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Issue Brief

Assessing Five Years of Taliban Rule in Afghanistan

Priyanka Singh

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Summary

The security situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban has been marked by strict internal control, occasional insurgent actions across multiple fronts, and border disputes primarily with Pakistan. On the foreign policy front, while only Russia has granted full recognition, China, India and Pakistan are yet to formalise their diplomatic ties with the Taliban regime fully.

In August 2021, when the Taliban took over Kabul, even before the US–NATO forces fully withdrew, predictions about their stay were uncertain. Some experts forecasted either a rapid security collapse, an economic breakdown, or a return to civil war. The first version of the Taliban was ousted during the War on Terror, and their comeback after 20 years of US–NATO presence in Afghanistan seemed to validate their cause. As the US, which had fought the group's resurgence for over a decade, withdrew, the Taliban further entrenched themselves and dismantled the democratic institutions established after the Bonn Peace Process. This process treated the Taliban as a defeated non-entity. Two decades on, the US moved away from the democratic framework and sidelined the elected government to strike a deal with the Taliban.

What Ruptured the Doha Peace Understanding?

Afghanistan's political downfall originated/stemmed from fundamental issues in the deal itself, along with the fragile state of Afghanistan's institutions and security forces. The US and Taliban signed a Peace Accord in Doha on 29 February 2020. The agreement included provisions for intra-Afghan dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Still, the government was excluded from peace talks because the Taliban refused to recognise its legitimacy. Pakistan facilitated the process, aligning with the Taliban at the time. The negotiations under the Doha Accord significantly weakened Afghanistan's democratically elected government. Engaging directly with insurgent groups gave them legitimacy and eroded the democratic authority structures that the US had worked hard to build since its post-9/11 intervention.

Following the Doha agreement, the US hesitated to provide concrete support to Afghan security forces, leaving them stranded and causing increased desertion amid uncertainty and instability. Sensing vulnerabilities, the Taliban expedited their military campaign despite commitments to lessen violence. With the US disengaged and eager to withdraw, they seized the opportunity to strengthen their hold and took Kabul just before 15 August 2021. Overall, US indifference and the halt in air support made the security forces feel abandoned and isolated, hindering their ability to resist the Taliban effectively.[1]

What happened at the Kabul International Airport on 26 August was the final breach—a suicide bombing amidst a crowded airport killed 160–180 people, including 13 US service members who were killed at Abbey Gate while conducting

[1] Jonathan Schroden, **"Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan's Security Forces"**, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Vol. 14, No. 8, 2021.

a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO).[2] The attack put the Biden Administration, already on the backfoot, under sharp scrutiny for this scale of mismanagement, having ignored advice and input from the military and intelligence.

The brief assesses the Taliban government's five years across broad verticals of the domestic environment, economic performance, and the scale of diplomatic pursuits and international outreach before prognosticating on the Emirate's road ahead.

The Domestic Environment

The security situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban has become somewhat more stable, marked by strict internal control, occasional insurgent actions across multiple fronts, and border disputes primarily with Pakistan. Their quick comeback after the US withdrew had lifted their morale. Now in their sixth year, the Taliban claim to have resolved internal civil conflicts that were prominent during the US withdrawal.

The reduction in violence is partly because the Taliban is now enforcing laws they once bypassed. As a result, overall violence and security worries are viewed as diminished. Unlike the Taliban 1.0, this government controls all of Afghanistan and has pushed opposition groups to the edges, holding full authority. According to the World Bank, the Taliban government reportedly spends nearly half of its budget (47.8 per cent) on security, including on intelligence and law enforcement agencies such as the police.[3]

According to reports from the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team, the Taliban continues to support the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) even though Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada reportedly advised against increasing attacks on Pakistan.[4] As a result, many TTP fighters had reportedly been moved inland, away from the Pakistani border.[5] There is also evidence suggesting that al-Qaeda is integrated into the Taliban's broader control structure, influenced by the Emirates' preference to

[2] **"DOD Identifies Marine Corps, Navy and Army Casualties"**, U.S. Department of War, 28 August 2021.

[3] **"Afghanistan Economic Monitor"**, The World Bank, December 2025, p. 7.

[4] **"Letter dated 6 August 2026 from the President of the Security Council acting in the absence of a Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council"**, United Nations Security Council, 10 August 2026, p. 18.

[5] Ibid.

"absorb" rather than "confront" them.[6] Concerning the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Taliban and ISKP have remained fundamentally different, being "doctrinally distinct" due to their conflicting objectives.[7] The Taliban's nationalist focus on Afghanistan is seen as opposing ISKP's goal of establishing a global caliphate.

Another internal dispute revolves around the supposed rivalry between the Kandahar and Kabul factions: Kandahar is seen as more traditional and conservative, whereas Kabul's group appears more pragmatic, flexible and media-aware. Despite these perceived divisions, both groups have generally acted cohesively, casting doubt on the accuracy of these perceptions/interpretations. Whether these perceptions are part of a deliberate strategy to balance the demands of daily governance and diplomacy with the fundamental principles of Taliban ideology remains unclear.

The social landscape under the Taliban is deeply worrying, characterised by sustained and institutionalised discrimination against girls and women. The Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, established after the Taliban disbanded the Ministry of Women's Affairs, has overseen the worst forms of discrimination against women, including banning them from secondary and higher education and severely restricting their participation in the country's workforce, which has declined to 18.3 per cent in 2019 and 16.5 per cent in 2020 to barely 5.1 per cent by 2026.[8] Amongst the minorities, the Shia Hazara community is the worst hit. There have been frequent incidents of targeted attacks against the community and their land being usurped and distributed amongst those belonging to the Taliban ideology or outfit.[9]

State of Economy

Between Taliban 1.0 and Taliban 2.0, Afghanistan's GDP rose from US$ 4 billion to about US$ 19.8 billion. Foreign aid fuelled this growth, supporting a highly centralised yet corrupt system, while limited transparency reduced accountability. When that system collapsed, the country's economic vulnerabilities became clear. The economy was also still reeling from the after-effects of natural calamities (the series of flash floods, the most destructive occurring in August 2020) and the

[6] Javid Ahmad, **"CIA's Al-Qaeda Files Reveal Terrorism's Hidden Advantage"**, Wilson Center, 18 September 2026; Bill Roggio, **"Al Qaeda Leaders are Prominently Serving in Taliban Government"**, *FDD's Long War Journal*, 11 June 2023.

[7] Abdul Sayed, Pieter Van Ostaeyen and Charlie Winter, **"Making Sense of the Islamic State's War on the Afghan Taliban"**, Hudson Institute, 25 January 2022.

[8] **"Afghanistan's Labour Market Five Years After the Taliban Takeover: Trends, Challenges and Emerging Risks"**, ILO Brief, International Labour Organization, August 2026, p. 6.

[9] **"Afghanistan: Taliban Forcibly Evict Minority Shia"**, *Human Rights Watch*, 22 October 2021.

pandemic.[10] As the Taliban took control, aid was severely cut: the US halted aid, froze Afghan assets worth US$ 9.5 billion, the IMF suspended US$ 440 million in Special Drawing Rights, and Germany halted US$ 300 million, among other economic measures.[11] The withdrawal of foreign direct budget support, combined with severe banking restrictions, plunged millions into poverty.

As the Taliban returned, the Afghan economy plummeted by about 20 per cent. However, by 2022, signs of recovery emerged after reaching "an inflexion point plateauing around a low-level equilibrium".[12] In this period, though inflation remained high, other markers such as exports appreciated, after which "exchange-rate volatility reduced, and domestic revenue collection" became "relatively healthy".[13] Further, businesses resumed, albeit at reduced capacity, after the operators became acclimatised to the new regime.[14] In a briefing before the Security Council in December 2022, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva, observed that "the Taliban's economic management has been more effective than expected", and noted that it maintained some macroeconomic stability, though only after international assistance fed half the population.[15]

What has prevented the Taliban's economic breakdown is the continuation, and in some cases the expansion, of trade with countries such as Iran, India, the United Arab Emirates, and neighbouring Central Asian countries, which has cushioned the impact. Remittances also help keep the Afghan economy afloat. The World Bank estimated total remittances in 2022 at 1 to 1.2 billion USD, twice the amount sent home in 2019.[16] However, there isn't much clarity on the total amount of remittances under the Taliban regime. The last reliable data on gross remittances remains from 2020, at US$ 788.9 million.[17]

The Taliban have raised funds through a vigorous revenue-collection strategy, including customs duties at borders and mining activities. They now control

[10] Inbar Pe'er, **"Afghanistan's Economy Under the Taliban: The Challenges Ahead"**, Atlantic Council, 9 September 2021.

[11] Ibid.

[12] **"Afghanistan Development Update: Adjusting to the New Realities"**, The World Bank, October 2022, p. 4.

[13] **"Afghanistan's Economy Faces Critical Challenges as it Adjusts to New Realities"**, World Bank Group, 18 October 2022.

[14] Ibid.

[15] **"Briefing by Special Representative Roza Otunbayeva to the Security Council"**, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 20 December 2022.

[16] Sabawoon Samim, **"Sending Money Home: The Impact of Remittances on Workers, Families and Villages"**, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 25 January 2024.

[17] **"Remittances to Afghanistan are Lifelines: They are Needed More Than Ever in a Time of Crisis"**, Migration Data Portal, 15 August 2022.

extensive mineral reserves such as copper, iron, gold, emeralds, chromite, and other precious stones, along with cheaper resources like coal, lithium, marble and lapis lazuli, which they can trade with neighbouring countries like China.[18] While they have collected domestic revenue effectively, the formal banking sector remains largely insolvent because of international asset freezes and its disconnection from the SWIFT payment system.[19] The economy largely relies on the informal Hawala transfer network, which complicates international trade, increases transaction costs, and restricts large-scale capital investments flowing into the country.

In November 2025, the World Bank reported that the drop in Afghanistan's remittances from 15.5 to 12.9 per cent of GDP has adversely impacted the balance of payments.[20] This decrease in remittances was attributed to mass return migration from Iran and Pakistan, reducing the number of Afghans sending money home. Approximately 6.9 million refugees have returned from Iran and Pakistan as part of the ongoing reverse migration.[21]

Besides, in April 2022, Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada issued a formal decree banning poppy cultivation and drug manufacturing. Opium trade and smuggling had been the mainstay of the Taliban economy during the War on Terror years. UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime) monitoring subsequently recorded a reduction of over 95 per cent in poppy cultivation across traditional heartlands like Helmand and Kandahar.[22] The ban removed an estimated US$ 1 billion annual income stream from rural communities, leaving them without alternative livelihoods.[23]

Neighbourhood and Beyond

The Taliban-led government currently operates 42 representative offices/diplomatic offices abroad and hosts 28 foreign missions and international organisations and

[18] **"Afghanistan's '$1 Trillion' Mineral Wealth: Who Controls It?"**, *Afghanistan International*, 2 September 2026.

[19] Abubakar Siddique, **"Distrustful of the Taliban, A Growing Number of Afghans Ditch Banks"**, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 29 May 2024.

[20] **"Afghanistan Development Update: Sustaining Returns: Challenges and Opportunities"**, World Bank Group, November 2025, p. 21.

[21] **"Returnee Resilience Overview – Afghanistan"**, International Organization for Migration, September 2026, p. 6.

[22] **"Press Release: Afghanistan Opium Cultivation in 2023 Declined 95 per cent Following Drug Ban: New UNODC Survey"**, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 5 November 2023.

[23] **"Leaving Poppy Behind – Permanently: How the Findings from UNODC's New Afghan Opium Survey Could Affect Vulnerable Populations"**, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 6 November 2023.

their representatives.[24] However, since the regime disbanded the previous constitution, it has lacked a clear foreign policy framework.

Pakistan

With Pakistan, Afghanistan is experiencing a serious crisis, with ongoing cross-border military actions and worsening diplomatic ties. In October 2025, during Operation Khyber Storm, Pakistan targeted suspected TTP hideouts in Jalalabad, Khost, Kabul and Paktika. The Taliban government responded with retaliatory strikes, leading to a ceasefire to facilitate diplomatic talks.

Border tensions escalated to an 'open war' codenamed Operation Ghazab lil-Haq (Wrath for the Truth) in February 2026, a day before the US–Israel struck Iran.[25] The two sides continue to face intense friction, with the most recent incident being a Pakistani Air Force strike on 20 September across the bordering provinces of Kunar and Paktika, killing 28, according to Islamabad, and 3 civilians, according to the Taliban government. This followed a suicide bombing, along with gunshots, at a mosque near a police facility in Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which killed several police personnel. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan was blamed for the attack.[26]

Overall, the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have sharply deteriorated due to increasing conflicts over the TTP. Islamabad consistently retaliates after attacks, blaming both the group and the Taliban government for providing sanctuary. Despite peace efforts by mediators like Qatar, Turkiye and China, tensions remain high. To pressure the Taliban government, Pakistan has implemented punitive actions such as disrupting trade and deporting many Afghan refugees over the Durand Line.

Iran

Iran, currently Afghanistan's largest trading partner, and the Taliban have maintained a relationship characterised by "caution and quiet engagement".[27] This stability persists despite recent large-scale deportations of undocumented Afghan refugees, which have put a strain on Afghanistan's limited resources. Even amid the ongoing US–Israel–Iran conflict, their ties have stayed steady, partly because the Taliban shares Iran's resentment towards the US. Additionally, strategic links

[24] **"Letter dated 8 December 2025 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council represented in Kabul"**, United Nations Security Council, 8 December 2025, p. 7.

[25] **"Afghanistan and Pakistan Trade Fire as Conflict Takes a Dangerous Turn"**, International Crisis Group, 20 March 2026.

[26] **"Kohat Attack"**, *Dawn*, 20 September 2026.

[27] Mahboob Shah Mahboob, **"The Strange Stability Between Tehran and the Taliban"**, *Iran International*, 10 May 2026.

between Iran and Afghanistan are strengthened by linguistic ties, including Persian-speaking Tajik and Hazara communities of the Shia sect.[28]

Central Asia

Tajikistan's relationship with the Taliban is intricate, influenced by its specific circumstances. With a 1,350-kilometre border to Afghanistan, including 250–300 km along the Wakhan Corridor, Tajikistan has hosted anti-Taliban Tajik Afghan factions.[29] The country has experienced occasional border clashes and disputes over the Amu Darya Basin, especially concerning the Taliban's plans to divert water for canal systems like the Qosh Tepa.[30]

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have shown pragmatic approaches in their economic relationships and in collaborating with Afghanistan on upcoming projects like TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline). Unlike Tajikistan's "frosty reception" to the Taliban's return, these countries welcomed the Taliban government and favoured "engagement over isolation".[31]

The United States

Washington's equation with Taliban 2.0 has been scarred by the embarrassment and loss of personnel during the exit. However, despite that, the US has carried out its role in the resettlement of Afghans through CARE (Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts) and Operation Enduring Welcome. Among those resettled were Afghans who assisted the US–NATO mission during the War on Terror. However, both resettlement operations ended in 2025.[32] The US also claims to have given aid up to US$ 3.8 billion after the Taliban takeover, mainly through UN agencies.[33]

However, in January 2025, the Trump administration issued an Executive Order mandating a review of aid to Afghanistan and ultimately ceased it in July 2025; since then, US assistance has been limited to token forms of aid, such as student assistance.[34] The US-based assets of the Afghan Central Bank remain frozen.[35] At

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[28] **"Iran and Afghanistan"**, Institute for the Study of War, 15 April 2009.

[29] Giorgio Cafiero and Eldar Mamedov, **"Tajikistan and the Taliban"**, *The National Interest*, 24 July 2024.

[30] Galiya Ibragimova, **"Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa Canal Could Trigger a Central Asian Water Crisis"**, Carnegie Politika, 3 September 2025.

[31] **"Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan Stand United on Afghanistan"**, *Eurasianet*, 6 October 2021.

[32] **"Congressman Morelle Condemns Dismantling of Afghan Allies Visa Program"**, U.S. House of Representatives, 30 July 2025.

[33] **"Final Report: Seventeen Years of Reconstruction Oversight"**, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, December 2025, p. v.

[34] **"EO 14169: Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid"**, The White House, 20 January 2025.

[35] Ayaz Gul, **"Taliban Decry US Claims About Frozen Afghan Assets"**, *Voice of America*, 1 February 2025.

the geopolitical level on the Pakistan–Afghanistan tensions, Washington has been seen on Pakistan's side against Afghanistan, and has defended what they call Pakistan's 'right to self-defence'.[36] Other irritants have been President Trump's demand to reclaim the Bagram airbase near Kabul and hard negotiations with the Taliban concerning the hostages.

Russia

Russia has been forthcoming in re-engaging with the Taliban regime in a different format. Moscow familiarised itself with the Taliban during its involvement in the peace talks—the quadrilateral and trilateral forums on Afghanistan. This was way before the US finally withdrew. Later, Russia became the first country to confer full diplomatic recognition on the Taliban regime before signing a military pact in May 2026.[37]

China

Before the Taliban's takeover, China played a significant role in Afghanistan's strategic affairs. As US influence diminished, China engaged actively in peace talks with the Taliban. China appeared to be moving towards greater economic involvement with Kabul, notably after completing the Wakhan Road.[38] Additionally, the extension of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been discussed multiple times at trilateral forums involving Pakistan, China and Afghanistan.

China's primary engagement with Afghanistan centres on security and counterterrorism efforts. It seeks guarantees from the Taliban for the safety of Chinese nationals and assurances that the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) won't find refuge in Afghanistan. While maintaining a working diplomatic relationship—being among the first to host a Taliban-appointed ambassador—China's economic involvement has been cautious, with limited investments and security conditions affecting project progress. For instance, a Chinese firm secured a US$ 540 million deal for oil extraction in the Amu Darya Basin, yet pending projects like the Mes Aynak copper mine remain stalled.[39] Nonetheless, China advocates for easing sanctions on the Taliban government and unfreezing Afghan assets.

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[36] Kanishka Singh, **"US Says It Supports Pakistan's Right to Defend Itself Against 'Terrorist Attacks'"**, *Reuters*, 3 July 2026.

[37] Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi, **"Taliban, Russia are Cozying Up to Each Other — Why?"**, *Deutsche Welle*, 3 June 2026.

[38] **"Taliban Says 121-km Wakhan Road in Badakhshan Completed"**, *Atlas Press News Agency*, 23 September 2026.

[39] **"18-Year Halt of Mes Aynak Mine Costs Afghanistan Billions in Lost Revenue"**, *DID Press Agency*, 4 May 2026.

India

Since their return to power, India–Taliban ties have improved. This resulted from a recalibrated, paced rapprochement. As the Taliban swept to power in August 2021, "many saw Kabul's fall as a strategic setback for India".[40] Indian missions and diplomatic staff had to be evacuated. However, soon after, in June 2022, a technical team landed in Afghanistan to oversee the disbursement and function of aid and other development works in the country.

India shared positive relations with successive regimes in Afghanistan during the years of the War on Terror. India hadn't engaged with the Taliban in past. This was mainly due to three primary reasons: the Taliban's fraternal ties with Pakistan, its military and the ISI, and bitter experiences with regard to the IC-814 hijack and the demolition of the Buddha sites in Bamiyan. India had traditionally engaged with anti-Taliban forces such as the Northern Alliance and was seen as close to pro-Soviet regimes such as those of the assassinated President Najibullah. Close to the Taliban's 1.0 capture of power, India was seen offering some form of military aid to Ahmed Shah Masood, leader of the Northern Alliance that was once part of the Burhanuddin Rabbani government before the Taliban arrived to take control.[41]

Nonetheless, soon after the Taliban took over, India's Ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, met Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, head of the Taliban's Doha Office, on 31 August 2021. During that meeting, Mittal sought assurances from the Taliban leadership on three issues: ensuring the safety and repatriation of Indian nationals, providing safe passage for Afghan nationals wanting to come to India, and preventing Pakistan-based terror groups from using Afghan territory to attack India.[42]

After the Taliban takeover, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar noted India has adopted a wait-and-see approach. Shortly after, New Delhi hosted the Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan on 10 November 2021. National Security Advisors from Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan attended the forum. Although the Taliban government was neither invited nor represented, it welcomed the outcome in the form of the Delhi Declaration.

Thereafter, a progressive rapprochement followed, with parleys between the Joint Secretary (Pakistan–Afghanistan–Iran division of the MEA), J. P. Singh, and Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob, and between Vikram Misri, India's Foreign Secretary, and Taliban Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, culminating in the

[40] Soutik Biswas, **"Why India is Reaching Out to the Taliban Now"**, *BBC*, 14 January 2025.

[41] Thomas Withington, **"The Early anti-Taliban Team"**, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 57, No. 6, 2001, p. 14.

[42] Sachin Parashar, **"Taliban kosher? India Confirms Meeting with Senior Leader"**, *The Times of India*, 1 September 2021.

latter's week-long visit to India in October 2025. By this time, India had begun to call Afghanistan its 'contiguous neighbour', including at international forums such as the UN. Of late, India has also begun advocating a change in approach towards Afghanistan and its needs, regardless of the world community's aversion to the current regime.

Interestingly, despite some disruptions after the takeover, trade between India and Afghanistan has remained steady. India has imported significant amounts of apples, figs, asafoetida, and notably saffron, the latter being grown as part of a deliberate effort to replace poppy cultivation in Afghanistan.[43]

The Road Ahead

Since taking power, while the Taliban have consolidated their position, the most significant obstacle remains their continued isolation by the international community. Only Russia has granted the regime full recognition. Even China, which has engaged closely with the Taliban since the early days of the War on Terror, has not conferred full recognition. Similarly, Pakistan (even before the deterioration of its relations with the Afghan Taliban) or India (which has improved ties with the Taliban) are yet to formalise their diplomatic ties with the Taliban government fully.

The Taliban are attempting to draw the attention of the world community to gain some form of recognition by acts such as the ban on poppy cultivation. Still, the regressive approach towards girls and women implies that global engagement remains far-fetched. The Taliban have been positing that different standards are being applied to the determination of their status.

The Taliban have successfully bought time to overcome their inexperience in statecraft. This was partly possible because, during their five-year rule, the global focus was largely absorbed by two major geopolitical crises—the Ukraine war and the US–Israel–Iran War. The Taliban exploited/utilised this distraction to strengthen their position in the meantime. They are also learning to negotiate with countries they had not previously engaged with. In June 2026, a Taliban delegation visited Brussels to discuss with 15 EU nations the return of failed asylum seekers from Afghanistan.[44]

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[43] Harikishan Sharma, **"Key Shift in India-Afghanistan Trade Since Taliban Takeover in 2021: Exports Slump, Imports Surge"**, *The Indian Express*, 16 February 2025.

[44] Richard Connor and Rosie Birchard, **"EU Hosts Taliban for Migrant Return Talks in Brussels"**, *Deutsche Welle*,
23 June 2026.

However, the challenge remains in meeting the long-term demands of running a state rather than opposing those who run it. For now, there is no external presence or interference to blame. Though the Taliban want to be treated as a normal government/state, they still have their own dogmatic idiosyncrasies to contend with. They have tried to reconcile the inherent contradictions by presenting themselves as diplomatically savvy, open to engaging with all quarters, and focused on development plans and progress.

In August 2025, they also introduced a 5-year National Development Strategy that laid out a horizon to achieve multi-sectoral goals, collating their resources and programmes in a single framework, and ordering various ministries to align their respective agendas with it.[45] Despite such moves that reflect their growing aspirations, the Taliban are short of severing ties with the ideological tenets that define their core identity.

By 2026, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) projects that about 21.9 million people—roughly 45 per cent of the population—will need humanitarian aid because of the combined effects of economic shocks and structural vulnerabilities.[46] According to the ILO, Afghanistan's unemployment rate has been above 13 per cent since 2021.[47]

The US and the broader world community need to rethink their approach to the Taliban. Washington gave them legitimacy by sitting at the negotiating table. Since the Taliban assumed power, aside from punitive measures such as freezing their assets, the US has largely, especially more recently, taken a hands-off approach. A key argument used to justify the War on Terror was that it targeted "enemies of freedom".[48] The US must acknowledge that the welfare and freedom of the Afghan people, especially women, are at risk. It should also consider whether it can change the situation. Most crucially, the US attitude will influence how the rest of the world responds to the evolving multi-fold situation/crisis in Afghanistan.

[45] **"Taliban Unveils Five-Year National Development Strategy"**, *Afghanistan International*, 26 August 2025.

[46] **"Afghanistan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026"**, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 30 December 2025.

[47] **"Country Profiles: Afghanistan"**, Labour Force Survey, International Labour Organization, 2021.

[48] **"Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People"**, The White House, 20 September 2001.

About the Author



Dr. Priyanka Singh is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
New Delhi 110 010 India
T +91-11-2671 7983 F +91-11-2615 4191
www.idsa.in
Twitter @IDSAIndia
www.facebook.com/ManoharParrikarInstituteforDefenceStudiesAnalyses