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Issue Brief

Central Asia's Afghan Predicament

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S*ummary*

The Central Asia region bore a heavy brunt of radical Islam ideology during the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1996 till 2001. Following the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021, the spectre of an agonising past looms large in Central Asia. Uncertainty prevails in the region due to the potential spillover of the conflict to the shores of the bordering Central Asian countries. An increased refugee flow, drug trafficking, a resurgence of radical ideology and economic losses have past precedence. There are genuine fears of violent extremist regional groups drawing anchorage from the Taliban to destabilise Central Asian governments. The open engagement of Russia and China with the Taliban and the ambivalent role of regional organisations such as CSTO and SCO has created a crisis of confidence among Central Asian countries about the emerging geopolitics in the region.

The Central Asia region witnessed a dark phase of atrocity, radical ideology and terrorism during the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1996 till 2001. This period saw several trans-national terror groups such as al-Qaeda hosted and trained by the Taliban,¹ which created a fertile ecosystem for terrorism in the region, the consequences of which were seen in several parts of the world. The radical ideology of the Taliban, pooled with the flow of drugs and weapons led to extreme instability in regions such as the Fergana Valley in Central Asia. Distraught refugees in several thousand had to find sanctuaries in the neighbouring Central Asian countries (also Iran and Pakistan), overwhelming the limited resources in those countries. None of these threats has ebbed with the return of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2021, and therefore paints an unnerving picture in Central Asia.

The Refugee Issue

The takeover of the country by the Taliban has resulted in thousands fleeing from Afghanistan to the Central Asian countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. This mass exodus is bound to impact Central Asia's fledgling security, health and social safety apparatus, especially in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, and could lead to communal violence and ethnic tensions in a region packed with multi-ethnic and cultural chasms. A serious point of concern is that some refugees could be disguised Taliban and may sow seeds of the Islamic Caliphate or Taliban ideology in other Central Asian countries. The Central Asian countries are indeed wary of the fact that the Afghan refugees could be the super spreaders of radicalisation in the region. Turkmenistan has denied entry to the Afghan refugees, including the ethnic Turkmen. Uzbekistan hosted some refugees initially in camps, however, many others were returned to Afghanistan after negotiations with the Taliban. On the other hand, Tajikistan seems to be willing to accept refugees, and had announced in late July that it could allow up to 1,00,000 Afghan refugees but has remained silent on the issue since. Kyrgyzstan had announced the issue 500 visas to assist Afghan students², but has been silent on the issue of accepting Afghan refugees. Kazakhstan was forced to issue a clarification when some rumours led to an outcry that it was preparing to accept up to 70,000 Afghan refugees.³

Fear of Radicalisation and Terror Sanctuaries

The Afghanistan crisis makes the Central Asian population vulnerable to more radical forms of Islam. The Taliban's jihadist ideology could inspire domestic Islamic groups to become more active in the region as was witnessed in the 1990s when the

¹ ["Al-Qaeda in Yemen Congratulates Taliban, Vows to Continue Jihad"](#), *The Hindu*, 19 August 2021.

² Mansur Mirovalev, ["Afghanistan's Central Asian Neighbours Panic, Reject Refugees"](#), *Al Jazeera*, 19 August 2021.

³ Almaz Kumenov, ["Kazakhstan Freezes Apparent Afghan Refugee Plans amid Grumbling"](#), *Eurasianet*, 17 August 2021.

Afghan mujahideen's propaganda spread rapidly in Central Asia. Post 2001, members of groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Islamic Movement of Tajikistan (IMT) helped the Taliban to fight the US-led coalition. Many of them also later teamed up with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. According to a 2021 UN Report, Taliban still retains its links with the al-Qaeda.⁴

Countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are already battling the spread of non-state sanctioned extremist groups such as Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), Islamic State (IS) (Central), Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) and Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)⁵ which have vainly threatened the stability of the Central Asian governments in the past. As a counter measure, the authoritarian governments of Central Asia are bestowing greater religious freedom to their citizens. However, they fear that their younger generation opposing the government on issues like unemployment and corruption, may find a fertile cause in militant Islam to propagate their demands. In the current context too, there were reports of Taliban garnering support from regional terror groups such as Jamaat Ansarullah (also referred to as Tajik Taliban) in their offensives.⁶ Some reports from the region have quoted the presence of nationals from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the ranks of the Taliban during offensive in the northern Afghanistan, which was later denied by the Taliban.⁷ With the Taliban in control, Afghanistan could re-emerge as an attractive destination for terror groups seeking sanctuaries to target nearby Central Asian countries. In July this year, Taliban seized a border checkpoint in the Mary region of Turkmenistan and killed 18 military personnel⁸ forcing Turkmenistan to amass artillery along its 800 km porous border with Afghanistan.⁹ Similarly, after seizing border posts near the Tajik border in June, the Taliban placed Jamaat Ansarullah, a Tajik terrorist group that reportedly aims to overthrow the government in Dushanbe, in charge of five districts in Badakhshan along the Tajikistan border.¹⁰

Drug Trafficking

Russia has been able to draw an assurance from the Taliban that it will stop drug production in Afghanistan.¹¹ However, whether the assurance was given to gain

⁴ [Letter dated 20 May 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 \(2011\) addressed to the President of the Security Council](#), *United Nations Security Council*, 1 June 2021.

⁵ [Violent Extremism in Central Asia 2018](#), *Internews*.

⁶ [“Foreign Terrorist Groups in Support of Taliban in Afghanistan, Says Report”](#), *ANI News*, 13 August 2021.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ Mansur Mirovalev, No. 2.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Jonathan Meyer, [“Forceful Displays and Soft Rhetoric: Central Asia’s Response to Developments in Afghanistan”](#), *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 25 August 2021.

¹¹ Gavin Helf and Barmak Pazhwak, [“Central Asia Prepares for Taliban Takeover”](#), *United States Institute of Peace*, 20 July 2021.

legitimacy in the international arena or otherwise, is yet to be seen. If earlier records are to be believed, illegal drugs were a key source of income during the earlier Taliban regime. Historically, most of the drug trafficking amongst all Central Asian countries happens through the Tajikistan border. For Tajikistan, a Taliban government could lead to an increase in the flow of contraband and drug trafficking.¹² The volume of drug trafficking through Tajikistan is equivalent to 30 per cent of its GDP.¹³ If on the other hand, the Taliban agrees to completely stop the drug production in Afghanistan, it will have a direct impact on Tajikistan's fledgling economy, drug trafficking being the second largest source of foreign revenue in Tajikistan after remittances from migrant labour.

With the US freezing most of the foreign financing to Afghanistan, there are growing concerns about the functioning of the government. The Taliban would find expedience in the drug trafficking model to obtain US dollars for payments. There are already reports that Iran has provided oil to the Taliban in exchange of dollars generated through "al-afiun" (opium).¹⁴ It will not be surprising if the Taliban adopts drug trafficking through the Central Asian route to Europe, China and Russia, to generate foreign funds to run its government.

Economic Outlook

Afghanistan's war-torn economy has largely been dependent on international aid and heroin trade. Its trade with Central Asia is a meagre US\$ 2 billion per year. However, what is crucial to Central Asia is that Afghanistan connects it with markets in Pakistan and India and vice versa. With the Afghan government losing control of land ports like Abu Nasr Farahi, Spin Boldak, Islam Qala, Torghundi and Shir Khan Bandar, a loss of US\$ 33.5 million was recorded in July 2021 itself.¹⁵ This was a major crisis which shrunk the customs' revenue and crippled the Afghan government. In Tajikistan, a total of US\$ 91 million in customs revenue was collected by the government in June, but the amount fell to US\$ 57.5 million in July, according to an Afghanistan government official.¹⁶ Traders in Kunduz and elsewhere voiced their concerns over the situation at border posts and said that imports of goods from Tajikistan had touched a new low.¹⁷ How the other Central Asian countries deal with the Taliban regime on trade from the region, remains to be seen.

¹² ["Afghanistan War: Taliban Capture Three Regional Capitals"](#), *BBC News*, 9 August 2021.

¹³ Sebastien Peyrouse, ["Drug Trafficking in Tajikistan: A Very Deep But Not Incurable Evil"](#), *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 1 March 2018.

¹⁴ ["Taliban Takeover Is a Boon for Cash-Strapped Iran"](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 August 2021.

¹⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, ["Afghan Economy Heads Towards Crisis Following Taliban Capture of Border Trade Points"](#), *The Economic Times*, 1 August 2021.

¹⁶ Shadi Khan Saif, ["Taliban's Capture of Border Crossings Deprives Afghan Gov't of Revenue"](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 30 July 2021.

¹⁷ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, No. 15.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are China's partners in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is now planning to extend its BRI tentacles in Afghanistan and intends to invest more in the infrastructure and energy sector in Afghanistan. The support of Central Asian countries will be crucial in ensuring security and growth of Chinese investments in these projects. Another concern is about the fate of infrastructure projects such as Central Asia–South Asia Electricity Transmission Project (CASA-1000), Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan Power Interconnection Project (TAP) and the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Gas Pipeline Project (TAPI). The stability of governments in Central Asia and Afghanistan is key to foreign investments in these projects.

Current Gambit

Central Asia has given a mixed response to the return of Taliban in Afghanistan. Faced with a fait accompli Taliban government in the horizon, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have reinforced their borders but softened their rhetoric towards the Taliban. Both the countries have kept their consular offices in Kabul, Mazar and Herat open and made statements expressing intentions of “friendship and good-neighbourliness” with Afghanistan.¹⁸ Uzbekistan has turned back fleeing Afghan soldiers to be on the right side of the Taliban. The military posturing and reticence to shelter refugees indicate dual fears of these countries: (a) aggression by the Taliban and, (b) infiltration of terrorist organisations and refugees. A subtle shift in the strategy of the governments of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan is seen in their approach towards the Taliban in the hope that it may assist them in fighting groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS and Islamic State (Khorasan Province).

On the other hand, Tajikistan's stand has been less cordial. President Emomali Rahmon has not engaged with the Taliban and warns that Dushanbe will not recognise a new government in Kabul if it undermines the interests of ethnic Tajiks and other ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. In a statement, the Tajik President has been quoted to have told the Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mohammad Qureshi that, “they do not recognise the tyrannical government in Afghanistan”.¹⁹ Tajikistan has honoured the leader of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud with the highest honour of the country, *Order of Ismoili Somoni*, indicating an anti-Taliban stand. More recently, Tajikistan may have softened its rhetoric calling the Taliban an “armed group” rather than an extremist organisation.²⁰ Kazakhstan which does not share a common border with Afghanistan is in favour of a coordinated response with Russia as the lead.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are keen to develop their economies. In February 2021, the Taliban had assured them about the safety of infrastructure projects passing their countries in the region. The mixed posturing of military readiness

¹⁸ Jonathan Meyer, No. 10.

¹⁹ Ashutosh Mishra, [“Tajikistan Won't Recognise Taliban Govt in Afghanistan: President Emomali Rahmon Tells Pakistan”](#), *India Today*, 25 August 2021.

²⁰ Jonathan Meyer, No. 10.

punctuated with diplomacy shown by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan with the Taliban could be due to several big-ticket projects, which generate considerable transit revenue, passing through their countries. Even Tajikistan's mixed tenor could be due to the potential gains it sees in electricity exports through the CASA-1000 project upon completion of the Rogun Hydroelectric Dam on the Vakhsh river.

Role of Russia and China

Russia is averse to relinquishing its stakes in the Central Asia region, which it calls its "Near Abroad". With the Taliban as the traction, Russia will want to re-establish its political dominance with the Central Asian governments like Uzbekistan who were showing signs of gradual multi-vectorism in their external policies. Russia's engagements in a connectivity-agreement with Uzbekistan, Pakistan and a Taliban-led Afghanistan in February 2021²¹ enhances its options in the Central Asia region and re-balances China's role. Beijing's strategy is to fill up the US void in the region not by political and military means, but through economy and trade. For China, it makes greater economic and political sense to promote land access to Afghanistan through the Central Asian countries—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan on the BRI track rather than the CPEC (China–Pakistan Economic Corridor). However, both Russia and China will be closely monitoring the assurances of the Taliban of not letting radical ideologies spill over to their territories through Central Asia.

Since the end of July, Russia has participated in three joint military exercises: with Beijing in China's western region of Ningxia; with Tashkent at Uzbekistan's Termez training ground; and with both Tashkent and Dushanbe near Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan. Russia's military drills with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan had 201st Motorised Brigade stationed in Tajikistan as the lead, and simulated a joint response to potential security threats from Afghanistan. Interestingly, the Chinese troop complement for the exercise was from the Western Military District of Xinjiang. All the exercises were structured on the theme of counter-terrorism operations of the kind being played up in the Pakistan–Afghanistan region and the military roles of the kind practised by US and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces in Afghanistan. The gains from the military exercises ostensibly aimed at delivering a show of force to the Taliban, has not manifested so far in altering the Taliban's behaviour.

Response of CSTO and SCO

The response of CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) following the takeover of a democratically elected government by the Taliban has been limited to holding military exercises and opposing the US attempts to find military space in the region. Their otherwise

²¹ Andrew Korybko, "[Russia & The Taliban: From Narrative Challenges To Opportunities](#)", *Russian International Affairs Council*, 25 August 2021.

innately tempered response has thrown a question mark on their efficacy to conjure up a strong response against terror threats. Russia and China's talks with the Taliban, a terror group, and building an alternative narrative of "good behaviour" has given away their *modus vivendi*. The belief that Russia and China allied with a terror group only to send the US out of the region has gained note.

Arguably, Russia-led CSTO has the mandate to protect its CSTO treaty allies in Central Asia from threats emanating from Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are CSTO members from the Central Asian region. Uzbekistan withdrew its membership in 2012 while Turkmenistan is a non-member. The Taliban capture of Afghanistan presents the organisation with an opportunity to redeem itself, but will it do so, is a moot question. CSTO has not issued any stern warnings to the Taliban of repercussions, should the Taliban or its ideologically divergent splinters renege on their promises. The CSTO members have carried out military drills but have not given a clear narrative of a plan to tackle refugees from Afghanistan or shoring up the border infrastructure of member states and clear plans for non-member states, should they need help.

The extraordinary session of CSTO which was held virtually on 23 August 2021 spoke of drawing out joint statement from member states on situation in Afghanistan, but it has not fructified. The absence of closer coordination between the CSTO members is apparent in their divergent views about the threat from the Afghan borders. The issue of implementing a joint crisis response mechanism as discussed during the CSTO session too remains unaddressed. The Taliban has promised not to threaten the countries of Central Asia, but the response of CSTO is not clear in the event of an aggravation of the situation at the Afghan-Tajik border or a military threat to Tajikistan or a non-member state. CSTO and the SCO have remained muted when the Panjshir resistance forces were battling the Taliban and now amidst reports of involvement of the Pakistan Army supporting the Taliban in Panjshir, is a cause of worry for weaker members. Perhaps, there is a fear of a "fixed" match with the Taliban amidst chatter that, the military exercises in the region is not intended for the Taliban if they remain within the red lines.

Likewise, Beijing too has engaged publicly with the Taliban and extracted a commitment to working within the Afghan borders. Perhaps, a pointer to Beijing's likely response in the forthcoming SCO summit meeting scheduled for 16-17 September in Dushanbe, of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, thus allowing Taliban a further alibi to stabilise its control in Afghanistan.

The Taliban is gradually upping the ante in Afghanistan by introducing "Sharia" laws and eliminating dissent. It will soon form its government, though whether it will be an inclusive government remains to be seen. The Taliban's inability to form a government even after 20 days shows faultlines within the organisation. The issue of recognition or non-recognition of a government by the Taliban will further test the agenda of both CSTO and SCO, should it not be an inclusive government. An ambivalent response of CSTO and SCO, even against designated terror groups, aspiring to change governments by force, will sow seeds of distrust among weaker

states and embolden trans-national groups such as al-Qaeda, IS (K) and Haqqani's in the region and elsewhere in the future.

Conclusion

Prospects of civil war²² involving Taliban and renegade elements with divergent ideologies of al-Qaeda, IS (K), TTP, Haqqani's and resistance movements and its likely spill over in Central Asia is the most probable emerging narrative in the region. An Afghanistan engulfed in civil war can throw up grave security and economic challenges in Central Asia. Neither Russia and China nor the Central Asian countries have a clear strategy on how to handle the rapidly changing canvas in Afghanistan. The failure of the mighty Soviet Union and now the US, provides enough sample case studies of "trepidation" in interfering too deeply in Afghanistan. As much they would have liked the contrary, the swift fall of the Afghan government and takeover by the Taliban have stuttered their stance. An ambivalent waiting game tied by slow calibrated response has unfortunately become the *sine qua non* strategy for the stakeholders in Afghanistan.

²² Chloe Taylor, ["Al-Qaeda 'Will Probably Come Back' as Afghanistan Heads Toward Civil War, UK Defense Minister Warns"](#), *CNBC*, 13 August 2021.

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