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Mode of Taliban Diplomacy before and after the US withdrawal: A Geopolitical and Economic Perspective

Maira Hilal

Ph D Scholar, Department of History, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

Correspondence Author: mairehilal@yahoo.com

Umair Ali

L. L. B (Honors), LL.M. Student at Chicago-Kent College of Law, Illinois Institute of Technology, USA

Email: umairpathan64@gmail.com

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Abstract

Almost twenty years Afghanistan seems to have witnessed the tug of war between Taliban and Afghan government. These bloodiest years had significantly transformed the geo-political landscape of the country also, left long lasting impacts on the internal peace of the country. Rather than remove the dichotomy between the states this land has created a vacuum which later filled by international power such as Russia, Iran, USSA and now china. So by understanding the geography and the role of international stakeholders in Afghanistan this research paper analyzed the ongoing changes and the factors that led to the establishment of post-Taliban regime in this area as well as to drawing attention to the fragile central state it examines the mode of Taliban diplomacy after US withdrawal.

Keywords: Taliban, US Withdrawal, Political Diplomacy, International Stakeholders, Afghanistan.



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1. Introduction

The Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 1996 marked the beginning of the phenomenon known as "Talibanization," which refers to the expansion of the Taliban's militant, political, and ideological influence. It underwent substantial change until their comeback to power in 2021. The Taliban first emerged from the turmoil of the post-Soviet Afghan civil war as a purifying Islamic force determined to use Sharia law to restore order (Rashid, 2000). Their Deobandi Islam-based ideology and strict interpretation of Pashtun tribal codes served as the foundation for an oppressive political system that disproportionately targeted women, ethnic minorities, and dissident voices (Barfield, 2010). Talibanization took the form of religious policing, gender segregation, the destruction of cultural artifacts (such as the Bamiyan Buddhas), and the repression of civil liberties during their first rule (1996–2001) (Marsden, 2002).

Following their defeat in the U.S.-led invasion in late 2001, the Taliban withdrew to Pakistan's border regions and progressively reorganized as an insurgency, leveraging ideological networks, madrassas, and tribal alliances to increase their power (Giustozzi, 2008). The spread of Taliban-style militancy throughout Pakistan's tribal belt, particularly in South Waziristan, Swat, and portions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was also referred to as "Talibanization" starting in 2004 (Abbas, 2007). Their strategic transition from centralized rule to localized shadow governance, which combined community engagement, dispute resolution, and terror tactics, was what marked their comeback (Rashid, 2010). The Taliban gained both rural legitimacy and international recognition as a negotiating party during the 2010s by increasingly embracing pragmatic diplomacy while upholding their strict religious identity (Jackson, 2021). Talibanization was a transnational phenomenon by the time the Doha Agreement in 2020 formalized the U.S. withdrawal. It was a combination of an ideology, a governance model, and a security threat. This culminated in the group's swift retake of Afghanistan in August 2021 and the restoration of their Islamic Emirate following twenty years of war (Gopal, 2014).

Literature Review and Significance of the Research

Numerous documents that explore Afghanistan's history, culture, and human experience from a variety of angles have surfaced since the Taliban's rule ended. The status of Afghanistan's post-Taliban government sheds light on the difficulties and successes of the nation's political transformation. The chosen literature covered in this review emphasizes important ideas like decentralization, security, and state formation. It sheds light on the achievements and shortcomings of the government's attempts to bring stability, legitimacy, and governance to the post-Taliban era. Researchers and policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of the Afghan government and participate in the decision-making process by looking into these activities.

No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes, by Anand Gopal draws attention to the intricacy of the Afghan War and the Taliban's ascent following 9/11. He tells the incredible tale of violence, power struggles, and the fallout from foreign intervention in Afghanistan through first-hand accounts from Afghan civilians, soldiers, and Taliban members (Gopal, 2014).

Evidence of Limitations in Afghanistan's State Building, the article by Lucy Morgan (2010) examines the role of the international community in Afghanistan's transition to statehood following the overthrow of the Taliban regime. It examines the challenges of striking a balance between local government structures and foreign intervention, emphasizing the challenges of establishing legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people (Morgan, 2010).

Afghanists' post-conflict transition and the difficulties of nation-building are the main topics of Saikal's book **Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival**. The author discusses the challenges of home construction, security issues, and the stabilization of competing ethnic and tribal interests in this work (Saikal, 2019).

Afghan National Defense and Security Forces under Jalali: Mission, Challenges, and Justice investigates the establishment and growth of the Afghan National Army (ANA) following the Taliban regime. It looks at the issues that ANA has with hiring, training, corruption, and sustainability and talks about how these issues affect security and national security (Jalali, 2016).

Aziz Hakimi Treaty: The Transition of Power and Sovereignty in Afghanistan examines the decentralization process and the function of local government organizations in Afghanistan following the Taliban. It examines the difficulties and successes of local government systems, emphasizing the function of both official and informal systems as well as the efficiency of higher court work (Hakimi, 2015).

Gupta and Matthew, A Comparative Study on Women in Afghanistan: Pre-Taliban and Post-Taliban Governments investigates the involvement of women in Afghan politics after the Taliban. It looks at the advancement of women's rights, emphasizing problems like cultural norms, political restrictions, and gender-based violence (Gupta & Mathew, 2022).

2. International Stakeholders and Afghanistan Security Dilemma

Developing a theoretical framework that takes into account the interactions of different regional actors and their interests is necessary in order to analyze the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan within the framework of regional geopolitics. A theoretical framework for this kind of research is as follows:

Economical Interference and Security Concerns:

Afghanistan continues to be at the forefront of international politics. Transportation in the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia is Afghanistan's main target. These nations can utilize their potential as land bridges for trade and financial exchange by forging regional ties with Afghanistan. This could benefit all parties by enhancing trade, investment, and infrastructure (Salim, Khan & Zakriya, 2019). The safety of neighboring nations greatly depends on the security of Afghanistan. A convincing framework for comprehending Taliban diplomacy is provided by classical realist and neorealist viewpoints. Realism, which has its roots in the idea that states (and actors that resemble states) behave rationally in order to maintain security and power, explains how the Taliban changed their strategies in reaction to changing power dynamics.

In line with realist reasoning, Anand Gopal's ethnographic account demonstrates how the Taliban reacted to outside power vacuums by re-arranging alliances and strategically interacting with foreign forces and tribal elites. Without changing their long-term objectives of consolidating power, they employed diplomacy as a survival strategy during the insurgency, negotiating with Pakistan and Iran on a global scale as well as with village elders locally (Gopal, 2014). A classic realist theme, Afghanistan's geographic centrality in South-Central Asia makes it vulnerable to Great Power politics, as demonstrated by scholars like Thomas Barfield (2012) and Barnett Rubin (2013, 2021) (Barnett & Rubin, 2013; Thomas, 2012). The Taliban were aware of this and took advantage of it, especially during the Doha talks, when they used the US withdrawal as leverage to obtain international legitimacy without making major ideological concessions (Barnett, 2021).

Given this, international relations, Here, realism theory and geopolitical and economic theory are most appropriate since they both examine how states compete with one another and how regional powers like China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan further their strategic objectives in Afghanistan, possibly through aiding or abetting the Taliban (Ahmed, 2012; Amin, 2012).

Neoclassical Realism: Domestic Constraints in Foreign Policy

According to neoclassical realism, domestic factors like societal structure and leadership perceptions influence state (or actor) behavior in addition to external forces (Gideon, 1998). Ashley Jackson (2021) and Antonio Giustozzi (2019) contend that internal factors, such as religious ideology, local commander autonomy, and factional divisions, frequently influenced or limited foreign engagement in Taliban diplomacy (Ashley, 2021).

This explains why the Taliban's dual-track strategy, which was influenced by both internal and external factors, includes both public opposition to female education and discreet assurances to diplomats about upcoming reforms (Jackson, 2019).

Economic Theories and the Taliban's Diplomatic Strategy

a. Political economy and the Dynamic of Resource Control

Economic self-preservation has long been a factor in the Taliban's diplomacy. David Mansfield (2022) emphasizes how the Taliban utilized control over opium production, border trade, and customs revenues to fund operations during the insurgency and after taking power in 2021 (David, 2022). Their outreach to regional players such as China, Iran, and Pakistan is indicative of the rent-seeking tendencies that characterize insurgent economies as they make the transition to statehood (David, 2022).

The Taliban engage in "transactional diplomacy," according to Jackson and Bahiss (2023) of the International Crisis Group, whereby they negotiate regional trade access, foreign aid, and the unfreezing of Afghan assets in exchange for pledges to counterterrorism and regional security, despite their opposition to international human rights standards (Ashley & Ibraheem, 2023). The rational-choice economic theory—maximizing material gain with the least amount of ideological compromise—is reflected in this economic diplomacy.

b. Core-Periphery and Dependency Theories

Dependency theory views nations like Afghanistan as structurally dependent on outside powers, which restricts their sovereignty and molds elite behavior, especially in the context of the Global South (Theotonio, 1970; William, 2015). The Afghan Republic was largely dependent on donors during the American occupation of the country. But after 2021, the Taliban's diplomacy sought to refocus on China, Iran, and regional trade corridors in order to lessen their reliance on Western aid; this change is comparable to a recalibration of dependency networks (Vanda, 2023). The Taliban's increased involvement in Belt and Road-related talks with China, according to Giustozzi (2021), may be interpreted as a calculated move to break free from Western-dominated economic hierarchies (Antonio, 2021). However, the Taliban are still susceptible to aid conditionality, suggesting that core-periphery economic dependencies still exist, albeit with new participants.

c. Normative Adaptation and Constructivism in Diplomacy

Taliban diplomacy is motivated by identity, religious ideology, and normative narratives in addition to material or security concerns, according to constructivist academics like Thomas Ruttig and Michael Semple (Thomas, 2021). Following Doha, the Taliban made an effort to reposition

themselves as a respectable political force through carefully planned public diplomacy, which included speaking in English, interacting with Western media, and referring to human rights (albeit as they were defined by Islamic law) (Antonio, 2022).

This performative diplomacy, especially after 2021, is a reflection of a process known as norm localization, in which local belief systems are used to frame and modify international norms in order to make them more acceptable. Constructivist diplomacy with strategic goals is demonstrated by the Taliban's interactions with UN representatives, their tacit recognition of humanitarian standards, and their allusions to international law (albeit with partial compliance) (Ashley & Ibraheem, 2022).

d. Regional Geopolitics: Strategic Hedging and the Taliban's Positioning

Taliban diplomacy is a good fit for recent research on hedging tactics in international relations, especially in Asian geopolitics. According to Harsh Pant (2022), in order to maximize autonomy, states (and non-state actors) in South Asia frequently balance their relationships with multiple great powers rather than fully committing to any one of them (Harsh, 2022).

The Taliban have taken a similar tack, pursuing recognition and investment from China and Russia.

preserving relations with Pakistan in spite of disagreements. Despite Sunni-Shia differences, Iranian diplomats are being hosted. speaking with the United States and permitting the UN to be present without official recognition.

Theories of soft balancing and regional hedging are frequently used to explain this complex diplomacy's strategic balancing behavior (Paul, 2005; Evan, 2005).

Trade routes, resource extraction, and economic projects are just a few of the economic interests and dependencies of regional actors in Afghanistan that are examined by geopolitical and economic theory. This could provide insight into their tactics and reasons for dealing with the Taliban (Zhiding & Dadao, 2016).

The aforementioned nations are unavoidably worried about the effects of Afghanistan's conflict, terrorism, and drug trafficking. Their goal is to foster regional connectivity and development in order to support peace, stability, and security in the area (Imran & Naveed, 2020). Afghanistan also possesses a wealth of resources, such as mines, gas, and oil. Meeting the region's energy needs, enhancing energy security, and promoting business development can all be achieved through collaboration on energy projects and infrastructure (Idrees, 2017).

e. Combating Extremism and Geographical Influence:

The nations in the region aim to address the underlying causes of terrorism and extremism. In Afghanistan, increasing connectivity and development presents a chance to address socioeconomic issues, lessen instability, and offer alternatives to fighting (Barnett, 2013). Relations with Afghanistan may have regional ramifications for nations such as China and Russia. By joining Afghanistan and contributing to its future development, they hope to gain more political, economic, and social clout (Adika, 2014). Despite the fact that this nation has stated its desire for regional connectivity, it is important to remember that stability, security, and the cooperation of all parties involved are just a few of the many variables that will affect the actual implementation and success of these projects (Imran & Naveed, 2020).

3. Resilient Insurgency: Factors behind the Taliban's re-emergence

Events and developments led to the formation of the Afghan Taliban government in 2021. The following are some of the main reasons they regained power:

After spending almost 20 years in Afghanistan, the United States and its NATO allies declared their intention to leave the country. The choice left a void that made the Afghan government weaker and gave the Taliban more power. The Taliban started conducting various attacks throughout the nation and progressively infiltrated regions and urban areas, taking advantage of the dwindling international forces. They were able to regain power thanks to their quick success and the morale of the Afghan security forces (Dorronsoro, 2019). The Doha Agreement was signed in 2020 between the United States and the Taliban. In exchange for the Taliban's pledge to stop the terrorist organization from using Afghan territory as a base and to begin talks with the Afghan government, the agreement offered the withdrawal of foreign troops. However, there were no notable outcomes from the Taliban-government talks, which ultimately resulted in the Afghan government's collapse in 2021 (www.state.gov).

Some Afghans support the Taliban for a variety of reasons, such as their displeasure with the Afghan government, their displeasure with corruption, and the lack of stability and progress in their nation. The Taliban have been able to increase their power thanks to this support, particularly from rural and rural communities (Schmeidl, 2010). Through coordination with numerous local forces and tribal leaders, the Taliban were able to secure cooperation and support. These collaborations give the Taliban access to resources and personnel while also advancing their military capabilities (Weigand, 2022). It is important to remember that the Taliban government's establishment in 2021 remains a contentious and continuous matter.

In response to the evolving situation in Afghanistan, the international community—including regional and international forces—continues to keep an eye on developments and interact with the Taliban in a number of ways.

4. Mode of Taliban's diplomacy in Afghanistan after 2021

Regional cooperation and Taliban Resurgence: Between Engagement and Estrangement:

In order to obtain support and recognition, the Taliban frequently work with nearby nations like Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia. These nations have shown that they are prepared to work with the Taliban for both their own and the security of the region. Since then, Russia has been providing Afghanistan with two million tons of grain, one million tons of gasoline, one million tons of diesel, and 500,000 tons of liquefied oil annually (International Crisis Group, 2022). Securing capital and financial aid is viewed as a top priority for the financially strapped and still unrecognized Taliban government as it works to gain legitimacy both domestically and internationally.

The Taliban government caused a severe humanitarian crisis and economic collapse; international donors stopped providing Afghanistan with a sizable amount of funding. The Taliban, for instance, are aggressively seeking Chinese investment in Afghanistan's mineral resources, which are mainly untapped. For this reason, the Taliban agreed to a contract with a Chinese company to explore for oil. China Xinjiang Central Asia Oil and Gas Corporation anticipates investing about US\$150 million in the first year as per the agreement. It is anticipated that this sum will rise to \$540 million in three years. It's worthwhile to hear about China's investment in Afghanistan, is about \$3 (Zhou & Yuan, 2022).

Future investments could be modeled after the \$5 billion investment in Logar State's Aynak Copper Mine. Among the plans for the copper zone are the building of power plants and a transportation network that connects the railways of Tajikistan and Pakistan (Zhou & Yuan, 2022).

International Recognition: The Taliban in Global Diplomatic Discourse

International law has historically governed the idea of state recognition, which has two components: state and government recognition. Although the Taliban proclaimed the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate following their takeover of Kabul in August 2021 and the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, no nation formally acknowledged it as the legitimate government. The Montevideo criteria (1933) state that a state must have a defined territory, population, government, and the ability to interact with other states (Montevideo Convention, 1933). It could be argued that Afghanistan under the Taliban meets the de facto requirements for statehood. However, international consensus, human rights standards, and normative legitimacy are also necessary for political recognition of a regime (Talmon, 1998).

According to scholars like Stahn (2022) and Weller (2022), recognition of governments is becoming more and more a political judgment rather than just a legal act, particularly in post-Cold War international relations where recognition decisions are heavily influenced by democratic legitimacy and human rights obligations (Stahn, 2022). As a result, despite the fact that many nations maintain bilateral ties with the Taliban, de jure recognition has been denied, especially by Western nations, because of worries about women's rights, minority protections, and connections to terrorism (Stahn, 2022). Many regional and international actors have sought to engage with the Taliban in a practical manner despite the lack of official recognition. China, Russia, Iran, Qatar, Pakistan, and Turkey, among others, have maintained open embassies in Kabul and participated in discussions on regional trade, humanitarian assistance, and counterterrorism, in view of the International Crisis Group (2022). Because of this, some analysts have referred to a policy of "functional recognition" (e.g., Jackson & Bahiss, 2023), a type of diplomatic pragmatism that permits collaboration without political support.

Regional actors, especially in Central and South Asia, place stability, border control, and economic interests above ideological differences, according to Thomas Ruttig (2022) and Antonio Giustozzi (2023). For instance, China has met with Taliban leaders on several occasions to discuss investments in the Belt and Road Initiative and fighting Uyghur militancy, but it has not formally recognized the country, preferring to obtain resource access and security assurances (Giustozzi, 2023).

By contacting nations (like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia) and international organizations (like the United Nations and World Health Organization), the Taliban hope to gain recognition from the global community (Ruttig, 2022). Nevertheless, a number of nations, including the United States and many Western nations, continue to refuse to recognize the Taliban government on the grounds of women's rights, human rights, and suspicions that criminals are being harbored by interest groups.

From conflict to consensus: the strategy of negotiation

For the government to operate independently within the nation and to engage internationally, legitimacy and recognition are essential. A foundation for recognizing representatives, entering into agreements, obtaining assistance, and gaining access to other government resources are just a few advantages of government recognition (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2020). The Taliban acknowledges that they cannot form or join alliances with other nations, that there is no external

obligation or recognition to address a range of defense, financial, and other issues, and that winning over Afghans will not be effective. and societal reactions. The Taliban met and negotiated with a number of stakeholders, including Afghan political parties, committees, and government representatives, in order to accomplish this goal. The goal of these talks is to use collaboration and consensus to create a sustainable system for the entire government (Hay & Hamming, 2023).

Constructing legitimacy: Propaganda and the Taliban's

The Taliban greatly increased and improved their propaganda machine after seizing control of Kabul in August 2021, promoting the legitimacy, Islamic credentials, and governance prowess of their regime through both traditional and digital channels. According to academics like Jackson and Bahiss (2022) and Giustozzi (2023), the Taliban have established a strategic communication policy that involves press conferences, official spokespersons like Zabihullah Mujahid, and social media engagement (particularly on Twitter/X, WhatsApp, and Telegram), portraying the Taliban as responsible, moderate leaders (Giustozzi, 2023). Their messaging has been directed at both domestic and foreign audiences, carefully downplaying their more oppressive policies, particularly with regard to women's rights, while frequently highlighting themes like Islamic justice, humanitarian outreach, and national sovereignty (Jackson & Bahiss, 2022; Giustozzi, 2023).

Human Rights Watch (Barr, 2023) and International Crisis Group (2022) contend that this propaganda campaign tries to hide internal dissension and violations of human rights while influencing international opinion, particularly among Muslim nations, aid providers, and UN organizations (www.hrw.org). Joscelyn (2021) and Nikita Malik (2022) caution that Taliban media operations are still strictly regulated and are employed to conceal militant affiliations, such as connections to al-Qaeda and local jihadist organizations. Additionally, propaganda is used locally through community shuras, schools, and mosques to promote social control and ideological narratives (Malik, 2022).

The Politics of Humanitarian Aid under the Taliban's

The importance of the Taliban delivering humanitarian aid and quality public services has been emphasized by the international community, especially in areas impacted by natural disasters, armed conflicts, or earthquakes.

Getting international support requires securing these resources. The United States contributed \$327 million in humanitarian aid, while Beijing contributed \$31 million (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA, 2022) When evaluating the situation in Afghanistan, the United Nations agency has already modified its strategy for resolving the current crisis for both development and people. Following the fall of what the United Nations refers to as "legal government," the United Nations, led by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), has created a special hope for Afghanistan in response to the numerous issues it faces. This new fund is an integrated organization that enables donors to coordinate and finance resources for Area Based Development in Emergencies (ABADEI), a development response and human resource transition strategy for Afghanistan (www.undp.org/afghanistan).

Economic diplomacy and Taliban engagement

One of the most crucial instruments for accomplishing national objectives is economic diplomacy. Helping the nation's economy grow is the primary goal of commercial diplomacy, and its primary responsibility is to accomplish economic objectives through legal frameworks, whether they be financial or nonfinancial (Okano-heijmans, 2011). In order to ensure regional connectivity and legitimacy, the Taliban gave economic diplomacy top priority after regaining power in 2021. They

concentrated especially on projects like the Chabahar port initiative, the Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission line, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline, or TAPI. These pre-2021 projects are now essential to the Taliban's plan to turn Afghanistan into a corridor for energy and transit (Mujahid, 2022). According to scholars like Giustozzi (2023) and Mujahid (2022), Taliban leaders have made a concerted effort to reassure regional partners of their commitment to these initiatives by portraying them as advantageous for both regional stability and economic growth (Giustozzi, 2023). Taliban representatives have held several rounds of discussions with Turkmen, Pakistani, and Iranian officials, indicating a willingness to offer security guarantees for infrastructure investment, according to the International Crisis Group (2022) and AREU (2023). Experts like Ruttig (2022) and Pant (2023), however, warn that despite rhetorical pledges, full-scale implementation is still hampered by security instability and a lack of international recognition. Iran has demonstrated a greater willingness to participate economically in Chabahar, while India has remained cautious, hesitant to legitimize the Taliban (Ruttig, 2022; Pant, 2023). Though political limitations and a lack of trust continue to be significant barriers, the Taliban's economic diplomacy generally represents a practical move away from ideological isolation and toward regional integration.

Conclusion

Before and after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, Taliban diplomacy changed, reflecting a strategic realignment driven more by practical necessity than by ideological change. The Taliban remained mostly isolated in their previous diplomatic mode, depending on ideological coherence and a small number of regional channels to sustain support. However, after 2021, Taliban diplomacy has changed from secret talks to open, strategic interactions with international organizations, non-Western global actors, and regional powers.

When viewed through the prism of international relations realism, the Taliban have proven to have a thorough awareness of power relationships, survival needs, and strategic self-interest. Their overtures to China, Iran, Russia, and other Central Asian nations are indicative of a realist approach meant to maintain territorial sovereignty, regime security, and geopolitical significance in a multipolar world. According to geopolitical and economic theory, the Taliban's efforts to integrate regional infrastructure, including TAPI, CASA-1000, and Chabahar Port, are also an attempt to ground Afghanistan in the resource diplomacy and trans-regional connectivity economic logic.

The Taliban's persistent opposition to normative international standards—particularly those pertaining to human rights, gender equality, and political inclusivity—remains a significant barrier even as they pursue legitimacy and recognition through economic and security engagement. As a result, the Taliban's current diplomacy lies somewhere between normative isolation and functional engagement. Both internal policy changes and shifting global power dynamics will determine whether this approach will result in long-term legitimacy or strengthen geopolitical fragmentation.

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