP, an umbrella group of tribal factions also known as the Pakistani Taliban, which has gained strength under the tenure of its current chief, Noor Wali Mehsud, intensifying its attacks within Pakistan.<sup>62</sup> The TTP was already becoming more aggressive before 2021, but the Taliban's takeover appears to have emboldened the group. Jailbreaks during the Taliban's sweep to power set free many TTP prisoners, allowing fighters to leave Afghanistan and resume their war to topple the Pakistani state.<sup>63</sup> Since then, the group has conducted a series of spectacular attacks in Pakistan, whose security forces struggle to seal the porous border.<sup>64</sup> In response, Islamabad, which claims that the TTP operates from Afghan soil, has pushed hard for Kabul to crack down on the group – but

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<sup>58</sup> The Taliban believe that many of these smaller groups pose no transnational threat and that ex-militants should be allowed to enjoy civilian lives. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, 2021-2023.

<sup>59</sup> Umed Khakimov, "Why is a security belt around Afghanistan needed?", Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, 18 January 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interviews, India and Pakistan experts, New Delhi, Islamabad, Peshawar and Washington, March and April 2023.

<sup>61</sup> "Report of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Taliban", May 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interviews, India and Pakistan experts, New Delhi, Islamabad, Peshawar and Washington, March and April 2023. Since July 2020, nearly 31 separate militant groups have merged with or joined the TTP. See tweet by Abdul Sayed, @abdsayedd, 11:16am, 8 May 2023. See also Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 16, no. 5 (2023).

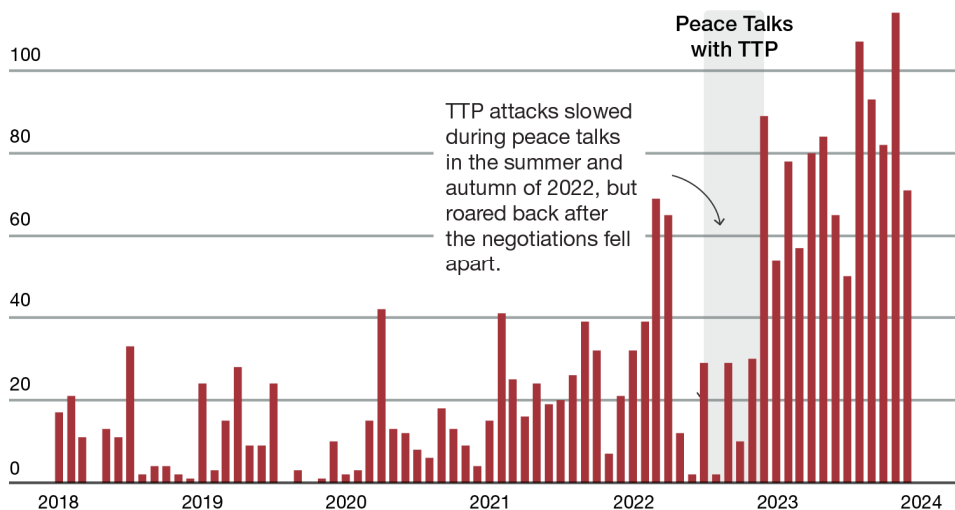
<sup>63</sup> Samina Ahmed, "The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 March 2023.

<sup>64</sup> "The Troubled Afghan-Pakistani Border", Council on Foreign Relations, 20 March 2009; and Ben Farmer and Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, "Pakistan builds border fence, limiting militants and families alike", *The New York Times*, 15 March 2020.

with little success as the Taliban, at least publicly, deny the TTP's very presence in Afghanistan.

Islamabad has tried several tactics: pausing diplomatic efforts to advocate for international engagement with the Taliban; accusing Kabul of violating the 2020 agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban, which included counter-terrorism provisions; temporarily closing border crossings; and seeking to complete fences and other barriers along a border that the Taliban, like earlier Afghan governments, do not recognise.<sup>65</sup> Faced with the Taliban's refusal of repeated requests for action against the TTP, Pakistan even conducted air and artillery strikes inside Afghanistan, which along with Pakistani Taliban commanders also allegedly killed dozens of civilians.<sup>66</sup> More recently, Islamabad has resorted to drastic measures that fall short of military action. In October 2023, Islamabad started mass repatriation of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, also introducing restrictions on transit goods bound for Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup> None of these methods have delivered results, however, and the Taliban's unwillingness to crack down on the TTP could further strain relations between the neighbours.

**Figure 3.** Fatalities Associated with Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan, 2018 to 2024



**Source:** Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); Crisis Group calculations.

These monthly totals include all violence involving TTP and its sub-groups as primary or associated actors in Pakistan from 1 January 2018 to 1 January 2024.

<sup>65</sup> The Taliban have actively opposed Pakistan's efforts to complete fencing on the porous border. Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan vows to continue fencing Afghan border, downplays Taliban disruptive acts", Voice of America, 3 January 2022. On the disputed nature of the Durand border, see Ahmad-Waleed Kakar, "The Durand Line: Beyond Nationalist Fables", *Afghan Eye*, 28 March 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Abubakar Siddique, "Pakistan's deadly air strikes inside Afghanistan increase tensions with Taliban", RFE/RL, 21 April 2022. See also "At least 47 dead in Afghanistan after Pakistan attacks: Officials", Al Jazeera English, 17 April 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Ibraheem Bahiss, "Pakistan's Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 November 2023.

Indeed, as with the northern groups, the Taliban have returned to their standard playbook for reining in foreign militants. Even as they deny the TTP's presence in Afghanistan, they have quietly forbidden the group from carrying out external operations, removed its fighters from border regions, housed TTP groups in "refugee" camps, separated fighters from their units and embedded them in Taliban units to break the chain of command.<sup>68</sup> The TTP is, however, much larger than the northern militant groups, and the Taliban said their plan for curbing the group would involve relocating "thousands" of people.<sup>69</sup>

The Taliban's reluctance to clamp down on the TTP is partly motivated by reluctance to act against a longstanding ideological ally.<sup>70</sup> They may also feel their clout with the TTP is limited, given that many of the group's former members played a key role in founding IS-KP, and if pushed, might defect to their enemies. So far, it remains unclear to what extent the Taliban's approach has moderated the TTP's behaviour, if at all. While some experts believe that Taliban pressure has induced the TTP to agree to negotiations and stick to small-scale attacks on Pakistani troops, such claims are difficult to verify.<sup>71</sup> Whatever the case, one thing is certain: the Taliban are far from satisfying Islamabad's demands vis-à-vis the group.

The TTP has also sought to counter the Taliban's pressures by rallying supporters among the Pashtun tribes and clans in Afghan regions next to Pakistan. While the group's standing on the Pakistani side of the border has diminished in recent months, as evidenced by mass demonstrations against its revived insurgency, the group remains popular on the Afghan side, allowing it to continue to operate, while exploiting differences between Islamabad and Kabul.<sup>72</sup> The TTP also appears to enjoy some local Taliban support.<sup>73</sup> Grievances that lead Afghans to back the TTP include Afghan refugees' allegations of mistreatment by Pakistani security forces; Kabul's claims that Pakistan has annexed Afghan territory; and years of sporadic

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<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kabul, Kandahar and Khost, March–November 2022; TTP affiliates in Nangarhar and Kandahar, November 2023. See also Crisis Group Report, *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, op. cit.

<sup>69</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Taliban move to address Pakistan's cross-border terror complaints", Voice of America, 4 June 2023. Privately, however, Taliban officials intimate that they would require economic assistance in undertaking such a massive relocation program, adding that so far, neither Pakistan nor any other actor has been willing to provide such assistance.

<sup>70</sup> Ahmed, "The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul", op. cit.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interviews, TTP experts in Kabul, Islamabad and Zurich, March–September 2023. It is worth noting that with some exceptions, the TTP has claimed only smaller attacks on Pakistani security forces, leaving other groups, such as Tehreek-e Jihad Pakistan, to take responsibility for larger ones. This little-known group is believed to have links with the TTP. Some experts argue it might be a TTP proxy created to ward off pressure from Islamabad and Kabul. See "Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan: New militant group challenges Pak establishment", *Times of India*, 5 November 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, op. cit. Pakistan estimates that up to 30,000 TTP fighters and family members reside in Afghanistan. See, for example, "Parliamentary body to keep eye on talks with TTP", *Dawn*, 6 July 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Asfandyar Mir, Tamanna Salikuddin, and Andrew Watkins, "Is Pakistan Poised to Take on the TTP?", U.S. Institute of Peace, 14 February 2023. According to Western experts and Taliban officials, the de facto security forces have arrested "hundreds" of Afghans, including Taliban members, whom they suspect of collaborating with the TTP. Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, October 2023.

cross-border shelling by the Pakistani army. Though Islamabad denies many of these charges, anti-Pakistan sentiment, sometimes fuelled by Pashtun nationalism, is widespread in the borderlands.<sup>74</sup>

For now, the TTP's presence in Afghanistan poses the single deadliest threat emanating from the country. Islamabad has reacted by stepping up mass deportation of Afghans and tightening trade restrictions, while also threatening to escalate cross-border strikes unless Kabul takes immediate action.<sup>75</sup> Friction between the neighbours has broader ramifications, including for China, which has extensive economic interests in Pakistan.<sup>76</sup> Any further spread of violence into Pakistan might also erode the fragile consensus among other regional states that, unlike in previous decades of civil war, they will not pick sides among Afghan factions. After all, much of the region's political calculus in favour of working with the Taliban rests on the assumption that the former insurgents can maintain stability. As a top diplomat put it: "Should transnational [militancy] thrive, it would make the Taliban unacceptable to the region".<sup>77</sup>

#### D. *Fears of "Contagion"*

Besides fearing that militancy may spill across Afghan borders, the region also worries that the Islamists' success in overthrowing the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan might inspire their own restive Islamists, heating up simmering insurgencies in places such as the Indian-administered part of Jammu and Kashmir and Central Asia's Fergana Valley.

These "contagion" scenarios arise in part from recent history in other parts of the world, such as Libya, where the 2011 uprising threw open stockpiles of weapons that made their way into nearby countries.<sup>78</sup> In 2021, Afghanistan looked like a similar proliferation risk because the U.S. and its allies left behind military equipment worth billions of dollars when they departed.<sup>79</sup> In the confusion of the Taliban's takeover, fleeing Afghan government forces took numerous armaments into neighbouring countries and smugglers brought other materiel into Pakistan.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, weapons fell into private hands inside Afghanistan as government stores were loot-

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<sup>74</sup> Some claim that Afghans, including Taliban members, might be joining the TTP. See Mir, Salikuddin and Watkins, "Is Pakistan Poised to Take on the TTP?", *op. cit.*

<sup>75</sup> "Khawaja Asif warns of striking terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan", *Dawn*, 13 April 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Some say the strain on Afghan-Pakistani relations is drawing a reluctant China into a mediation role. Crisis Group interviews, Pakistan experts in Washington, May 2023. See also "Joint Statement of the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue", press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 9 May 2023. On China's economic interests in Pakistan, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°297, *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks*, 29 June 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, regional diplomat in Kabul, September 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Nicholas Marsh, "Brothers Came Back with Weapons: The Effects of Arms Proliferation from Libya", *Prism*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2017).

<sup>79</sup> "Collapse of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise", U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghanistan experts, April 2022.

ed.<sup>81</sup> The Taliban tried to address this problem by going door to door, collecting guns for safekeeping in government depots, and they continue to raid hidden arms caches across the country.<sup>82</sup> These actions have slightly eased regional countries' concerns, even if not all Taliban local commanders followed rules for securing the weapons.<sup>83</sup>

Another export from Afghanistan would seem to be harder to control: revolutionary ideas. Diplomats from countries across the region express anxiety that the Taliban's triumph over a superpower will galvanise Islamists opposing their own governments. To some degree, the Taliban has allayed these concerns as well by expressing little sympathy for Muslim rebellions in nearby countries. With rare exceptions, the new authorities in Kabul have refrained from public comment on militant groups in China, India and Central Asian states. Still, they are putting out propaganda in several of the languages spoken in the region, and some of the policies they advertise – for example, on battling corruption and respecting religious values – are troubling to nearby governments that view such messages as implicit criticism of their own rule.<sup>84</sup>

So far, at least, the fears of contagion seem exaggerated. Except for Pakistan, places in the region previously beset with Islamist militancy have witnessed lower levels of violence since the Taliban takeover. From the start of 2018 to August 2021, Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir saw 44 fatalities in violent incidents on average per month; since the Taliban returned to power, that number has fallen to 21 per month.<sup>85</sup> Central Asia's Fergana Valley, where Uzbekistan has regularly put down Islamist uprisings in previous decades, has remained almost entirely peaceful since 2021.<sup>86</sup> These developments obviously have local explanations, and probably little, if any, connection to Afghanistan, but the trend does indicate that the initial worries about guns, fighters and jihadist ideology spilling across borders in the aftermath of Taliban victory were overblown.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, op. cit. See also Ashley Jackson, Maiwand and Florian Weigand, "Taliban Arms Management Practices", Small Arms Survey, June 2023.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional diplomats, Kabul, 2023. One positive indicator is the rising prices for weapons in local markets, which point to a smaller number in circulation. Justine Fleischer, "Arms Smuggling Dynamics under Taliban Rule", Small Arms Survey, July 2023.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional diplomats, Kabul, 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group calculations based on fatalities in all incidents recorded by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 1 January 2018-31 July 2023.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

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## IV. Economic Dynamics

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### A. *New Impetus for Regional Trade and Connectivity*

From the days of the Silk Routes, prosperity in Afghanistan's neighbourhood has depended on trade – with much of it passing through the country. In the last few decades, warfare turned Afghanistan into a roadblock to regional development. Since 2021, however, stability under the Taliban has revived regional actors' dreams of trade corridors spanning South and Central Asia, giving new life to old plans for easing the flow of freight, gas and electricity.<sup>87</sup> The Taliban and officials of neighbouring governments express interest in such economic cooperation, all for their own reasons. The region is trying to insulate itself from Western sanctions on Russia, Iran and Afghanistan, as well as the prospect of further economic restrictions on China. Central Asian countries, in particular, worry they will end up surrounded by pariah states and cut off from global markets.<sup>88</sup> For their part, Moscow and Beijing are keen to foster the regional economy as a buffer against pressure from the West.<sup>89</sup> The region wants business with Kabul mostly for the sake of diversifying trade routes – while also, perhaps, tempering the Taliban's erratic tendencies with incentives for good behaviour.

Kabul's motivations are stronger. After the Taliban took over, the West froze central bank assets and cut aid that previously had covered 75 per cent of state spending, while offering only partial sanctions relief.<sup>90</sup> Afghan GDP contracted by 21 per cent in 2021.<sup>91</sup> The Taliban scrambled to halt the economic freefall, focusing on self-sufficiency and regional connectivity, not just as a way of paying the bills, but also as a defensive measure: by holding out the prospect that stable rule in Afghanistan would pay dividends in the form of economic opportunities, they made the former a matter of self-interest for regional actors.<sup>92</sup> Customs duties emerged as the biggest source of revenue for the new regime, as it tackled widespread corruption and removed predatory checkpoints that had proliferated during the war, hampering trade.<sup>93</sup> The Taliban also invited foreign companies back to the country, but the few investors willing to take the risk were mostly from the region: for instance, the largest mining concessions to date have been awarded to local firms backed by Chinese, Iranian or Turkish partners.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Previous Afghan governments also sought to exploit the country's location to connect regional markets. See, for example, "Manifesto of Change and Continuity Team", Ashraf Ghani campaign publication, March 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional experts in Washington, April 2023.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, op. cit.

<sup>91</sup> "Afghanistan Socioeconomic Outlook 2023", UN Development Programme, 18 April 2023.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, "Speech by Afghan Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi at OIC Foreign Ministers meeting in Islamabad 15/05/1443 Hijri Lunar – 19/12/2021", Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 December 2021.

<sup>93</sup> David Mansfield, "Changing the Rules of the Game: How the Taliban Regulated Cross-Border Trade and Upended Afghanistan's Political Economy", XCEPT, 25 July 2022.

<sup>94</sup> "The Taliban say they have signed mining contracts worth \$6.5 billion in Afghanistan", AP, 31 August 2023.



A degree of economic stability returned, as Kabul's revenues picked up, exports grew, inflation fell, the currency recovered and the proportion of food-insecure households declined from 70 per cent in late 2021 to 59 per cent in early 2023.<sup>95</sup> Still, millions of Afghans suffer extreme poverty at a time when Western donors, put off by the Taliban's discrimination against women, are turning away, resulting in billions of dollars cut from humanitarian budgets for 2023.<sup>96</sup> The Taliban had found ways to pay hundreds of thousands of civil servants, but their burden grew in 2023 as humanitarian agencies stopped covering salaries for some medical staff.<sup>97</sup> Pressures on the central bank, still deprived of its assets, are expected to mount in 2024 as aid dwindles, clouding the macro-economic picture.<sup>98</sup>

The Taliban, who know they need economic growth to stay afloat, have pushed for Afghanistan's inclusion in regional development plans.<sup>99</sup> Their main priority appears to be constructing a trans-Afghan railway that would link Uzbekistan with Pakistan, which could shorten delivery times by up to five days, thereby reducing transport costs.<sup>100</sup> It would also connect to the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan rail system, which started running trains into the Afghan border town of Hairatan in 2022.<sup>101</sup> But no country involved appears to want to spend the billions of dollars required to build the railway, and international development agencies backed away after the Taliban takeover.<sup>102</sup> Doubts persist about Kabul's technical capacity to undertake such an ambitious project.<sup>103</sup> The deterioration of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations over the

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<sup>95</sup> "Afghanistan Economic Update", World Bank, 14 June 2023.

<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group's mid-year calculations found that the UN received only 17 per cent of the funding requested in its 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan for Afghanistan, the lowest proportion for any country except Honduras. Financial Tracking Service, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, August 2023.

<sup>97</sup> Charlotte Greenfield, "Red Cross set to end funding at 25 hospitals in Afghanistan", Reuters, 17 August 2023.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western economists, July-August 2023.

<sup>99</sup> Afghanistan previously aimed for inclusion in regional development schemes such as China's Belt and Road Initiative; the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership; the Ashgabat Agreement; the EU's Global Gateway; the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment; and the International North-South Transport Corridor that links India, via Iran, with Central Asia. The Taliban have continued seeking membership in these schemes, despite their pariah status. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, 2022-2023.

<sup>100</sup> Kabul also seeks to build a secondary railway from Mazar-e-Sharif to Herat, connecting Afghanistan's fledgling network with Iran. For now, these plans appear to be postponed, possibly due to lack of funds. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, 2023.

<sup>101</sup> See tweet by Shen Shiwei, @shen\_shewei, political and economic analyst, 10:55am, 26 September 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Prior to the Taliban's takeover, the World Bank had expressed interest in lending support, perhaps with other international financial institutions. Abdul Hadi Mayar, "Trans-Afghan railway line", *Daily Times*, 3 December 2022.

<sup>103</sup> Another challenge is reaching agreement on the route. Afghanistan and Uzbekistan want a railway via the Torkham border crossing, but Pakistan reportedly pushed for the track to run via a crossing farther south, at Kharlachi. See "Afghan Railway Authority: Pakistan has a proposal to change the route of the Afghan-Transit project", *TOLO News*, 3 June 2023 [Pashto].

TTP has dulled appetites as well. Similar concerns have delayed longstanding efforts to link the region's electricity and gas supply networks.<sup>104</sup>

### B. *Modest Investments, So Far*

With mega-projects on hold, Kabul appears to be exploring more modest efforts. The Ministry of Water and Energy has, for example, proposed small-scale projects for energy generation, such as wind farms.<sup>105</sup> Before investing in railways, the Taliban are also spending their meagre development budget on improving the roads connecting Afghanistan with its neighbours, upgrading infrastructure at border crossings and regularising trade practices.<sup>106</sup>

Kabul has also been promoting regional investments in extractive industries, but most of these projects remain at exploratory stages. For example, in September 2022, an Iranian company signed an agreement for the extraction of lead and zinc in Ghor province.<sup>107</sup> In January 2023, Kabul inked a deal for development of the Amu Darya oilfields with a Chinese company, Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas, which later unveiled further investments in Afghanistan.<sup>108</sup> Despite the grand announcements, work has been slow getting started. The exceptions have been low-key projects such as Perozi Park, an industrial complex near Kabul, with construction co-sponsored by Beijing. At the time of the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the area was still a wasteland.<sup>109</sup>

For now, much of the investment by regional actors is extremely cautious at best, and performative at worst, geared toward boosting relations with Kabul without risking much capital.<sup>110</sup> Investors may simply lack confidence in the Taliban's ability to manage the economy, but some have also had bad experiences in Afghanistan. Missteps by Chinese entrepreneurs best illustrate the volatility of economic adventurism in the country since 2021. The departure of U.S. forces sparked a "gold rush" among Chinese speculators, many of whom arrived from prospecting in Africa to

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<sup>104</sup> Kabul continues to push for completion of the Central Asia South Asia-1000 Project, which would bring electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan; the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan plan to connect Central Asian countries to an Afghanistan electrical grid that could re-export power to Pakistan; and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. See, for example, "Ministry of Interior Affairs has shared the security plan for TAPI project with Turkmenistan", Bakhtar News Agency, 22 February 2022 [Dari].

<sup>105</sup> See tweet by TOLO News, @TOLONews, 2:32pm, 9 May 2023.

<sup>106</sup> Most government revenue, about \$2.4 billion in 2022, is spent on meeting the state payroll. The amount left over for rebuilding, however, now goes further than under the previous government. Construction costs have dropped by 35 to 50 per cent, because significantly less money is going to cover security and bribes to officials. Crisis Group interview, construction firm owner, Istanbul, November 2022.

<sup>107</sup> "Report: Iran firm signs deal to develop Afghan lead, zinc mines", Press TV, 28 September 2022.

<sup>108</sup> "Chinese mining company to invest \$350 million in Afghanistan", *Khaama News*, 7 July 2023.

<sup>109</sup> "Industrial park construction underway in Afghan province", Xinhua, 12 May 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Such diplomatic signals are well received by the Taliban and amplified in their propaganda. For example, Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar announced that foreign firms had "shown a willingness to invest around \$10 billion". See tweet by Office of Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, @FDPM\_AFG, 2:33pm, 28 February 2023.

seek precious metals, gems, rare earths and other mineral wealth.<sup>111</sup> Some of these entrepreneurs told Crisis Group that the early efforts faltered, with the would-be investors going home “after having discovered that this frontier market might be more ‘frontier’ than expected”.<sup>112</sup> Some businessmen tried to bribe their way past Taliban regulations and, allegedly, set up alcohol distilleries and prostitution rings, getting themselves arrested.<sup>113</sup>

There appears to have been a misunderstanding between the Taliban and this wave of entrepreneurs, with the former hoping for investments by Chinese state-backed firms and instead getting small-time chancers. So far, bigger Chinese companies seem content to purchase exploration rights to Afghan mines, even if they are not developing them yet, perhaps as a means of seeking control of what is found underground and influencing commodity prices.<sup>114</sup>

### C. *Tensions over Water*

Water management has emerged as a point of contention between the new government in Kabul and neighbouring states. Tensions over water had simmered for decades, but grew in recent years, to the point of reportedly triggering border clashes with Iran. The most important reason is the impact of climate change: with 80 per cent of its water coming from snowmelt and glaciers, Afghanistan is among the countries most vulnerable to global warming.<sup>115</sup> About 60 per cent of the country’s households now suffer water shortages, while hotter winters and precipitous spring seasons are respectively causing droughts and floods.<sup>116</sup> Making things worse is the fact that Afghanistan lags behind its neighbours in developing water infrastructure. Meanwhile, other countries have built agricultural sectors that depend on an unhindered supply of water from Afghanistan.

These factors drive the Taliban to seek ways of catching up, pursuing ambitious water projects that are raising hackles in the region. Afghanistan is mostly upstream from countries next door, which means they often view Afghan dams and irrigation systems as threats.<sup>117</sup> A complication is that among Afghanistan’s many transboundary rivers, only one is subject to a water-sharing agreement. The rest are governed only by international customary law, which calls for “equitable and reasonable” use

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<sup>111</sup> See, for example, “The Chinese entrepreneurs chasing an Afghan ‘gold rush’”, video, Al Jazeera, 24 November 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, October 2022.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. Foreign entrepreneurs who did not speak the local languages also depended on Afghan interpreters, and some Chinese businessmen fell prey to their fraudulent schemes.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, business consultant involved in such talks, June 2023.

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, “Afghanistan Water Resources Profile Overview”, USAID, 2 August 2021.

<sup>116</sup> Tweet by OCHA Afghanistan, @OCHA Afg, 1:42pm, 14 May 2023. Crisis Group mapping of Afghan regions affected by floods and droughts between January 1990 and October 2022 shows that rainfall excesses and deficits have become more intense, affecting larger areas for longer periods of time. Crisis Group Report, *Taliban Restrictions on Women’s Rights Deepen Afghanistan’s Crisis*, op. cit., Appendix A.

<sup>117</sup> The previous Afghan government complained that upstream countries had built too many dams and were not allowing water to flow into Afghanistan. Crisis Group interviews, current and former Afghan officials, 2022-2023.

of water, without clarifying what that phrase entails.<sup>118</sup> The fact that previous Afghan governments drummed up nationalist fervour for water projects, giving the issue populist appeal, has not helped the Taliban in managing relations with their neighbours. The Taliban have also seized upon water infrastructure not only for its practical value but also as a propaganda piece meant to portray their efficient governance, filling their media outlets with footage shot from drones showing construction in several provinces.<sup>119</sup> Among these, works in two places – a canal in the north and a dam in the south – are most contentious.

### 1. Concerns from Central Asia

In the north, the Taliban inaugurated the Qush Tepa Canal in March 2022, making swift progress on what ranks as their largest infrastructure project.<sup>120</sup> When finished, the canal will divert water from the Amu Darya, a river that separates Afghanistan from its Central Asian neighbours. The canal will traverse 285km of northern Afghanistan before reconnecting with the river, irrigating up to 550,000 hectares of farmland.<sup>121</sup> Kabul funded the project from the national budget, at times awarding mining rights to contractors in lieu of payment to spare the cash-strapped treasury.<sup>122</sup> More than 100 companies are reportedly involved, with over 7,000 workers.<sup>123</sup> By October 2023, phase one of the project was complete and the second under way.<sup>124</sup>

The imminent prospect of the canal diverting part of the Amu Darya revived old fears in the region: Crisis Group has been reporting about the potential for water conflicts between Afghanistan and Central Asian states for over twenty years.<sup>125</sup> Afghanistan appears to be joining Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as upstream countries that, struggling economically, are trying to keep more water even as neighbours downstream – namely, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan – need more for

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<sup>118</sup> Mohsen Nagheeb, “Anarchy and the Law of International Watercourses”, Northumbria University, 2021.

<sup>119</sup> Former President Ashraf Ghani had also hoped that water infrastructure would “unite Afghans”, transcending ethnic and geographical divisions, according to an ex-official in his government. Crisis Group interview, 2023.

<sup>120</sup> Besides Qush Tepa, the Taliban have been working on several projects that Ghani and his predecessors championed, such as the Kajaki dam in Helmand province, the Kamal Khan dam in Nimroz province and the Namak Aab canal in Takhar province. Work is also under way on the Toori dam in Zabul province, while the Taliban cabinet has called for completion of the Shah wa Aroos dam on the Kabul River. “Ministry of Water and Energy’s press conference on the gains of the past year”, video, YouTube, 3 April 2023 [Pashto].

<sup>121</sup> The canal will stretch across Balkh, Jawzjan and Faryab provinces. Crisis Group interviews, Afghan and Western officials, Kabul, 2022-2023.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban officials, 2022-2023.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interview, water experts, Western and Taliban officials, June 2023.

<sup>124</sup> The project is divided into three phases: the first entailed a 108km canal extending from Amu Darya to Dawlatabad district in Balkh; the second involves a 177km extension from Dawlatabad to Andkhoy district in Faryab via Jawzjan province; and the third will entail digging sub-canals to distribute water to agricultural lands. Crisis Group interviews, 2023.

<sup>125</sup> See, for instance, Crisis Group Europe & Central Asia Report N°34, *Central Asia: Water and Conflict*, 30 May 2002.

their growing agricultural sectors.<sup>126</sup> The five Central Asian countries already squabble over water, despite a 1992 agreement among them on allocating it, to which Afghanistan is not a party.<sup>127</sup> Still, Kabul is bound by international law, including the obligations to notify affected states of waterworks and to abide by a no-harm principle.<sup>128</sup> Central Asian states say they were never informed, let alone consulted, about the Taliban's plans for the canal.<sup>129</sup>

Downstream countries want further discussion of the canal to find ways of mitigating its impact on transboundary water flows. In an attempt to reduce wastage caused by the Taliban's rudimentary construction methods, Uzbekistan has even offered technical support for the project.<sup>130</sup> But the Taliban are wary, arguing that the project is in line with provisions in international customary law about "reasonable and equitable" use of water and that previous Afghan governments, having been planning the canal since the 1970s, already satisfied the notification requirement. The Taliban sometimes view foreigners' efforts to talk about the canal or offer assistance as delaying tactics.<sup>131</sup> Given how important the project has become to the Taliban's self-portrayal domestically, and the money involved, Kabul will not want to adjust the schedule – even as delegations keep visiting from nearby countries to persuade them otherwise.<sup>132</sup>

## 2. Conflict with Iran

On the country's southern borders, a similar conflict over water has often sparked public accusations by both sides. Iran and Afghanistan are feuding over the Helmand river, Afghanistan's longest waterway, which drains about 40 percent of the country and is critical for irrigation in its arid southern provinces. The main point of contention is Kamal Khan dam, inaugurated in 2021 by the previous Afghan government. Downstream, the river is vital to the wellbeing of the volatile Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan, where wetlands are drying up and scientists predict that

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<sup>126</sup> On previous tensions between upstream and downstream countries, see Crisis Group Europe & Central Asia Report N°233, *Water Pressures in Central Asia*, 11 September 2014.

<sup>127</sup> Aibek Zhupankhan, Kamshat Tussupova and Ronny Berndtsson, "Could Changing Power Relationships Lead to Better Water Sharing in Central Asia?", *Water*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2017), p. 139.

<sup>128</sup> Although Afghanistan is not party to an agreement governing the Amu Darya river, certain international customary law principles are likely to apply, including the principle of equitable and reasonable use, the obligation not to cause significant harm, and the duty to cooperate and protect ecological systems. See the UN Watercourses Convention, 1977.

<sup>129</sup> Both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan could be significantly affected. A paper co-authored by Afghanistan's former water negotiator concluded: "A reduction in flow would threaten agriculture, worsen water shortages, and risk aggravating the socio-economic and environmental situation in a volatile region". Mohd Faizee and Susanne Schmeier, "Charting Complex Currents: The Qosh Tepa Canal and Central Asia's Water", *New Security Beat*, 18 August 2023.

<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western officials based in Kabul, July-August 2023.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban officials, June 2023.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* See also "Uzbekistan pursues mediation with Afghanistan over Qosh Tepa canal", *Eurasianet*, 19 October 2023.

planned Afghan dams could threaten 70 per cent of wheat production.<sup>133</sup> Disagreements over rights to the river may have contributed to deadly clashes between Taliban and Iranian forces in May 2023, though both sides deny it played a role.<sup>134</sup>

Unlike the dispute with Afghanistan's northern neighbours, the longstanding tensions with Iran could ideally be mitigated by an existing deal on water sharing. A 1973 bilateral agreement stipulated that Tehran would be entitled to fixed amounts of water, which were to be determined after construction of a hydrometric station and three testing stations in Afghanistan.<sup>135</sup> With the political upheavals both countries lived through in the following years, the deal was never ratified or put into practice.<sup>136</sup> But it remains a point of reference, with both sides invoking its provisions during their recent spats over water sharing.<sup>137</sup>

Mirroring their behaviour in other water disputes, the Taliban have signalled that regional concerns will not slow down their infrastructure plans near the Iranian frontier. Soon after the border clash, and even as bilateral talks continued about the Helmand river in May 2023, senior Taliban officials announced fresh construction on the Bakhshabad dam, located on the Farah Rud, another river flowing into Iran. The fact that this dam was inaugurated in the middle of the diplomatic tussle over the Helmand suggested that Kabul will keep building water infrastructure, even when neighbours vehemently disagree.<sup>138</sup>

The Taliban's high tolerance for conflict over water arises in part from their hopes that hydroelectric projects could make Afghanistan, which currently imports 80 per

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<sup>133</sup> Hoojjat Mianabadi, Simin Alioghli and Saeed Morid, "Quantitative Evaluation of 'No-harm' Rule in International Transboundary Water Law in the Helmand River Basin", *Journal of Hydrology*, vol. 599, August 2021.

<sup>134</sup> Ruchi Kumar, "On the Afghanistan-Iran border, climate change fuels a fight over water", *Science*, 4 August 2023. The May 2023 clash came at a time of heightened tensions between Tehran and Kabul over the Helmand, leading observers to speculate that it was linked to the water dispute. But both Iranian and Afghan officials told Crisis Group the border skirmish arose due to local factors and was not part of broader political tensions. Crisis Group interviews, regional experts, Kabul and Tehran, August 2023.

<sup>135</sup> "The Afghan-Iranian Helmand River Water Treaty", original text, archived by the International Water Law Project, Texas A&M University School of Law. Although it is not covered in the agreement, Afghan officials have claimed that the understanding with Iran also allowed Afghan traders unrestricted access to the Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bander Abbas. Fatemeh Aman, "Issue Brief: Water Dispute Escalating between Iran and Afghanistan", Atlantic Council South Asia Center, August 2016.

<sup>136</sup> Aman, "Issue Brief: Water Dispute Escalating between Iran and Afghanistan", op. cit. See also Nilab Saeedi, "The Silent War: 'Afghanistan and Iran Water Crisis'", *AHBVU Edebiyat Fakultesi Dergisi*, vol. 7 (2022).

<sup>137</sup> See "Iran president says Islamic Emirate allowing experts to check water levels", *TOLO News*, 29 August 2023. Also see tweet by Farouq Azam, senior adviser to the Ministry of Energy and Water, @DrFarouqAzam, 8:09am, 13 May 2022.

<sup>138</sup> Downstream neighbours are not without leverage. Afghanistan relies on electricity supplies from Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and electricity shortages during severe winters have made Kabul worried that neighbouring states could use electricity as a form of pressure in water negotiations. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials in Kabul and Balkh, October 2022-March 2023. See also "Cold snap and electricity shortages slam Central Asia, Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, 2 February 2023.

cent of its electricity, self-sufficient in energy. More urgently, Kabul also faces rising demand for water from farmers, especially in the Taliban heartlands of southern Afghanistan. The need for irrigation in those regions rose sharply in 2023, after the Taliban banned opium cultivation and farmers switched to growing cotton and other more water-intensive crops.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, 2022-2023.

## V. Better Regional Dialogue

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The lack of trust between the Taliban and their neighbours is evident, and tensions on some of Afghanistan's borders appear to be growing. This wariness prompts countries in the region to cherry-pick issues they want to engage on, focusing on matters of highest priority in their respective capitals. While such a pragmatic approach is logical from a diplomatic standpoint, it misses opportunities for solving interrelated sets of problems. For their part, the Taliban need to set aside concerns about falling under foreign influence if they wish to achieve better collaboration with their neighbours. Broad-based security cooperation could address regional states' concerns about militant groups inside Afghanistan, while also easing Taliban worries about insurgents getting help from outside the country. Similarly, better integration of regional economic development plans could lead to forging shared economic interests, building incentives for cooperation instead of destructive rivalries.

### A. Security Cooperation

The first step toward better regional security cooperation will be cooling down the rhetoric on all sides and getting regional actors on the same page about security issues, agreeing on a set of facts even if they have different priorities. Taliban forces have got better at targeting IS-KP leaders, but information sharing remains limited, since the Taliban have not built confidence with regional partners.<sup>140</sup> Part of the problem is that the Taliban lack credibility due to their blanket denials regarding certain threats – particularly the TTP – while regional countries offer inflated estimates of the number of militants allegedly based in Afghanistan. There is also a schism between how the Taliban prefer to deal with many of the Islamist militant groups inside Afghanistan and how the region would like Kabul to deal with them.

It does not help that UN monitoring teams, which used to visit Afghanistan to provide independent assessments of terrorist threats, have not returned since 2021. The UN accepts information only from member states, meaning that the Taliban cannot assist the monitoring because they lack a UN seat. Member states should continue to encourage the UN to send the monitors back to the country or at least to seek feedback from Afghan forces on militant groups, which would represent a step toward refocusing global counter-terrorism institutions on transnational threats rather than groups with local agendas like the Taliban.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Some information sharing about security is happening: in August 2023, Pakistan praised the Taliban for promptly informing Islamabad of the arrest of TTP members inside Afghanistan. Abdullah Momand, "Afghan govt has arrested some perpetrators of terrorism in Pakistan: FM Jilani", *Dawn*, 31 August 2023.

<sup>141</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2716 (2023) includes a provision "encouraging the Monitoring Team to visit Afghanistan and meet with relevant stakeholders". UN officials say it is unclear, however, whether the team will be able to visit the country any time soon. Crisis Group interviews, New York, January 2024. See also "Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts (1988 Committee)", UNSC S/RES/2716, 14 December 2023.



Regional forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization could also play a greater role in addressing the plethora of emerging challenges at the regional level.<sup>142</sup> In fact, there are conversations within the organisation about reactivating the Afghanistan contact group, first established in 2005, with a view to fostering a regional platform for engagement with Kabul.<sup>143</sup> Regardless of the format, regional players need to discuss the legitimate security needs of all actors around the table. Simply comparing notes might lead to tangible cooperation: some regional countries have expressed a desire for greater information sharing – and, possibly, even training and equipping Taliban forces – even if that remains controversial with their own populations.<sup>144</sup>

If regional security cooperation is to become a viable option, it must be based on reciprocal transparency. While Afghanistan's neighbours complain about the Taliban's lack of decisive action against groups that threaten their security, they themselves have only provided limited information in response to Kabul's requests for lists of the weapons and ammunition they received from fleeing members of the previous government's armed forces.<sup>145</sup> The Taliban also express frustration at getting no answers from neighbours (especially Pakistan) to their queries about alleged sightings of drones in Afghanistan's airspace.<sup>146</sup> Finally, the de facto authorities in Kabul want to know how anti-Taliban fighters are slipping into the country, but they receive little response from their neighbours.<sup>147</sup>

Such cooperation might be easiest, at first, along Afghanistan's rugged borders, where neighbouring countries seek to staunch the flows of migrants, drugs, guns and jihadists coming from the country. Skirmishes on the frontiers fell off in the second year of Taliban rule, but the persistence of such incidents point to the lack of cooperation between Taliban patrols and their counterparts.<sup>148</sup> Central Asian countries have

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<sup>142</sup> The Taliban want to join security talks at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, where Afghanistan has observer status. The organisation appears reluctant, so far; alternatives might be China's Global Security Initiative or ad hoc dialogue tracks such as the meetings hosted in recent years by Uzbekistan. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, 2022-23.

<sup>143</sup> The contact group was revitalised in 2015, when Beijing sought to use it to address questions about how Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours might change when U.S. and other foreign troops eventually withdrew. See "Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *The Diplomat*, 14 July 2021.

<sup>144</sup> In late 2022, Iran called for forming a security commission consisting of Afghanistan and the regional countries to facilitate greater cooperation with Kabul, including information sharing, training and provision of equipment. See "Tehran has proposed a regional cooperation commission for security collaboration with Kabul", video, YouTube, 22 November 2022 [Pashto].

<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, 2022-2023. Except for Iran, regional states have so far been reluctant to give back the weaponry and aircraft abandoned by forces from the previous government when they fled across borders in 2021. "Annual Report of the Foreign Ministry", op. cit.

<sup>146</sup> "Taliban accuses Pakistan of allowing US drones in Afghan airspace", Al Jazeera, 28 August 2022.

<sup>147</sup> The Taliban worry that Afghan embassies, controlled by former Afghan officials, are giving business visas to anti-Taliban resistance figures. Senior Taliban members have also expressed concern that IS-KP funnels recruits into the country using illegal migration routes, including from Türkiye via Iran. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul and regional capitals, 2022-2023.

<sup>148</sup> Crisis Group analysis of ACLED data for Afghanistan suggests that from August 2021 to August 2022, there were at least 67 incidents involving the armed forces of neighbouring countries; in the subsequent twelve-month period the number declined to 40. The number of deaths arising from

placed restrictions on some border crossings, allowing only representatives of local businesses to pass, which improves security but hurts trade. Another major problem is that the Taliban do not recognise the Durand Line as an official border, and have, at times, sent troops to impede Pakistan's fencing of the boundary.<sup>149</sup> Given that all past Afghan governments have refused to recognise this border, inherited from colonial times, it is hard to imagine the Taliban doing so, but that should not prevent them from cooperating on practical steps that improve security for both Afghanistan and the neighbourhood.

At best, the Taliban would accept help with the professionalisation of Afghan border guards, and all neighbours would agree on installing new technology at border crossings. Given the need to build trust, a starting point might be for Kabul to satisfy the neighbours' requests to keep Taliban fighters away from their borders unless they belong to the uniformed Afghan border units. If the region wants the Taliban to improve the professionalism and efficiency of their security forces, however, they could support it in doing so. While they may understandably feel uncomfortable handing over military equipment abandoned on their territory by the armed forces of the previous Afghan government, countries across the region could also benefit from supplying equipment for border screening and customs integration. Neighbouring states welcomed Tajikistan's proposal for establishing a "security belt" around Afghanistan in early 2023.<sup>150</sup> This "belt", which aims to provide a buffer against militants operating from inside Afghanistan, could also be extended to address the Taliban's concerns about infiltration across the border in the other direction.<sup>151</sup>

Of all the risks that threaten to spill over into the region, the TTP is the deadliest. Kabul should constrain the TTP by curtailing the group's capacity to recruit, train and raise funds on Afghan soil. Stronger action by the Taliban, including jailing individuals assisting the TTP in attacks on Pakistani targets or putting TTP leaders in Afghanistan under house arrest, would allow Pakistani forces to counter cross-border threats more effectively. But Islamabad will also have to address the root causes of the militancy in Pakistan itself if counter-insurgency operations are to stand a chance of success.<sup>152</sup>

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these incidents also declined, after a spike in early 2022 when Pakistan conducted airstrikes on suspected TTP militants in Afghanistan.

<sup>149</sup> "DG ISKP press conference", video, YouTube, 5 January 2022. Some experts on the narcotics trade say Pakistan does not want to close all the gaps in the fence, because Pakistani officials (along with the Taliban) allegedly profit from drug smuggling. Crisis Group interviews, 2023.

<sup>150</sup> "Samarkand Declaration of the Fourth Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's Neighbouring States", press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 14 April 2023.

<sup>151</sup> Such cooperation would expand on the meetings that have already occurred between Kabul and Tashkent on mechanisms for resolving border issues at a technical level. "The Foreign Ministry's annual report", video, YouTube, 7 September 2022 [Pashto].

<sup>152</sup> In five months of TTP talks, after a Pakistani parliamentary committee formally approved negotiations in early July 2022 until the discussions fell apart late that November, TTP-related incidents caused 96 fatalities in Pakistan – lower than similar five-month periods before (185 fatalities) and after (358 fatalities). Crisis Group analysis of ACLED data.

## B. *Economic Integration*

The Taliban takeover has resulted in widespread poverty, from which the only escape is economic development that surpasses the high rate of population growth and overcomes hurdles such as insecurity and climate change.<sup>153</sup> Many neighbouring countries also need strong growth to keep up with swelling labour forces.<sup>154</sup> Against this backdrop, the case for better regional economic connectivity is overwhelming, especially in the energy sector, where Central Asian countries are in search of new markets while South Asia needs new supplies of oil, gas and electricity.<sup>155</sup> Government planners across the region have been drafting schemes for such integration for decades, but now that Afghanistan is finally peaceful, allowing for their rollout, the Taliban have made themselves into global pariahs.

Investments in the frontier market are no doubt risky, as the bruising experience of Chinese investors has shown, but the region has strategic reasons to encourage ventures in Afghanistan as part of long-term planning for economic integration, which in turn would help with regional stability. The Taliban are frustrated that regional partners are slow to move ahead with projects such as railways, mines, electricity lines and trade corridors, and while some of the blame falls on the Taliban (see below), the region as a whole would clearly benefit from more alacrity with bringing Afghanistan into its development plans. China and Pakistan have already expressed support for including Afghanistan in the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>156</sup> More such efforts are needed, however, to fully integrate Afghanistan into the regional economic infrastructure and insulate it from potential breakdowns in bilateral relations.<sup>157</sup>

That said, development plans require a reliable partner in Kabul, and the Taliban have not yet shown they are fully open for business. They have succeeded in tamping down violence across the country and have, for now, quelled the minor insurgencies against them. Corruption levels plunged after they took over and have remained much

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<sup>153</sup> The UN declared the Afghan poverty crisis the world's largest humanitarian emergency in 2022 and 2023, although a mid-year revision of the humanitarian response plans made Afghanistan's smaller, ranking second in the world after Syria. "Afghanistan still a grave humanitarian crisis, senior aid official says", UN, 28 February 2023.

<sup>154</sup> Afghanistan needs about half a million new jobs annually to keep pace with population growth rate (2.5 per cent), which surpasses the rates in Tajikistan (2.1), Uzbekistan (2.1), Pakistan (1.9), Turkmenistan (1.4) and Iran (0.7). World Bank data, 2022.

<sup>155</sup> "Tashkent meeting analysis: Central Asia wants path to South Asia", *TOLO News*, 31 July 2022; and "Can India 'connect' with Central Asia?", *The Diplomat*, 30 November 2017.

<sup>156</sup> "Joint Statement of the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 9 May 2023.

<sup>157</sup> The previous Afghan government turned away from trade with Pakistan and focused on growing commerce with Iran. That trend was reversed under the Taliban, but the new government wants to diversify its economic relationships for the sake of avoiding dependence on any foreign power. Tensions with Islamabad have also prompted Kabul to seek alternatives to the Pakistani port of Karachi, redirecting trade through Iran's Chabahar airport and looking into direct shipments to China. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Kabul, 2022-2023. See also "Islamic Emirate: Efforts underway to create new crossing with Turkmenistan", *TOLO News*, 22 September 2023; "Taliban minister asks for China's help to open Wakhan corridor", *Kabul Now*, 28 November 2022; and tweet by RTA English, @rtaenglish1, 8:07pm, 17 September 2023.

lower than under the previous government.<sup>158</sup> While it may not be evident to much of the world, their government has shown a degree of administrative authority that is on par with that of most regional countries, with Taliban decisions enforced – for good and ill – in every Afghan province.

Yet the Taliban's internal dynamics, with centres of power in Kabul and Kandahar vying for influence, as well as their opaque and, often, erratic policies, continue to give external actors cause for concern. Their government's discrimination against women has tarred the Taliban's name around the world, and some firms will steer away from the ethical and reputational risks of business with the regime. State revenues seem healthy, but no outsider can feel certain that the fiscal situation is solid because the government does not publish detailed budgets. The nature of opportunities also remains a matter of speculation: Afghanistan's natural resources, for example, have never been properly mapped.<sup>159</sup> Nor do the Taliban have the regulatory frameworks needed for large investments. They need to give investors greater predictability, including by ensuring clarity over applicable laws and establishing mechanisms for arbitration of commercial disputes.<sup>160</sup>

For the sake of regional stability, economic integration must make progress most urgently on water issues. Iran, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan cannot afford to let their rivers dry up, but landlocked Afghanistan also cannot grow if water disputes interrupt trade, including its access to ports such as Iran's Chabahar. The basis of an agreement between Iran and Afghanistan over the Helmand river may exist in the 1973 treaty: as discussed earlier, the two sides never established the hydrometric station and testing stations imagined as part of the agreement to determine river levels. Provided the two countries can pull together the required budget, building this infrastructure could reduce tensions between them and would offer agricultural returns on the investment for both. Similar collaboration may be feasible on the northern border where, as mentioned, Uzbekistan is offering technical support for the Qush Tepa canal. The Taliban have resisted what they see as foreign meddling in their flagship project but would have a lot to gain by allowing international expertise into the process. Including such support as part of a broader package of economic ties could bring them to compromise.<sup>161</sup>

Beyond the cases of Iran and Uzbekistan, some kind of wider agreement, or at least a tacit understanding, will be necessary to move ahead on regional cooperation. Afghanistan is not party to water-sharing treaties with Central Asian states, and a concern for many of them might be whether they can conclude binding international

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<sup>158</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghan business owners and Western analysts, 2023.

<sup>159</sup> For example, claims based on Soviet-era estimates that the country has \$1 trillion worth of minerals may be exaggerated. Frik Els, "How Afghanistan's \$1 trillion mining wealth sold the war", *Mining*, 27 August 2021.

<sup>160</sup> According to interlocutors involved in economic discussions with the Taliban, government delegations often lack technical knowledge, especially in specialised fields such as mining. This deficiency does not inspire confidence, especially as the Taliban are conducting a review of laws and regulations enacted by the former government. Crisis Group interviews, Dubai, Istanbul and Kabul, 2022-2023.

<sup>161</sup> For example, Taliban and Uzbek delegations have discussed ways of increasing trade across borders. "Uzbekistan delegation visits Afghanistan to strengthen ties", Salam Watandar, 28 August 2023.

agreements with the de facto authorities without bestowing recognition on their government. Yet many seem to believe that important issues could be addressed without first having decided the issue of recognition. The Taliban and their neighbours thus have an opportunity to reach broad agreements, perhaps in multilateral discussions, on watershed management and climate adaptation. In that regard, the Taliban should be allowed to join the Conference of the Parties climate summits, or similar international events, to discuss not only what to build but also how to finance it. Afghanistan is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, but its access to climate financing – the Global Environment Facility, Green Climate Fund and Adaptation Fund – has been suspended since the Taliban takeover.<sup>162</sup>

Whatever gets achieved in international forums, be it on climate funding or other issues, it will almost certainly be less than the Taliban expect. Hundreds of billions of dollars flooded Afghanistan when Western donors considered it the main front in the war on terrorism, leading to outlandish ideas among Afghans about how much foreigners are willing to spend in their country. Recent efforts at economic projects have reportedly broken down because Kabul's new bosses had unreasonable expectations. A regional diplomat sardonically accused the Taliban of employing a strategy that he called "*pul bakhshish*", or "money gifts", meaning that Kabul seeks more and more concessions as it negotiates an agreement, eventually making the deal a burden on the other party. Too often, Kabul expects support that matches the grants given the U.S.-backed government when it was battling the Taliban. In other words, besides the technical hurdles in attracting foreign investments – mapping resources and establishing legal frameworks – the Taliban also require more exposure to the workings of global markets.<sup>163</sup>

### C. *Western Support or Acquiescence*

Diplomats from the region are trying to address security and economic issues through cautious engagement with the Taliban, but an official at a tiny embassy in Kabul admitted that the "to do" list feels daunting, as regional aspirations are often stymied by wider constraints. Only a handful of Western diplomats remain in the Afghan capital, and much of the day-to-day work with the Taliban falls to regional actors with budgets that do not match the size of the problems. Western sanctions have been eased by U.S. exemptions, but many sanctions remain in force, and, in any case, it is hard to get loans for infrastructure in an impoverished, pariah state.<sup>164</sup> Many issues

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<sup>162</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional and Western officials, 2023. See, for example, Graeme Smith and Ulrich Eberle, "Why the Taliban Should Be Brought in from the Cold for Climate Talks", Crisis Group Commentary, 24 November 2023.

<sup>163</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional diplomats, Kabul, Istanbul and Dubai, 2022–2023.

<sup>164</sup> The U.S. Treasury Department issued sanctions carveouts, or "general licenses", in 2022 that should allow ordinary commerce with Afghanistan despite sanctions against Taliban figures. The chilling effect of U.S. sanctions remains, however, and several U.S. allies have not followed Treasury's lead. In Canada, for example, aid organisations and private businesses that work with Afghanistan still face hurdles from anti-terrorism laws. Ali Latifi, "How a law change could soon allow Canadian aid to return to Afghanistan", *The New Humanitarian*, 4 April 2023. See also Erica Moret, "Barriers to Afghanistan's critical private-sector recovery", Norwegian Refugee Council, March 2023.

facing Afghanistan are development challenges, but Western donors have cut off development assistance and offer only fast-shrinking humanitarian aid. “If your engagement is mostly based on humanitarian assistance, and that assistance is declining, then your engagement strategy is really a disengagement strategy”, as a Western official in Kabul summed it up.<sup>165</sup>

Policymakers in the countries that battled the Taliban in previous years might see this state of affairs as painful but necessary to achieve a range of desired outcomes. There are more than a few Western leaders who would prefer to forget Afghanistan; for some of them, shunning the country allows them to avoid the topic of a lost war. Prominent voices are calling for pressure on the Taliban, and even active support for anti-Taliban forces, hoping for regime change, but the Taliban show no sign of collapse and subjecting Afghans to more years of war seems particularly cruel.<sup>166</sup> Others may hope that undermining the regime will leave a mess on the doorsteps of China, Russia and Iran, which some might see as a geopolitical win.<sup>167</sup> Still others, including Western diplomats who want to negotiate a better future for ordinary Afghans – women and girls, especially – may believe that their leverage with the Taliban is higher if they hold back security and economic support, using the promise thereof to get concessions in future negotiations over recognition.

How best to make progress on human rights requires careful consideration and will almost certainly entail trade-offs, but Afghanistan's security and economic challenges cannot be ignored in the meantime – not least because the people who suffer the most from instability and deprivation are usually women and girls.<sup>168</sup> Two years after the Taliban returned to power, it is worth giving weight to the concerns of regional countries that spend the most time talking to the new leadership in Kabul and have the most at stake. The countries surrounding Afghanistan are warning that the world cannot afford to have a failed state in the region and that isolation would only make the Taliban more intransigent. They need international backing for the modest steps required to live next door to such a challenging neighbour.

Those needs will vary according to countries and projects, but in many ways Western countries remain gatekeepers, whether for attaining voting rights at the World Bank board or granting exemptions from sanctions and export controls to send equipment for Taliban border guards. Progress will be impossible in many cases without Western support or, at least, acquiescence. For example, regional airlines want to resume flights to Kabul but have not done so because the radar system at the airport is deemed unsafe. Regional diplomats complain that new equipment has been purchased but remains stuck in Europe due to sanctions.<sup>169</sup> Another chokepoint is Western banking regulations: regional banks want to facilitate transactions with

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<sup>165</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western official based in Kabul, August 2023.

<sup>166</sup> See, for example, “US congressional leader interested in dialogue with Taliban's opposition”, *Afghanistan International*, 12 January 2024; and “Afghan women call for global action against Taliban's gender policies”, *Kabul Now*, 13 December 2023.

<sup>167</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western experts, Washington, London and Kabul, June–July 2023.

<sup>168</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis*, op. cit.

<sup>169</sup> Similar issues blocked the export of Afghan currency printed in Europe, requiring the personal intervention of senior U.S. officials to get the banknotes delivered. Crisis Group interviews, Western and regional officials, Kabul, June 2023.

Afghanistan, but U.S. banks often forbid them from doing so.<sup>170</sup> Western donors discussing development policy options for Afghanistan should also involve governments from the region in their deliberations – even if regional actors are not donors themselves, decisions made in such meetings can bear directly on their economic wellbeing as well.<sup>171</sup>

Some solutions will need to move ahead without any, or much, Western funding. It is, for example, hard to imagine international donors paying for large-scale water infrastructure on the Helmand river to assist the outcast regimes in Kabul and Tehran. But it would not cost international agencies much to offer technical assistance for better management of shared waters. For the moment, Afghanistan and Iran prefer to talk about their dispute bilaterally, but their 1973 agreement allows them to “use the good offices of a third party” and contains additional protocols for arbitration of disputes.<sup>172</sup> It might be desirable to involve the World Bank or a similar institution that could offer expertise and, possibly, help with small-scale funding to map and monitor water flows.<sup>173</sup> Similar technical assistance could aid Afghanistan in better regulating migrant labour, offering skills certification for Afghans seeking work in the Gulf and elsewhere. Solutions proposed for the Afghan banking sector might also require only a few experts and a green light from the U.S. government, rather than a major investment.<sup>174</sup>

The UN Security Council received a blueprint for moving ahead with such ideas in mid-November 2023, when Special Coordinator Feridun Sinirlioglu concluded his much-anticipated review of international efforts in Afghanistan. Among other proposals, Sinirlioglu called for greater international support for security cooperation with the Taliban-controlled government, including provision of assistance related to addressing “key security and regional stability issues” such as terrorism and border controls. On economic matters, Sinirlioglu’s report called for expanding international cooperation in the fields of climate adaptation and transboundary natural resource management; completion of near-finished infrastructure projects abandoned in 2021; and measures to promote transit, trade, and connectivity between Afghans with the world. The Council should adopt these and other recommendations from the Sinirlioglu report as part of its mandate to maintain international peace and security.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Crisis Group interviews, banking executives, Kabul, Dubai and Istanbul, 2022-2023.

<sup>171</sup> Arguably the most important such forum is the Afghanistan Coordination Group, which includes the biggest donors as well as the UN, European Union, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank and World Bank. The Group has considered taking actions requested by regional actors – for example, helping with completion of infrastructure projects abandoned in 2021 – but faced resistance from Western member states. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, 2022-2023.

<sup>172</sup> “The Afghan-Iranian Helmand River Water Treaty”, *op. cit.*

<sup>173</sup> Crisis Group interviews, experts, Tashkent and Tehran, August 2023.

<sup>174</sup> For example, a solution proposed for the Afghan banking sector involves U.S. permission for frozen assets to be made available to a regional bank, in order to facilitate correspondent banking relationships with Afghanistan. U.S. officials say the White House is unlikely to endorse any plan for unfreezing the assets, especially before the 2024 presidential election, because of domestic politics. Crisis Group interviews, Washington, June 2023.

<sup>175</sup> António Guterres, “Letter from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council”, 8 November 2023.

More fundamentally, Western countries must decide whether the Taliban are a threat to be contained or unavoidable (if frustrating and, in their gender policies, odious) interlocutors on regional stability and development. Some Western intelligence officials want more cooperation with the Taliban on counter-terrorism, but others among their colleagues still talk privately about backing anti-Taliban rebels.<sup>176</sup> This policy schizophrenia has persisted for too long. Regional states do not need the West's blessing to engage with the Taliban on matters of national security or economic integration, but getting it would, in many instances, simplify their efforts in that regard.

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<sup>176</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, London, Washington and Brussels, 2022-2023.



## **VI. Conclusion**

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A Taliban regime that respects human rights might be welcomed into the club of nations, someday. But that will not happen in the foreseeable future, if ever, which means that Afghanistan is likely to be ruled by an unrecognised pariah regime for years to come. Its people should not be held hostage to this reality. For the sake of destitute millions both in Afghanistan and across the region, efforts must continue to make the world's relationship with Kabul more functional, even if on a piecemeal basis. Afghanistan and its neighbours have urgent needs – among them, security and economic recovery – that cannot be placed on hold.

With Western influence in Afghanistan fading, most of the responsibility for improving regional cooperation falls on the shoulders of the country's neighbours and the Taliban themselves. They must clear a path for greater flows of goods across borders and work together to keep one another safe. All sides know from history the nightmarish consequences of failure. While Western countries are unlikely to be enthusiastic about such cooperation on account of the Taliban's attacks on women's rights, they should at the very least refrain from blocking practical steps to do such things as improve trade and counter militants, which will lessen poverty among the Afghan people – including women – in the long term.

**Kabul/Brussels, 30 January 2024**

Appendix A: Map of Afghanistan's Diplomatic Presence in the Region



Source: Crisis Group research as of January 2024.

\* Diplomatic missions in which representation is internally contested between Taliban appointees and diplomats posted by the former government.

## Appendix B: Country Profiles

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The countries surrounding Afghanistan have pursued a variety of policies toward the Taliban authorities since 2021. This report covers “the region” as a whole. The following appendix provides an overview of individual countries’ approaches.

### PAKISTAN

Pakistan suffered the most from aftershocks of the Taliban victory in 2021, much to the surprise of Islamabad. As a Taliban sponsor since the movement’s birth in the 1990s, Pakistan celebrated its partner’s success: then-Prime Minister Imran Khan said the insurgents had “broken the shackles of slavery”.<sup>177</sup> His ebullience was partly justified by the peace dividends that followed: trade between the neighbours grew, driven mostly by Pakistan’s coal imports.<sup>178</sup> In 2021, Pakistan became the country with the most interactions with Kabul and made the strongest calls for international engagement with the new authorities.<sup>179</sup> But rising TTP attacks began straining ties between the neighbours in late 2022.<sup>180</sup> Kabul’s unwillingness or inability to curb the TTP drove perceptions in Islamabad that the Taliban were growing harder to influence now that they were in power.<sup>181</sup> Still, Pakistan seems likely to continue working with the Taliban, as both countries struggle to revive their economies and manage cross-border security threats.<sup>182</sup>

### CHINA

In 2022, China replaced Pakistan as the country holding the most diplomatic meetings with the Taliban and, the following November, it became the first country to accredit a Taliban-appointed ambassador, raising concerns that it might be bestowing informal recognition on the regime.<sup>183</sup> Beijing has longstanding ties with the Taliban and positions itself at the forefront of regional efforts to manage relations with the new government.<sup>184</sup> China is in the process of becoming Afghanistan’s second-largest

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<sup>177</sup> Stephanie Findlay, “A win for Pakistan: Imran Khan gambles on Taliban ties”, *Financial Times*, 30 September 2021.

<sup>178</sup> Besides coal, Pakistan also imported large amounts of fruits and vegetables, while exporting pharmaceutical, industrial and other products to Afghanistan. “Afghanistan Economic Monitor”, World Bank, 24 February 2023. See also “Pakistan’s exports to Afghanistan increases by 32%”, *Ariana News*, 13 March 2023.

<sup>179</sup> Crisis Group calculations, 2022-2023.

<sup>180</sup> Ahmad, “The Pakistani Taliban Test Ties between Islamabad and Kabul”, op. cit.

<sup>181</sup> As a Beijing-based interlocutor put it, Pakistan knows that “the closer the Taliban are to power in Afghanistan, the less influence it has over the movement”. Crisis Group interview, China expert, April 2023.

<sup>182</sup> Islamabad claims that 700,000 Afghan migrants arrived in Pakistan in the two years since the Taliban takeover, a rate that it views as “unsustainable”. Crisis Group interviews, Pakistani officials, Kabul, 2022-2023.

<sup>183</sup> “Afghan Taliban says China becomes first nation to accept its ambassador”, *Voice of America*, 1 December 2023.

<sup>184</sup> Luke Encarnation and C. Christine Fair, “China and the Taliban: Past as Prologue?”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 26 February 2023.

trading partner, overtaking India but remaining behind Pakistan.<sup>185</sup> At the same time, China's economic engagement has been cautious. Beijing's concerns are mostly related to security threats, especially from Uyghur militants who might cross into China from Afghanistan or indirectly via Tajikistan.<sup>186</sup> China has also been thrust into a role as mediator between Pakistan and the Taliban, partly to protect its economic interests in Pakistan.<sup>187</sup> Beijing seeks to limit its role in Afghanistan, fearing that the country may become "its burden to carry".<sup>188</sup> All the same, China has offered detailed thoughts about Afghanistan policy in an eleven-point strategy paper, the first of its kind by a regional player. Among other points, the paper included ideas about how to forge a common regional approach to Afghanistan.<sup>189</sup>

## INDIA

During the first Taliban regime, India viewed the group as a militant Islamist force supported by Pakistan and beholden to Islamabad. For this reason, New Delhi had almost no contact with the Taliban and, alongside other regional states, supported anti-Taliban resistance groups. The 1999 hijacking by Pakistani militants belonging to Harakat-ul-Mujahideen of an Indian Airlines flight, however, highlighted the importance of talking to Kabul, as most of the hostages survived due to negotiations via the Taliban. When the Taliban returned to power in 2021, New Delhi withdrew its diplomats. But sensing the need for communication with the de facto authorities and encouraged by tensions between Kabul and Islamabad, India began exploring channels with the Taliban. India made formal contact with the de facto authorities in late 2021 and sent emissaries back to Kabul in mid-2022 to be its "eyes and ears" on the ground.<sup>190</sup>

Building on its minimal presence in Kabul, India continues to explore further engagement, such as expanded humanitarian assistance and bilateral trade.<sup>191</sup> This outreach is slow, weighed down by decades of mutual distrust and India's vocal anti-Taliban constituencies. Still, India wants peace in the neighbourhood, not least because it fears that instability will push militants into Kashmir. It finds itself in the

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<sup>185</sup> Chris Devonshire-Ellis and Farzid Ramezani Bonesh, "China to become Afghanistan's second largest trade partner in 2023", *Silk Road Briefing*, 16 February 2023.

<sup>186</sup> "The Taliban Takeover and Central Asian Security: What Will Russia and China Do?", Davis Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, 30 September 2022.

<sup>187</sup> China has invested tens of billions of dollars building Gwadar port and related infrastructure, some of it located near Afghanistan. "China-Pakistan economic corridor attracted \$25.4 billion in 10 years: Beijing", Anadolu Agency, 7 July 2023. See also Crisis Group Report, *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks*, op. cit.

<sup>188</sup> Crisis Group interview, China expert in Washington, May 2023.

<sup>189</sup> "China's Position on the Afghan Issue", press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 12 April 2023.

<sup>190</sup> Nayanima Basu, "India reopens embassy in Kabul, sends 'technical team' with relief material for Afghanistan", *The Print*, 23 June 2022. See also Suhasini Haidar, "Should India review its position on the Taliban?", *The Hindu*, 30 December 2022.

<sup>191</sup> See, for example, Shivam Shekhawat, "India's Taliban dilemma: Diplomatic engagement and moral disquietness", *ORF Online*, 24 March 2023.

chorus of regional actors calling for common approaches to security concerns.<sup>192</sup> New Delhi is also wary that Beijing, with which its relationship has deteriorated over the last few years, could take the lead on forging a regional approach to Afghanistan; as a result, India would prefer to draw Western countries into multilateral talks about how to deal with the Taliban.

## TAJIKISTAN

After the Taliban takeover, Tajikistan's reaction was the most hostile among neighbouring countries. Dushanbe allowed the National Resistance Front to establish bases in Tajikistan, and Afghan districts near the Tajik border suffered the worst clashes between Front and Taliban fighters.<sup>193</sup> Dushanbe's sympathies with the Front stem from personal ties between Tajik officials and leaders of the Jamiat-e Islami party, some of whom belong to the Front, and other Afghan factions that resisted the Taliban in the 1990s. During that period, Jamiat-e Islami played a role in mediating an end to Tajikistan's civil war.<sup>194</sup> More generally, Tajikistan feels an affinity with ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan, who live under the Taliban's authority with little representation in Kabul; Dushanbe has repeatedly called on the Taliban to form a more inclusive government.<sup>195</sup> Tajikistan also has security concerns, claiming that militant groups such as Ansarullah, which wants to topple the Tajik government, operate near the Tajik border, despite Taliban denials.<sup>196</sup> More broadly, there is concern that Islamism in Afghanistan might stir up domestic opposition to the Tajik government.

Hints of détente emerged as the Taliban settled into power. After initial interruptions, Tajikistan resumed bilateral trade, exporting electricity and allowing Tajik goods to transit Afghanistan on the way to Pakistan.<sup>197</sup> Although the Taliban cracked down on poppy cultivation and opium smuggling, some evidence suggests that drug production in Badakhshan, a province on the Tajik border, is still significant, allowing opium into Tajikistan – a major concern for Dushanbe.<sup>198</sup> Tajikistan keeps working-

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<sup>192</sup> On Indian concerns about the tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, see Nayanima Basu, "Why tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan over TTP could be 'dangerous' for India", APB Live, 11 January 2023.

<sup>193</sup> Crisis Group analysis of ACLED data for the period September 2021 to April 2023; Crisis Group interviews, Dushanbe, October 2022.

<sup>194</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tajikistan expert in Washington, May 2023.

<sup>195</sup> Fidel Rahmati, "Tajikistan's president calls for inclusive government in Afghanistan", *Khaama Press*, 21 July 2023.

<sup>196</sup> Tajikistan's concerns about militancy spilling over the border are mirrored by Kabul's fears about increasing recruitment of Tajik militants by IS-KP for attacks in Afghanistan. Taliban officials claim that many IS-KP militants are from Tajikistan. See tweet by Hafiz Zia Ahmad, @HafizZiaAhmad1, deputy spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9:08pm, 19 March 2023. Similarly, the Taliban's intelligence service claims that an IS-KP suicide bomber responsible for killing a provincial governor was from Tajikistan. See tweet by The Khorasan Diary, @khorasandiary, 11:37pm, 26 March 2023. Conversely, Tajikistan continues to highlight infiltration from Afghanistan. See "Tajikistan reports unrest on its Afghanistan border", *Eurasianet*, 28 April 2023; "Over 6,000 militants located near CSTO southern border – president of Tajikistan", TASS, 10 January 2022.

<sup>197</sup> Crisis Group interviews, traders and port officials in Sher Khan and Aikhanem, October 2021. See also "Tajikistan increases export volume to Afghanistan by 38%", *Ariana News*, 27 July 2022.

<sup>198</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, Takhar and Badakhshan provinces, 2023.

level diplomats in Kabul, and delegations from each country have visited the other's capital.<sup>199</sup> Front members complain that Tajikistan curtails their activities, expelling some of them.<sup>200</sup> Friendship between the neighbours seems unlikely, but bilateral relations are improving.

## **UZBEKISTAN**

Uzbekistan welcomed the new regime more warmly and has subsequently focused its attention on increasing trade with its neighbour to the south. Afghanistan had already become one of Uzbekistan's largest commercial partners, with a trade deficit of nearly 90 per cent in favour of Uzbek exporters.<sup>201</sup> Since the Taliban takeover, the two sides have sought to deepen these ties, especially as Tashkent looks for alternatives to Russian transport for reaching South Asian ports and markets. With Russia falling into pariah status after its all-out invasion of Ukraine, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states fear being surrounded by sanctioned neighbours; partly as a result, Uzbek diplomats have been pushing for removal of Western sanctions on the Taliban and calling for pathways toward recognising the regime.<sup>202</sup> Still, Uzbekistan has security concerns. In addition to IS-KP, which has carried out attacks inside Uzbekistan, Tashkent is wary of Uzbek militants hiding in Afghanistan, such as Katiba Imam al-Bukhari and other remnants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.<sup>203</sup> Tashkent also feels uneasy about the Taliban's largest infrastructure project, a canal and irrigation system that could drain water from the Amu Darya river on the border.<sup>204</sup>

## **TURKMENISTAN**

Turkmenistan was the first neighbour to raise concerns about the Taliban's irrigation project on the Amu Darya (see Uzbekistan). Afghan governments have been planning the Qush Tepa canal since the 1970s, but it is now almost complete. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan both sent delegations to Kabul to discuss the downstream effects – including on agriculture, infrastructure and the ecology of the Aral Sea basin – but the Taliban cut off negotiations in late 2022 and seem intent on moving ahead with the project as a symbol of post-war recovery.<sup>205</sup> Besides water, Turkmenistan has concerns about Afghan migration and long-term ambitions to build a pipeline

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<sup>199</sup> Tweet by Abdul Qahar Balkhi, @QaharBalkhi, spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9:05am, 25 March 2023.

<sup>200</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Dushanbe, October 2022.

<sup>201</sup> See, for example, "World Integrated Trade Solution", World Bank.

<sup>202</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Uzbekistan experts in Dushanbe and Tashkent, May and October 2023. See also "Uzbekistan ready to increase trade to \$1 bln with Afghanistan", Bakhtar News Agency, 23 March 2023.

<sup>203</sup> The UN listed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as a terrorist group in 2001 for its alleged associations with al-Qaeda. The group suffered crackdowns in Uzbekistan and several members fled to Pakistan and Afghanistan. A related group, Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, was included on UN sanctions lists in 2018 as a Movement offshoot. UN Security Council, "Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari", ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, 29 March 2018.

<sup>204</sup> Tashkent believes that the Taliban are willing to "fight for water". Crisis Group interviews, Uzbek officials, 2023. See also Bakyt Ibraimov and Fawad Ali, "A lot of work for diplomats' in Central Asia as the Taliban build huge canal", The Third Pole, 18 May 2023.

<sup>205</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, June 2023.

that could transport its natural gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Pakistan is eager to get started on the pipeline, a decades-old concept that could alleviate energy shortages.<sup>206</sup>

## **RUSSIA**

The security vacuum left when U.S. forces and their allies departed Afghanistan pulled Russia more deeply into Central Asia.<sup>207</sup> Responding to concerns about spreading militancy, Russia organised meetings of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, particularly to address Tajikistan's fears of cross-border attacks. Moscow also hoped that Russia might find a viable regional partner in a Taliban-led government, particularly to explore the formation of an expanded economic and political bloc – as of 2023, still a nascent concept.<sup>208</sup> Like many regional actors, the Kremlin found that it had little leverage over a movement whose decision-making is often inscrutable to outside actors.<sup>209</sup> The IS-KP attack on the Russian embassy in September 2022 undermined Moscow's confidence in Kabul and limited the movements of Russian diplomats in the capital. Still, like other regional players, Russia seeks ways of working with the Taliban: primarily on security, but also on economic issues and counter-narcotics. Moscow supports collective regional approaches to negotiating with the Taliban on formation of an "inclusive" government that could gain legitimacy – and Russia insists that the U.S. and its allies should not block other countries from recognising the regime.<sup>210</sup>

## **IRAN**

Iranian trade with Afghanistan suffered after the Taliban takeover. Iran had been the top source of imports to Afghanistan, partly because the former Afghan government encouraged business with Tehran.<sup>211</sup> The return of a regime that had verged on war with Iran in the 1990s reversed that trend. Despite cultivating ties among the Taliban during their decades as insurgents, Tehran feels that it now has less leverage over the group.<sup>212</sup> It also perceives a growing threat from IS-KP, especially after the jihadists launched their largest cross-border operation so far in Shiraz in October 2022.<sup>213</sup> Skirmishes between Afghan and Iranian border guards, largely over construction of

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<sup>206</sup> Nizamuddin Rezahi, "Pakistan, Turkmenistan sign TAPI joint implementation plan", *Khaama Press*, 9 June 2023.

<sup>207</sup> According to one author, Russia viewed the precipitous U.S. withdrawal as "both a challenge and an opportunity". See Charles J. Sullivan, "Kabul and the Kremlin: Russia's Evolving Foreign Policy towards the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", *Asian Affairs*, vol. 54, no. 1 (January 2023).

<sup>208</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional experts, Kabul, Washington and Dubai, June 2023.

<sup>209</sup> Russia's frustrations in dealing with the new regime have included personal frictions with Taliban diplomats: at one meeting, witnesses saw Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov shouting at a senior Taliban envoy. For their part, some Taliban remember battling Soviet troops in the 1980s and express mistrust of Moscow. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and Western officials, 2021-2023.

<sup>210</sup> At a May 2023 meeting of envoys to Afghanistan, Russian diplomats insisted that any country that deployed troops to Afghanistan "in the last twenty years" be kept out of talks about recognition of the Taliban regime. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, May 2023.

<sup>211</sup> Crisis Group interviews, current and former Afghan officials, 2023.

<sup>212</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional diplomats, Kabul, 2023.

<sup>213</sup> "Fifteen killed in attack on Shia mausoleum in southern Iran", BBC, 27 October 2022.

border facilities or perceived mistreatment of migrants, have been another irritant.<sup>214</sup> Other topics of concern for Tehran include sharing of the Helmand river's waters, as well as the flow of drugs coming from Afghanistan. Like their Russian counterparts, Iranian diplomats have proposed that a committee of regional states – with UN support but excluding the U.S. and its allies – should take the lead on negotiations with the Taliban on political, security and economic issues.<sup>215</sup>

## **QATAR**

Qatar, whose prime minister is reportedly the only foreign dignitary to have met with the Taliban's emir, promotes itself as a peacemaker in the region. Afghanistan has served as a showcase of its mediation efforts since 2013, when Doha accepted U.S. requests to host the Taliban for peace talks. The result was the 2020 Doha agreement, which paved the way for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. Qatar then facilitated evacuations amid the chaos after the Taliban seized power, and Doha emerged as a hub for Western diplomats in exile.<sup>216</sup> Qatar has been disappointed with the Taliban's restrictions on women's education, though its attempts to convince them to change their policies have not done so. Doha was also surprised that an Emirati company won the airport management contract, rather than the Qatari and Turkish firms that submitted a joint bid, given Qatar's role in Afghanistan mediation – an example of the Taliban playing regional rivals off each other.<sup>217</sup> All the same, Doha continues to push for engagement with Kabul. "Instability in Afghanistan threatens all the neighbouring countries", a senior Qatari diplomat said.<sup>218</sup>

## **UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**

The United Arab Emirates was one of only three countries to recognise the Taliban regime in the 1990s, but it aligned itself with the U.S.-backed government after 2001, deploying troops, helping with logistics and providing financial services for the war to defeat the Taliban.<sup>219</sup> The UAE's decision in 2021 to shelter the fleeing Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, also boded ill for its relations with the Taliban. But the UAE took a pragmatic decision to re-engage with the Taliban and eventually won the aforementioned deal to run Afghan airports in 2022.<sup>220</sup> As the co-penholder on Afghanistan in the UN Security Council, Abu Dhabi has condemned the Taliban's gender policies but also spearheaded efforts for an independent review of engagement, seeking a

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<sup>214</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and regional officials, Kabul, 2023.

<sup>215</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Kabul and Washington, 2023.

<sup>216</sup> "Qatar emerges as key player in Afghanistan after US pullout", AP, 31 August 2021; "Qatar emerges as bridge between Taliban and the West", *Financial Times*, 4 September 2021; and "Blinken will visit Qatar, where diplomats relocated to keep working on Afghanistan", NPR, 3 September 2021.

<sup>217</sup> The Taliban delayed the decision for a year before making a choice, entertaining bids from the Emirati firm and a Qatari-Turkish partnership. Key issues in the negotiations included security provisions; the Taliban refused to allow armed foreigners at the airports. Crisis Group interviews, Afghan, Qatari and Turkish officials, 2021-2022.

<sup>218</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qatari official, Doha, 2023.

<sup>219</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UAE officials, Abu Dhabi, 2019.

<sup>220</sup> Umer Karim, "Pragmatism Drives Taliban-UAE Engagement", Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 31 January 2023.



more workable relationship between the regime and the world.<sup>221</sup> The UAE remains a centre for Afghan traders, bankers and other business owners, many of whom are appealing to the Taliban for more lenient policies that might result in fewer sanctions and more foreign investment.<sup>222</sup>

### **SAUDI ARABIA**

Saudi Arabia has transformed in the last decade as Riyadh attempts to shed its reputation for strict conservatism. Part of that shift involves a new focus on countering the rise of political Islam in the Middle East, a contrast with ultraconservative movements such as the Taliban. In 2017, Riyadh hosted a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) that condemned the Taliban's insurgency. After the Taliban seized power, Riyadh evacuated its diplomats but has since sent some of them back to Kabul.<sup>223</sup> Riyadh's outreach to the Taliban was partly designed to assist its ally, Pakistan, which encouraged engagement with the new Afghan authorities. Saudi Arabia even facilitated the opening of OIC offices in Kabul as a conduit for humanitarian assistance. Yet as Pakistan's relations with the Taliban worsened in late 2022, Riyadh stepped back from its diplomatic efforts. In early 2023, the Saudi and OIC missions withdrew some staff from Kabul.<sup>224</sup>

### **TÜRKIYE**

Türkiye considers Afghanistan "distant but not too distant", as a diplomat put it, meaning that Ankara suffers the effects of instability in the country, even if not the worst or most immediate ones.<sup>225</sup> These include migration, terrorism and drug smuggling, as well as concerns about spillover of conflict into the region.<sup>226</sup> Ankara has taken the position that the best way to stop Afghanistan's troubles from spreading is to address them at the source. For this reason, it supports reconstruction and development efforts, in the hope that these help in stemming migration and militancy. Turkish officials also believe that economic interdependence might serve to moderate Taliban behaviour in the medium term. The Turkish private sector has been at the forefront of reviving the Afghan economy. Like many others, however, Turkish firms complain that the Taliban's pariah status, with the attendant sanctions and banking restrictions, hampers their activities.

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<sup>221</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN officials and UN Security Council member state diplomats, New York, May 2023.

<sup>222</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Dubai, 2022-2023.

<sup>223</sup> Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco and Kristian Alexander, "With Eye on Stability, Saudis Shift Role in Afghanistan", Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 8 February 2023. See also "Saudi Arabia and Qatar are cooperating with the Taliban. But their approaches to Afghanistan are different", Atlantic Council, 12 January 2023.

<sup>224</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, 2023. See "Saudi diplomats leave Afghanistan, relocate to Pakistani capital – sources", Reuters, 6 February 2023.

<sup>225</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ankara, November 2022.

<sup>226</sup> Türkiye has a large Afghan population and militants such as IS-KP have reportedly been active in the country. See, for example, Emrah Gokmen, "Turkish police arrest 'high-ranking' Daesh/ISIS terrorist in Istanbul", Anadolu Agency, 22 June 2023.

## Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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**January 2024**

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