



13th MP-IDSA SOUTH ASIA CONFERENCE

Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Implications and Way Forward

16–17 December 2021 (ONLINE)

CONFERENCE TAKEAWAYS

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA)

**1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi–110010**

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OBJECTIVE OF CONFERENCE

As per the Concept Note, the objective of the 13th MP-IDSA South Asia Conference was to seek answers to the following questions and dwell on the possible way forward on Afghanistan:

- 1. How is the situation in Afghanistan likely to pan out in the immediate to short-term?**
- 2. Given the growing pulls and pressures, both within and from outside, will the Taliban be able to hold itself together and provide a stable and effective national leadership?**
- 3. How are other Afghan political actors likely to respond to the return of the Taliban in Kabul?**
- 4. How are regional and extra-regional countries looking at the return of the Taliban and its implications for the security landscape in and around the 'Heart of Asia'?**
- 5. In the absence of national reconciliation, how effective and sustainable will the economic and political incentives be in transforming the Taliban, from an armed proxy jihadi network into a moderate, broad-based and independent governing authority?**
- 6. What does the return of the Taliban bode for Pakistan in the long run?**
- 7. The Taliban 2.0 (as the new pseudonym goes) is being pushed to an ostensibly more moderate position by the more virulent Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) group and its affiliates. In this context, how is it likely to affect the ideological underpinnings of the Taliban and their unity?**
- 8. What is the way forward, in terms of available policy options for the region and the wider international community to deal with the developing situation in Afghanistan?**

CHAIRS, SPEAKERS & TITLE OF PRESENTATIONS

Session Chairpersons

Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy

Director General, MP-IDSA

Ambassador Ashok Sajjanhar

Member, MP-IDSA Executive Council

Ambassador Rakesh Sood

Former Ambassador to Afghanistan

Maj Gen (Dr) Bipin Bakshi, Retd

Deputy Director General, MP-IDSA

SPEAKERS & TITLE OF PRESENTATIONS

- **Return of Taliban and What It Means for Afghanistan and the Region**
MR LOTFULLAH NAJAFIZADA, Director, TOLO News, Kabul
- **The Taliban's Immediate Future**
MR ABUBAKAR SIDDIQUE, Editor, RFE/RL Gandhara, Prague
- **Afghanistan Heads Towards Uncertainty**
AMB SHAMSHER M. CHOWDHURY, Former Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh
- **Extreme Prognosis for an Extreme Region**
DR AYESHA SIDDIQA, Research Associate, SOAS, University of London
- **Working With or Around the Taliban**
MR OBAIDULLAH BAHEER, Lecturer, American University of Afghanistan, Kabul
- **The Future of US Policy in Afghanistan**
MR MICHAEL KUGELMAN
Deputy Director & Senior Associate, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC
- **Afghanistan's Security Crisis and the Region**
DR NILOFAR SAKHI, Senior Fellow (NR), Atlantic Council, Washington, DC
- **Central Asia's Approach Towards Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan**
MR BRUCE PANNIER, Central Asia Correspondent, RFE/RL, Prague
- **The Central Asian States versus New Afghanistan**
DR IRINA ZVYAGELSKAYA, Head, Centre for the Middle East Studies, IMEMO Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow
- **Social Engineering of Afghanistan Revisited**
PROF SEYED MOHAMMAD KAZEM SAJJADPOUR
Distinguished Fellow, Institute for Political and International Studies, Tehran
- **Taliban Victory in Afghanistan–The Impact Upon Pakistan**
PROF PERVEZ HOODBHOY, Islamabad-based Physicist and Writer

- **Afghanistan's Road to Peace and Development**
DR WANG SHIDA, Deputy Director & Associate Professor, Institute for South Asian Studies, CICIR, Beijing
- **Return of Taliban and Reversal of Women's Rights in Afghanistan**
DR BAHAR JALALI, Visiting Professor, Loyola University Maryland
- **Central Asia, Taliban and the Regional Security**
DR AKRAM UMAROV, Fulbright Visiting Scholar, University of Pittsburgh
- **Taliban 2.0: A View from Russia**
DR ALEXEY KUPRIYANOV, Head, Group on South Asia and Indian Ocean, IMEMO Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow
- **Afghanistan and South Asia: Two Different Futures**
PROF C. RAJA MOHAN,
Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore
- **A Long, Violent, Road Ahead for Afghanistan**
MR MAHENDRA VED
President Emeritus, Commonwealth Journalists Association, New Delhi
- **The Peril of Legitimation**
PROF AJAY DARSHAN BEHERA
Director, Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi
- **The Way Ahead in Afghanistan**
DR ASHOK K. BEHURIA
Senior Fellow & Coordinator, South Asia Centre, MP-IDSA

Note: Prof Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour (Distinguished Fellow, IPIS, Tehran) and Dr Bahar Jalali (Visiting Professor, Loyola University Maryland) could not join the online session due to technical issues. However, both the speakers will be submitting their papers for the edited book that the Institute plans to publish subsequently.

CONFERENCE TAKEAWAYS

The MP-IDSA organised the 13th edition of its flagship South Asia Conference on the theme “**Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Implications and Way Forward**” on **16–17 December 2021**. The two-day international conference, held in an online format, was divided into five sessions: (i) Inaugural Session, (ii) Return of Taliban: A Critical Analysis, (iii) Perspectives on Afghanistan, (iv) Regional Perspectives, and (iv) Way Forward in Afghanistan.

A cross-section of eminent speakers deliberated on various aspects of the conference theme, bringing together Afghan, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Russian, Iranian, Central Asian, American and Indian perspectives on the developing scenario in Afghanistan.

Key observations/arguments made during conference deliberations have been condensed under the following four broad heads:

Taliban and their ‘Islamic Emirate’

1. One of the primary challenges that is being faced by the Taliban is how to balance out the expectation of the Afghan people, the international community, and their own foot soldiers. The struggle is around preserving their internal unity and maintaining discipline and balancing the interests of disparate groups/factions within.
2. The patrons of the Taliban wanted to put pressure on Kabul for a democratic transition and in turn create leverages/counterweights to later urge the Taliban to behave in a certain way. The Ashraf Ghani Government, however, collapsed unexpectedly and the Taliban achieved a sense of victory and pride. This has now become problematic for the patron states including Pakistan.
3. The perception of a conclusive military victory has made it difficult for the Taliban to open up and bring about an inclusive government. It has inhibited them from adopting an inclusive set-up or appreciating how much society has transformed in the past 20 years. Their regime is more about rule and control than governance and delivery.
4. Taliban’s idea of an ‘Islamic Emirate’ has alienated other constituencies—not only the ethnic minorities but even the secular Pashtuns are feeling marginalised and excluded.
5. The Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) provides a viable alternative, especially to the disgruntled Taliban fighters. This in turn is making the Taliban more rigid on the ideological front as they fear that the IS-K would turn out to be a catching net for the defectors.

6. At the core of the conflict in Afghanistan was the constant 'othering' by both the Afghan Government and the Taliban and their patrons. Post the Taliban takeover, the binary approach that the Taliban either comply with or face sanctions may not be productive. There are several levels in between at which engagement must happen.
7. There has been some attempt by the Taliban to present themselves as different and they are active on the diplomatic front to communicate that. They do not want to be seen as being controlled by Pakistan and want to show themselves as an Afghan national organisation.
8. The typical ideas of 'rationality' may not apply to religious groups like the Taliban. Such groups do not look at physical or tangible limitations in a war. There is no cost-benefit analysis as such.
9. For the Taliban, the challenge is to establish control and push back forces that seek to compete with them. What is encouraging is the fact that they are also engaging widely with the rest of the world and the conversation thus is not entirely negative.
10. The internal contradictions within the Taliban could grow with time and create a destabilising situation in Afghanistan. Without a charismatic leader, the Taliban may face a major crisis in the months to come.
11. There is negative peace in Afghanistan. The country is in a transformational stage, and the Taliban can do better or worse.

US Policy Towards Afghanistan

12. The US policy towards Afghanistan is largely about handling the post-withdrawal issues. The main near-term goal is to help its citizens in Afghanistan and make an effort to address the worsening humanitarian crisis. The mid-term goals will be known once the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan subsides.
13. There are political risks if the US decides to end sanctions and unfreeze frozen assets and allow them to flow to the Taliban and especially the Haqqani faction. Had the Haqqanis not been dominant in this Taliban government, the US policy might have been different. The US-Pakistan deal is possible as the US counter-terrorism operations may not be effective if they are managed from its bases in the Middle East.
14. The long-term US policy includes continued engagement with Afghanistan but its strategic interests lie beyond Afghanistan. The US is more concerned with issues such as climate change and competition with China. The considerations of counter-terrorism will, however, continue to guide the US policy in the region.

Regional Perspectives

15. Security is the main concern for countries in the region. China would not like to have a situation in Afghanistan that would pose security challenges to its mega projects in Pakistan. Russia will try to limit the spillover to the Central Asian states and Iran also would want better treatment of Shias and especially the Hazara community, and all regional countries would want the end of the drug trade.
16. There is a general lack of consensus on Afghanistan. The US has left but Russia and China are not too keen to put all their resources into Afghanistan. The unfolding situation in Afghanistan poses a challenge to the entire world as to whether the people in Afghanistan will be left to starve. Engagement must come about even if it is to reduce the possibility of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan in future.
17. The dominance of pro-Pakistani Haqqanis and the hardliners within the Taliban regime is not in the Indian interest. From an Indian perspective, an autonomous Afghanistan would be of great value. The primary objective for India remains to continue to build on the goodwill that it has with the people of Afghanistan. The silver lining is that the Taliban are open to the idea of Indian assistance.
18. It was argued that due to the conflicting identities among the ethnic groups, Afghanistan is not united despite having a common Islamic identity. At times, ethnic and tribal identity became predominant over Islamic identity. So, Pakistan using the Taliban to popularise the Islamist Pashtun identity to counter Pakhtun nationalism may not work.
19. Pakistan will continue to support the Haqqani Network in order to get rid of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). If Pakistan makes the Afghan Taliban more Islamist, then there will be greater radicalism in the region including in Pakistan, and if they make the Taliban more nationalist, they will run the risk of awakening Pakhtun nationalism, thereby threatening the Durand Line with Afghanistan.
20. There is hope in Pakistan that China will bring stability to Afghanistan by removing poverty and strengthening institutions in Afghanistan, taking advantage of the mineral resources in the country. However, there is inhibition on the Chinese side to invest in the mining sector or any other project given the instability in Afghanistan, which is unlikely to end soon.
21. The Afghan Taliban, who are trained in Pakistani madrassas, are greatly reliant on Pakistan. The Pakistani establishment now looks at Afghanistan as the fifth province of the country. Pakistan's intelligence agency was seen advising the Taliban about how to run society and how to organise themselves.
22. Although the Durand Line has been accepted as a national boundary by Pakistan, there are strong linkages between the Pashtuns living on either side of the Durand Line. There is a fear in Pakistan that the flow of Afghan refugees will strengthen the Pashtun nationalism within Pakistan. Pakistan hopes that a friendly Taliban

government would consolidate the national boundary. Pakistan is also hoping that the Taliban will be able to modernise under Pakistani tutelage.

23. There are differences between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which will not be resolved anytime soon. For now, the dependence of Afghanistan on Pakistan under the Taliban is real; so, how it plays out will have an impact on the nature of the regional order.
24. Pakistan is not in conflict with the Afghan Taliban over the unmet demands. It has also been trying to tell the world, how the Taliban is better than al Qaeda and the IS-K. There is very little chance that Pakistan would like to put its boots on the ground inside Afghanistan.
25. China could not take up several projects in Afghanistan because of security issues. Once the country gets stabilised domestically, and also its relationship with other countries including the US gets normalised, China will invest in projects in Afghanistan. How the China–Afghanistan security cooperation would take shape is difficult to fathom at the moment, as it is still a work in progress.
26. Russia would be more amenable to working with a friendly and moderate government in Afghanistan. In the Russian political discourse, there is a perception that with some support Taliban may be able to form a working system of government and bring a semblance of stability to Afghanistan. Russia has no other alternative but to have a working relationship with the Taliban. However, Russia remains sceptical about the Taliban's capability to fulfil its obligations and responsibilities effectively.
27. Iran is following a policy of 'strategic patience' and watching how the Taliban are consolidating themselves and how they are looking at Iranian concerns about the Shia Hazara minority and also the security of their border with Afghanistan. Iran would not like to be caught in sectarian quagmires at the moment.
28. There are no winners in Central Asia after the Taliban takeover but still most of the countries in the region are looking at Afghanistan as an opportunity and hope to see better prospects in their relations with Afghanistan. Although all except Tajikistan are ready to further engage the Taliban, they are not in a hurry to recognise their government.
29. There are apprehensions in Central Asia that the radicalised elements which fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan might return and pose internal security challenges. Taliban could be trying to keep away from issues that bother the Central Asian states, but this is not likely to work in the long term.
30. On reports about the Chinese military presence in Tajikistan, it was stated by one of the Russian participants that this is unlikely for two reasons: first, there is already a Russian base in Tajikistan, and second, it is not in line with China's Central Asia policy.

Challenges & Way Forward

31. The contradiction of a terrorist organisation forming the government and trying to get legitimacy and also in the process trying to keep links with its old jihadist friends is the dilemma the Taliban would be facing in the coming days.
32. There is no easy way for the Taliban regime to secure the legitimisation of its rule in Afghanistan despite the many conjectures and theories. It is basically an insurgent group that has taken over power and does not have a roadmap for governance. That is why the Taliban government does not talk about its governance system, except for talking about an Islamic regime.
33. Taliban are not just forming another government in Afghanistan, they are also changing the flag, wanting to change the constitution and the name of the country; and therefore, what they are talking about is the restructuring of the state in terms of their own ideological vision. The dual question for the world is whether it will be an undiluted affirmation of their ideology or it will be an incremental pragmatic adaptation to the real world.
34. If the Taliban give up too much of their ideology, then there will be attacks from within and if they stick to their ideology, then there will be problems with governing Afghanistan itself. Therefore, the choices that the Taliban make in terms of how they want to proceed will have consequences for Afghanistan itself and in turn on the region.
35. It is up to the Taliban to ensure that their regime becomes a responsible one, in tune with the expectations and aspirations of the Afghan people and the global community. Failure to do so would imperil the Taliban's rule and deny the full legitimacy they seek in the international community.
36. There are three possible ways to approach the Taliban regime: first, to accept and engage; second, dissociate and disengage; and finally, stay indifferent. Rejecting to engage or staying indifferent to the Taliban regime might make things worse. Today, irrespective of the terror tag on the Taliban, most of the regional and extra-regional powers consider it as an alternative now. Russia and China are close to accepting the legitimacy of the Taliban government and doing business with it.
37. It was argued that if the world has recognised and engaged conservative Islamic regimes elsewhere, then why not engage the Taliban in Afghanistan. Ignoring Afghanistan simply because it is not as resource-rich as the conservative countries in the Middle East and because it wants to set up an Islamic Emirate, is not logical.
38. It is imperative to stay engaged with Afghanistan and both ensure and enable an inclusive government. Lack of external (international community) or internal consensus (within Afghanistan) on how to take Afghanistan forward, is only making the matters worse.

39. The most urgent task before the global community is the provision of humanitarian assistance in an open and transparent manner. The return of UN and aid workers to Afghanistan will permit not just the monitoring of the distribution of food aid and other assistance, but may also help to check the excesses committed by zealots and criminals on vulnerable sections of society.
40. For the Indian strategic community, the question is how internal contradictions in Afghanistan play out and how India protects its interest in Afghanistan. India's core interest in Afghanistan is that the latter does not become a reservoir for Pakistan-supported terrorism against India. Today, the Taliban are reaching out to India. The Taliban have their own agency and the idea that somehow the world can persuade them to behave in a particular manner is very ambiguous. The focus should be on understanding the structural changes taking place in Afghanistan and how it is playing out.

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available at <https://www.idsa.in/event/sac/sac2021>