

Taliban's Re-Takeover of Afghanistan and Implications for Southeast Asia: The Need to Calibrate Politics and Violence?

Bilveer Singh

Af-Pak: One Year Since the Taliban's Return to Power

Abdul Basit

Beyond Af-Pak: Varied Impacts of the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan in the Rest of South Asia

Iftexharul Bashar and Kalicharan Veera Singam



Impact of the One-Year Taliban Takeover on South and Southeast Asia

The impact of the Taliban's one-year rule in Afghanistan varies across regions and countries. Of the two regions in focus in the current issue, the impact on South Asia was more pronounced than on Southeast Asia. Seemingly, the salience of Afghanistan as the trendsetter of global jihadist trends has diminished. The foreign jihadists have not travelled to Afghanistan in significant numbers. On July 31, Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri's killing, in a US drone attack in Kabul in a Taliban safehouse, also exposed a continued nexus between the two groups. His killing will likely blunt Al-Qaeda's hope to revive its global jihadist brand under the Taliban protection. At any rate, Al-Qaeda is not fixated on high-profile attacks against the US and the West. Rather, it is investing in localising and regionalising its jihadist narrative. Hence, continued vigilance is required to ensure the transnational jihadist group does not make serious inroads into South and Southeast Asia's local conflicts.

In South Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan bore the brunt of the Taliban's takeover in the form of growing militant violence in the border regions, triumphant jihadist narratives, cross-border flow of refugees, struggling economies and human rights violations. While other South Asian countries like India and Bangladesh did not witness any significant physical changes, the extremist narratives increased exponentially in the discursive space.

Meanwhile, the Southeast Asian threat landscape has not been significantly impacted, despite the Taliban's return to power. Indeed, some pro-Al-Qaeda groups had issued congratulatory statements and vowed to imitate the Taliban's model, but such avowals were mainly confined to cyberspace. The less pronounced impact on Southeast Asia is partly explained by the split in the global jihadist movement between Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (IS). The pro-IS Southeast Asian jihadist groups did not see the Taliban's return as a victory for themselves.

This issue carries three articles. The first article by **Bilveer Singh** studies how the Taliban takeover has impacted the social and political drivers of the Islamist terrorist threat in the region, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. The author first assesses the historic links between Islamist militancy in Southeast Asia and the Taliban 1.0, and then postulates how the linkages between the current Taliban regime and various politico-militant movements in the region are shaping up and will be forged. The article also alludes to the possibility of Islamist political fringes going mainstream and capturing power, as witnessed in a few countries in other regions.

The second article by **Abdul Basit** examines the impact of the Taliban takeover on Afghanistan and Pakistan. The author notes that Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'s attacks against the Pakistani security forces have increased significantly. Meanwhile, the Taliban's internal coherence has been tested since they came to power. The main disputes dividing the Taliban factions include sharing of power and resources, ethnic differences, engaging the international community for recognition, cutting ties with al-Qaeda and girls' education. The author notes that the Al-Qaeda chief's killing will hurt the prospects of Al-Qaeda's revival in the immediate term. Meanwhile, the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (IS-K) is resilient and poses the most significant threat to the Taliban in Afghanistan. The National Resistance Front is weak but if the Taliban's internal divisions persist, it can become a threat to reckon with in the coming years.

The last article by **Iftexharul Bashar** and **Kalicharan Veera Singam** discusses the varied impacts of the Taliban takeover in South Asia, outside of the Af-Pak region. In Bangladesh, there are concerns over the increased activities of Islamist militants and politically oriented Islamist groups – although their ability to transform into significant threats for the Bangladeshi government remains questionable. India presents a somewhat mixed picture, with the country featuring prominently in the propaganda of various pro-Taliban organisations such as the Al-Qaeda, although this has not translated into physical attacks. In Sri Lanka and the Maldives, it remains unclear if the Taliban takeover could potentially invigorate the domestic jihadist threat. The ability of these states to cope with Islamist terrorism, given their limited capabilities vis-à-vis their larger neighbours, also raises concerns.

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Taliban's Re-Takeover of Afghanistan and Implications for Southeast Asia: The Need to Calibrate Politics and Violence?

Bilveer Singh

In the 1980s and 1990s, Afghanistan played a critical role in the evolution and morphing of Southeast Asian terrorist groups. The importance of Afghanistan's prominence as the nerve centre of jihadist militarism and the continued role of the Afghan 'alumni'¹ are relevant for the region even today, particularly following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. In many ways, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (AQ) had developed close ties with Southeast Asian jihadists during the Russia-Afghan War (1979-1988) and had maintained close ties. The experience and network ties established during the anti-Soviet jihad between Southeast Asian and Afghan Mujahidin groups played a key role in influencing Southeast Asian jihadists' outlook and struggle. However, the magnitude of close ties has varied across time, with the most intense period being from the 1980s to the late 1990s. This article looks at the implications of the Taliban's return to power for Southeast Asia, and how the region is trying to navigate the new power realities in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, Taliban and Southeast Asia

Primarily due to the Afghan War by the Afghan *Mujahidins* against the Soviet Union, largely backed by the US and Saudi Arabia, several Southeast Asian jihadist groups, including individuals and factions from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, made their way to Afghanistan through Pakistan.² Many of these individuals and groups eventually morphed into Southeast Asia's strongest inter-connected terrorist group, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), and several others.³

Following the establishment of JI in 1993, many of these groups either became part of the region-wide JI or collaborated with it ideologically and operationally. One of the means of collaboration was through the establishment of the *Rabitatul Mujahidin* (RM), or the Coalition of Mujahadins, in 1999. Three key meetings of RM were held in Malaysia and at the first meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1999, there was a region-wide representation. This included the *Kumpulan Militan Malaysia* from Malaysia, *Laskar Jundullah*, *Darul Islam*, a Free Aceh Movement faction (MP-GAM) and Republik Islam Aceh from Indonesia; the Moro Islamic Liberation Front from the Philippines; the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation and the Arakanese Rohingya Nationalist Organisation from Myanmar; and the Patani United Liberation Organisation from Thailand.⁴

Following the Taliban's 1996 rise to power in Afghanistan, the belief that the *Mujahidins'* mission had been accomplished and in the face of the difficulties of operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan, most of the Southeast Asian jihadists came back to their home countries to undertake jihadi activities.

Under these circumstances, the Southeast Asian jihadists' challenge was to structure their relations with the AQ and the Taliban, both of which were closely interlinked through ideology, joint operations and close personal ties. They also shared a history of collaboration and being hunted by the West and even the Pakistanis, who were alleged to have given them sanctuaries following the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. The fact that most of the Taliban were believed to have been raised in the refugee camps in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region made the understanding of the AQ-Taliban nexus critical in analysing the Southeast Asian approach to the Taliban during this period.

Due to AQ's degradation since 2001, including of its franchises such as JI, there was a general sense that the 'war against terror' was being won.⁵ However, following the rise of the Islamic State

(IS) terrorist group in June 2014, this sense of triumphalism changed significantly. The increasing IS attacks in the West took the focus away from AQ and the Taliban, and in some states such as Indonesia, the former pro-AQ and JI members were mobilised to counter the IS' propaganda and ideological war. IS' decline started in 2018, especially following former leader Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi's killing in October 2019.⁶

The Taliban's Return to Power in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia

After the US and its allies' failure to capture and control the bulk of Afghanistan since 2001, and the persistence and resilience of the Taliban, it was only a matter of time before the Taliban would return to power. Following the then Trump administration's decision to deal with the Taliban that culminated in the Doha Agreement 2020⁷ between the US and the Taliban, the US withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021. The Taliban takeover not just changed the power equation in Afghanistan but their ties with various terrorist and extremist groups, including in Southeast Asia, as well. In this regard, how Southeast Asia, be it the governments or the terrorist and extremist groups, responded to the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan is important to unpack.

In Southeast Asia, since August 2021, Indonesia and Malaysia have established working relations with the Taliban's de facto regime in Afghanistan, without diplomatically recognising it. In this regard, as the largest Muslim state in the world, Indonesia has played a leading role in engaging the Taliban, even prior to the latter's re-capture of power.

Indonesia

One of the leading voices calling for closer Indonesia-Taliban relations has been Jusuf Kalla, the former Vice President of Indonesia under Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2009) and the current President Jokowi Widodo (2014-2019). Kalla has had a long history of informally engaging with the Taliban leaders, including mediating peace talks between the former administration of Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban. Kalla's mediation role in the Afghan conflict also led Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the incumbent Deputy Prime Minister and former chief of the Taliban's Qatar political office, to visit Jakarta in July 2019, meeting among others the leaders of the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and the Indonesian Council of *Ulemas*.⁸

While Indonesia had minimal ties with the first Taliban administration, following its ouster in November 2001, the Indonesian establishment played an important role in peacemaking in Afghanistan. In 2007, the NU, though not part of the Indonesian government, was mobilised as part of the negotiation team that secured the release of a South Korean hostage held by the Taliban.⁹ In 2010, the Indonesia Islamic Centre in Kabul was established during the presidency of Bambang Yudhoyono.¹⁰ In 2014, Indonesia established a branch of the NU in Afghanistan. A key goal of NU's engagement with the Taliban was to moderate the latter's worldview on Islam with a view to making it more acceptable internationally, especially among fellow Islamists. While the Taliban's bilateral ties with Indonesian non-government groups made some progress, there were limits in introducing the Indonesian model into Afghanistan, in part evident from the absence of Taliban-linked *Ulemas* from a 2018 trilateral conference involving Islamic scholars from Indonesia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹¹

However, following the Doha Agreement, the Indonesian government started engaging the Taliban. In February 2020, Indonesia, as one of the co-facilitators of the Doha Agreement, was invited to witness the signing of the US-Taliban peace agreement. Indonesia's foreign minister, Retno Marsudi participated in the signing ceremony.¹² Following this, the Indonesian government believed that the international community should provide full support to Afghanistan, especially in ensuring peace among the various parties engaged in the Intra-Afghan Dialogue.¹³ In this regard, Indonesia was particularly focused on two key aspects of the peace process: a) the role of the *Ulemas* and b) women's empowerment. Following the Doha agreement, Retno flew to Kabul to launch the Indonesia-Afghan Women Solidarity Network with several Indonesian female leaders.¹⁴

A new era of Indonesia-Taliban ties dawned following the latter's re-capture of power in Afghanistan. On 27 August 2021, Retno called on the Taliban to form an inclusive government with

respect for women's rights as a key pillar.¹⁵ While in Qatar, Retno met Sher Mohammad Abas Stanikzai, the Deputy Director of the Taliban's Political Office, for discussions to improve ties even though no diplomatic ties were established.

In December 2021, Indonesia reinstated its representative office in Kabul, the first Southeast Asian state to do so, to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to the country.¹⁶ While this did not connote a recognition of the Taliban regime, it represented a halfway house of working with the de facto government in power in the country. In the same month, at the extraordinary ministerial meeting of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Retno laid out the conditions that would pave the way for the improvement of diplomatic ties with the Taliban. Among others, the conditions "included the formation of an inclusive government, respect for human rights, including those of women, and ensuring the country would not become a breeding ground for terrorism".¹⁷ In September 2021, Indonesia promised to provide US\$2.85 million humanitarian aid with about \$150,000 to be used for humanitarian assistance in emergency situations.¹⁸

While the Indonesian government was cautiously moving forward towards establishing ties with the Taliban, political parties and civil society groups were either in support of or opposition to the Taliban. A leading Islamist party, the Prosperous Justice Party, called on the government to recognise the Taliban and establish formal diplomatic ties with them. However, other sectors of the Indonesian society, such as members from the two largest Islamic organisations, NU and Muhammadiyah, called for a cautious approach.¹⁹

The key Indonesian concern with the Taliban has been due to its long relationship with AQ and its franchise in Southeast Asia, the JI, which has been seen as part of its tentacles for a global jihad. As was articulated by Nasir Abbas, a former JI leader who trained in Afghanistan, the Taliban's victory could enhance JI's new recruitment, persuade Islamists that the victory was a triumph for Islam, and draw on the affinity between Indonesian Muslims and their Afghan brothers in the faith.²⁰ Similarly, the Indonesian State Intelligence Agency has expressed its fear that the Taliban's victory could inspire Islamist radicalism in the country, especially as many members of the Afghan alumni expressed their joy with the Taliban's victory.²¹ These leaders included Abu Tholut and Rohim Bashyir, with the latter, leader of the *Jamaah Ansharu Syariah*, describing the Taliban's return to power as being "exemplary" and the success being due to "consistency in fighting on the path of Allah".²² However, pro-IS groups in Indonesia, such as the *Jamaah Anshorut Daulah*, being rivals, did not welcome the Taliban victory.

Malaysia

In many ways, Malaysia's approach to the Taliban has been almost similar to Indonesia. Both government and non-government agencies have been engaging the de facto authorities in Kabul. Nevertheless, unlike Indonesia, Malaysia is yet to open a diplomatic office in Afghanistan. However, like Indonesia, Malaysian political leaders have been directly engaging the Taliban leaders, including Abdul Hadi Awang, Malaysia's special envoy to the Middle East, and Malaysia's special envoy to Afghanistan, Ahmad Azam Ab Rahman, meeting Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.²³ Both Malaysian envoys met the Taliban leaders with the approval of the Malaysian Cabinet. While Kuala Lumpur is yet to establish diplomatic ties with Kabul, it has been operating in Afghanistan through the office of the Global Peace Mission (Malaysia), a humanitarian organisation established by the Malaysian government.²⁴

The Rest of Southeast Asia

For the rest of Southeast Asia, especially where Muslims are in the minority, the Taliban's re-emergence brought about an essentially security-oriented response. This response was clearly visible in Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines where in the past JI, linked in a complex way with the AQ and the Taliban, continued to have tentacles in Southeast Asia. As many of these Southeast Asian states were supportive of the US-led war efforts in Afghanistan since 2001, the Taliban's victory in August 2021 represented somewhat of a foreign policy setback, even though nationally the Southeast Asian region was successful in neutralising the threat posed by JI and other pro-AQ groups.

As Zachary Abuza noted, the US\$83 billion project of state building failed spectacularly and the annual military assistance of US\$6 billion to the Afghan security forces evaporated in the face of the Taliban's offensive.²⁵ For various Southeast Asian states, the Taliban's victory must have come as a shock, including those, such as Singapore and Malaysia, that deployed their military forces in Afghanistan.²⁶ Fundamentally, what the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan brought about in Southeast Asia was the dawn of a 'Second Vietnam', raising questions about the US as a reliable and trustworthy security partner, especially with a rising China already on the horizon.

For most of the Southeast Asian states, the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan signalled several things. First is the concern that the Taliban's victory could revitalise the various terrorist networks in the region that had been weakened over the last two decades.²⁷ This is especially in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines, as the victory of the Taliban is seen by some as a victory for 'jihadism'. Second, there is the need to deal with the rising sense of euphoria among the various jihadist groups in the region, believing that groups such as the Taliban won because they survived the counter-terrorist operations for 20 years and triumphed, and what's more, the Taliban eventually defeated two superpowers, the Soviets and the Americans. For the Southeast Asian terrorist groups, this represents a powerful propaganda tool to continue their struggle, remain relevant and gain potential new recruits. As was stated by Muslimin Sema, chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front, it was "sheer determination, persistence and resoluteness of the Taliban that defeated hypocrisy and opportunism in Afghanistan".²⁸

The third is the issue of Afghanistan becoming a sanctuary for terrorist groups, as it was for AQ in the late 1990s.²⁹ While most of the Southeast Asian terror groups were dismantled and are on a recovery path since the September 2001 attacks, AQ never left Afghanistan but simply re-deployed itself with the Taliban in various parts of the Af-Pak border region. Hence, there remains the fear that a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan could play a role of providing sanctuaries to these groups, especially as a bargaining chip to lift sanctions and gain international recognition as a quid pro quo to counter these terrorist groups that may pose a danger to the interests of the West, be it in South or Southeast Asia and even beyond.

Southeast Asia and the Terrorist Threat After the Taliban's Victory

The US and its allies failed to wipe out the Taliban and its allies, such as AQ and other violent groups like the Haqqani group that played a key role in the Taliban's victory. While a *déjà vu* situation has re-emerged in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and its possible impact elsewhere, other factors have also played a part in the somewhat subdued terrorist threat in the Southeast Asian region. This includes the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic that affected every state in Southeast Asia. While there were no major terrorist attacks in the past two years, however, it did not mean the disappearance of the threat posed by various terrorist groups. First, groups linked with IS were systematically degraded before the onset of COVID-19, and this also played a part in the reduced terrorist threat in the region.

Second, with various lockdown measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, most terrorist groups adopted a low-profile, consolidation mode, largely explaining the lack of major attacks in the region.³⁰ While no major attacks took place, it did not mean a lack of danger in the region as there were still intermittent, low-scale attacks in the Philippines and Thailand. As the region enters a largely post-COVID-19 era, the danger of terrorism resurfacing cannot be discounted. At the same time, the presence of various terrorist groups in the online sphere did not dissipate, in part signalling that these groups were in what is described as the *i'dad* (preparation for jihad) mode and hence, the need to remain vigilant about them.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has played a critical role in shaping the terrorist threat in Southeast Asia, especially in terms of groups linked with AQ and, to some extent, the Taliban. This was most clear in the threat posed by the region-wide JI since the mid-1980s. JI still remains relevant in Southeast Asia despite its focus being on Indonesia today.³¹ What the Taliban victory in Afghanistan augurs for

Southeast Asia is a clear message – that violence, ideology and increasingly, the importance of politics will shape the future trajectory of terrorism in the region.

While jihadist groups will continue to pose a threat to governments in the Southeast Asian region, what the Taliban has demonstrated is that through the astute interplay of politics, it was able to gain support and eventually edge out not just the US and its allies, but the US-backed Ashraf Ghani regime as well. As terrorist groups are some of the best learning organisations, what the Taliban has demonstrated is that while the use of violence is important, equally critical is gaining public sympathy, and through shrewd politics, it succeeded in capturing political power in Afghanistan. This is something that Muslim-majority states such as Indonesia and Malaysia should be extremely mindful of.

Fringe groups can capture political power, something that happened in Algeria and Egypt in the recent past and in Afghanistan today. Therein lies some of the important lessons for governments in the Southeast Asian region. This was also something Islamist ideologues such as Sheik Abu Musa al-Suri had long advised jihadist groups in the past, that is, it was not just important to be good in jihad but also in politics.³²

About the Author

Associate Prof Bilveer Singh is the Deputy Head, Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore and Adjunct Senior Fellow, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University.

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¹ The 'Afghan alumni' refers to jihadists who collaborated and participated in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan from 1980 to 1988, who believed ideologically and operationally that they defeated the Soviet Superpower and its eventual dismemberment and would like to replicate their success in their home country or elsewhere. The Afghan alumni is steeped not just in ideological resilience but also military experience.

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Af-Pak: One Year Since the Taliban's Return to Power

Abdul Basit

The one-year Taliban rule has left Afghanistan and Pakistan more susceptible to religious extremism, while undermining the counter-terrorism gains. The Taliban victory has created a triumphant jihadist narrative in the two countries and rejuvenated groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Similarly, Al-Qaeda (AQ) is still closely allied to the Taliban, and enjoyed freedom of movement and assembly in Afghanistan. However, the AQ chief Ayman al-Zawahiri's killing in a US drone strike in Kabul on July 31 would change that dynamic. At the same time, the Taliban's arch-nemesis, the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K), remains defiant and resilient, continuing its attacks to undermine the Taliban rule. Despite consolidating their grip on power, the Taliban are divided ethnically and factionally and their leaders are bickering over sharing of power and resources. They also face a rebellion in northern Afghanistan from the National Resistance Front and a plethora of other little-known groups. Though the Taliban do not face an existential threat to their rule, they sit on a power keg which can ignite with one major mishap in a country suffering from extreme hunger and poverty.

The Context

The US Exit from Afghanistan: A Pyrrhic Victory for the Taliban and Pakistan

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory for Pakistan.¹ Despite being a US ally, Pakistan supported the Taliban to keep India out of Afghanistan and ensure the Taliban's return to power, albeit through power-sharing with other Afghan factions.²

Although Pakistan achieved these goals, the Taliban have turned out to be a liability rather than an asset.³ Against Pakistan's expectations, the Taliban have refused to act against TTP.⁴ Furthermore, the Taliban have also reached out to India to reopen its embassy in return for sureties of cooperation against anti-Indian jihadist groups in Afghanistan.⁵ Similarly, far from recognising the Durand Line as the internationally recognised border,⁶ the Taliban have clashed with the Pakistani forces over the Pak-Afghan border's fencing, calling it illegal.⁷ The radicalisation trend has increased alarmingly in Pakistan since the Taliban's return to power.⁸ Compelled by the Taliban's inaction against TTP and the latter's increasing attacks, Pakistan is pursuing peace talks with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from a weak position.⁹

When the Taliban captured Kabul, they were not ready to assume power immediately and run the country.¹⁰ On top of the Taliban's lack of governance credentials, the US's decision to freeze US\$9.5 billion Afghan central bank reserves and the brain drain of skilled manpower to the West and other parts of the world have further crippled the Afghan economy.¹¹ The common Afghans' hardships have increased due to extreme poverty and hunger.¹² So far, no country has recognised the Taliban regime.¹³ Though the Taliban have restored order in Afghanistan and there has been a dramatic decrease in the level of violence,¹⁴ Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K)'s attacks against the Taliban and religious minorities persist.

For the Taliban, the transition from an insurgent to a political movement has been fraught with risks of losing ideological legitimacy and incurring internal fractures.¹⁵ Currently, the movement is torn between pragmatists who advocate moderation for international recognition and hardliners who prefer ideological purity.¹⁶ Similarly, the pragmatists are proponents of a tougher policy towards AQ, while the hardliners oppose it.¹⁷

Taliban Pragmatists Versus Purists

Currently, there are two power centres in Afghanistan: Kabul (political) and Kandahar (ideological). The Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada and his religious council sit in Kandahar.¹⁸ Haibatullah's religious council can veto any decision taken by political leaders in Kabul.¹⁹ For instance, in March, the Taliban cabinet decided to open girls' secondary schools. However, the Taliban cabinet had to travel to Kandahar to explain this decision to the religious council which had reservations over the decision. Following serious disagreements between the hardliners and pragmatists during that meeting, Haibatullah put the decision on hold. He also formed a commission to list a policy of recommendations for all girls' schools to reopen.²⁰

Haibatullah and the Deputy Prime Minister, Mullah Baradar, also have disagreements over the inclusion of other Afghan ethnic and political factions in the government.²¹ In August 2021, Baradar almost reached an understanding with former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Dr Abdullah Abdullah on giving them 30 percent share in the government. Ahmed Massoud, the son of former anti-Taliban Afghan commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, was himself demanding a 50 percent share.²² However, the deal could not be concluded when fighting broke out between Taliban and Massoud's forces in the Panjshir valley.²³ In September 2021, when Baradar left Kabul after a scuffle with the Haqqanis in the presidential palace and moved to Kandahar, one of his conditions to return to the capital was the guarantee to include non-Taliban representatives in the cabinet.²⁴ The eventual expansion of the Taliban cabinet where token representation was given to other ethnic communities was on Baradar's insistence.²⁵

The Haqqani-Kandhari Power Struggle

The main factional fault-line is between the Haqqani Network and the Kandhari Taliban.²⁶ The Kandharis complain that military power is concentrated in the Haqqanis' hands.²⁷ Along with getting the most powerful interior ministry and the lucrative ministry of migration and tribal affairs, the Haqqanis are also entrusted with the task of maintaining Kabul's security, among others.²⁸ On the other hand, the Haqqanis are apprehensive that the Kandhari Taliban have taken most of the government jobs.²⁹ The Kandharis have objected that the Haqqanis' overwhelming presence in the cabinet will hinder the efforts to get international recognition.³⁰ It is important to mention that during the Taliban insurgency, the Haqqani Network was notorious for its high-profile attacks in Kabul.³¹ The Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani is a globally designated terrorist with a US\$10 million bounty.³²

Another source of Haqqani-Kandhari friction is the never-ending debate on the credit for victory.³³ The Kandharis argue that victory was made possible after the Doha Agreement which Mullah Baradar negotiated with the US in 2020.³⁴ They uphold that the deal paved the way for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. On the contrary, the Haqqanis maintain that the victory was achieved through the military struggle for which they rendered the most sacrifices. In February 2022, Sirajuddin issued a statement that the Haqqanis contributed 1,050 suicide bombers for the fight against the US.³⁵ It was a rude reminder to the Kandharis that the victory was not possible without the military fight.

Ethnic Factionalism

Ethnic divisions are emerging in the Taliban ranks as well. Primarily, the Taliban are a Pashtun-dominated Deobandi jihadist movement. In the last few years, the Taliban recruited Uzbeks, Tajiks and some Hazaras into their ranks as well and gave them key positions in the movement.³⁶ For instance, the Taliban's Chief of Staff Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat, who is credited with the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan, is an ethnic Tajik.³⁷

At any rate, the non-Pashtun Taliban have reservations over the Pashtun Taliban's discriminatory and condescending attitude.³⁸ It is important to mention that the Taliban's cabinet is Pashtun-dominated with token representation from non-Pashtun Taliban factions and communities. The Taliban interim cabinet comprises 43 Pashtuns, 4 Tajiks, 2 Uzbeks and one member each from the Khawaja, Hazra, Turkmen and Nooristani communities.³⁹

In June, cracks appeared when the only ethnic Hazara Shia Taliban commander Maulawi Mahdi defected after a dispute over the mining rights of a coal mine in Balkhab district.⁴⁰ Mahdi cut all communications with the Taliban, went back to Balkhab, mobilised his supporters and forced the Taliban governor to flee to Kabul.⁴¹ The Taliban followed him back to Balkhab to quash the rebellion. His defection could be a precursor to ethnic and sectarian tensions in Afghanistan.⁴² In the past, the Taliban have engaged in the massacre of the Hazara Shia community in Afghanistan.

Likewise, earlier in February, the Taliban arrested an influential Uzbek Taliban commander, Makhdoom Alam, on trumped-up charges of kidnapping a boy and supporting IS-K.⁴³ His arrest sparked immediate protests in Uzbek-dominated Faryab province. Kamal is credited with three quick victories for the Taliban in the north where traditionally the Taliban have been weak.⁴⁴ The outraged Uzbek Taliban group went to Kabul to see Haibatullah. Though they could not secure a meeting with Haibatullah, the Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob met the delegation and listened to their demands.⁴⁵ After the meeting, Alam was released from jail. Over and above the release of Alam, the Uzbek Taliban want authority and autonomy in the Uzbek-dominated provinces of Faryab, Jawzjan and Sar-i-Pul and a fair share at the highest level of the government.⁴⁶

Impact on the Af-Pak Region

The Af-Pak region has borne the brunt of the Taliban's return to power.⁴⁷ For one, the extremist groups feel emboldened because the Taliban's victory is a vindication of their faith in the jihadist doctrine. That is, jihadism works.⁴⁸ Likewise, unlike widespread criticism that jihadists are religious fanatics with intangible and unrealistic goals, the Taliban's victory has seemingly proven that limited territorial ambitions are achievable through persistent armed struggle.⁴⁹

Another alarming, albeit limited, impact has been the US-made Small and Light Arm Weapons (SLAW) left in Afghanistan making their way to regional conflicts. For instance, the Af-Pak militant and insurgent groups have intermittently used M9 and M1911 pistols, M249 automatic rifles, 509 tactical guns, M4 carbine assault rifles and Iridium satellite phones.⁵⁰ At the tactical level, the acquisition of advanced technologies, particularly night vision goggles or infrared lasers for guns, can increase the accuracy and lethality of terrorist attacks.⁵¹ Both TTP, through night-time sniper attacks along the Pak-Afghan border, and Baloch separatists, during gun-and-bomb attacks on the Noshki and Panjgur Frontier Corps' camps in February, have employed these weapons.⁵² The Indian military has recovered similar weapons from Kashmiri militant groups as well.⁵³

Reinvigorated TTP

The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan has reinvigorated TTP, which has increased its attacks against Pakistan.⁵⁴ In 2021, TTP carried out as many as 282 terrorist attacks against Pakistani security forces.⁵⁵ Similarly, in the first quarter of 2022, the group killed more than 79 Pakistani security personnel.⁵⁶ Soon after the Taliban victory, TTP renewed its pledged of allegiance to Taliban leader Haibatullah and vowed to follow the Taliban's example for a *Shariah* system in Pakistan as well.

TTP has deep-seated political, ethnic and ideological linkages with the Taliban.⁵⁷ After 9/11, TTP sheltered the Taliban leaders and fighters in the ex-FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) region, now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, and assisted in fighting the US forces in Afghanistan. Since 2020, at least 17 militant factions, including TTP splinters, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) factions, have pledged allegiance to TTP chief Nur Wali Mehsud. It has strengthened its operational and organisational prowess.⁵⁸ There are about 5,000 to 6,000 TTP fighters in Afghanistan.⁵⁹

Contrary to Pakistan's (mis)calculation, the Taliban regime has not taken any action against TTP.⁶⁰ On the contrary, the Taliban termed TTP as Pakistan's internal matter and urged both sides to settle their dispute through talks. TTP's persistent attacks and the Taliban's refusal of kinetic cooperation compelled Pakistan to pursue peace talks from the position of weakness.⁶¹ On July 6,

Pakistan's Parliamentary Committee on the National Security (PCNS) formally approved negotiations between the Pakistan Army and TTP.⁶² During the PCNS briefing, the army leadership informed the parliament that it was compelled to talk to TTP to avoid the latter's alliance with IS-K.⁶³

In a recent interview, Nur Wali has compared the TTP-Pakistan talks with the US-Taliban negotiations in Qatar. He has said that just like the US, TTP has defeated the Pakistan Army in the ex-FATA region and soon *Shariah* will be implemented there as well.⁶⁴ If the TTP-Pakistan talks culminate in the creation of a mini-jihadist state in the ex-FATA region, it will be a huge confidence booster for regional jihadists and will be portrayed as the domino effect of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan.⁶⁵ Furthermore, it will compromise Pakistan's counter-terrorism gains, turn the ex-FATA region into a sanctuary for jihadists, and lead to a spillover of jihadist narratives and violence into other parts of the country.⁶⁶

Resilient IS-K

IS-K remains resilient and defiant with its signature high-profile attacks in urban Afghanistan. Currently, IS-K poses the most formidable challenge to the Taliban in Afghanistan,⁶⁷ with about 2,000 to 2,200 IS-K fighters in cell formations in the country. It continues to undermine the Taliban's claim of restoring order in Afghanistan by attacking religious minorities.⁶⁸ According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, IS-K killed most of the 700 people who lost their lives in Afghanistan between 15 August 2021 – 15 June 2022.⁶⁹

Despite the Taliban's claims of crushing IS-K, the US withdrawal and the Taliban's weak law enforcement capability has allowed IS-K a permissible environment to survive and grow. The US fears that IS-K's agenda in Afghanistan is externally-focused and that it will attain the capability of mounting international attacks from Afghanistan in one year to 18 months.⁷⁰

IS-K has enhanced its propaganda operations from Afghanistan, focusing on regional conflicts in South Asia and publishing in multiple regional languages, including Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Tajik and Pashto.⁷¹ IS-K has criticised the Taliban regime for being soft on the Shia community (which it considers as apostate) and the Taliban's growing ties with China and India – the two countries increasingly on the global radar for their treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang and Kashmir, respectively.⁷² IS-K taunts the Taliban for compromising on *Shariah* principles for economic assistance and diplomatic recognition. IS-K has cleverly positioned itself as the most suitable jihadist alternative to the Taliban in Afghanistan to absorb angry Taliban dissenters and hardliners.⁷³

Reviving Al-Qaeda?

Until recently, AQ was quietly reviving and rebuilding itself in Afghanistan under the Taliban's protection.⁷⁴ Since the US withdrawal, AQ has also been aspiring to establish presence in northern Afghanistan, mobilise new fighters and increase resources.⁷⁵ However, the AQ chief Ayman al-Zawahiri's killing in a US drone strike on a Taliban safehouse in Kabul on July 31 will blunt those ambitions.⁷⁶ The group was supporting the Taliban in an advisory role and enjoying freedom of movement and assembly in Afghanistan.⁷⁷ As a consequence of al-Zawahiri's killing, AQ fighters and leaders will go underground and maintain a distance from the Taliban for the foreseeable future.⁷⁸ Zawahiri's deputy and Egyptian AQ commander Saif al-Adel is likely to succeed him.

Al-Zawahiri's killing in a Taliban safehouse exposes the terror group's continued close association with the Taliban,⁷⁹ though publicly, both the Taliban and AQ downplay their nexus so as not to create complications for each other.⁸⁰

According to UN reports, there are about 500 to 550 AQ and AQIS fighters in Afghanistan.⁸¹ While AQ currently lacks an external operational capability in Afghanistan, it poses a long-term threat to the international security landscape.⁸² The US's official assessments indicate that AQ can attain the capability of carrying out international terrorist attacks from Afghanistan in two years.⁸³

Since the Taliban's takeover, the frequency of al-Zawahiri's videos has increased substantially.⁸⁴ Another striking feature of AQ's recent social media propaganda is its India obsession. Most of AQ's videos since the Taliban's takeover have focused on political developments in India, such as the hijab-ban issue in Karnataka, the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) former spokesperson Nupur Sharma's derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad, and the situation in Kashmir, among others.⁸⁵ AQ's India-focused propaganda is consistent with the transnational jihadist group's localisation and regionalisation approach with two possible motives. First, to make inroads in India through fresh recruitment by exploiting issues which are emotionally appealing to the Indian Muslims.⁸⁶ So far, AQ has struggled to make an impact in India.⁸⁷ Second, after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the jihadist group needed a big "villain" state to justify its violence. The growing Islamophobic trends in India make it convenient for AQ to turn its guns towards India.⁸⁸

Rebellious NRF

The anti-Taliban resistance in Afghanistan is weak but defiant, particularly the National Resistance Front (NRF) of Ahmed Massoud.⁸⁹ Operating out of Tajikistan, Massoud has been demanding an inclusive government in Afghanistan, politically and ethnically. Otherwise, he has threatened that NRF's anti-Taliban resistance will grow. Though NRF lacks funding, weapons and fighters, the Taliban's refusal to incorporate other ethnic and political factions as well as their internal divisions could turn NRF into a force to reckon with.⁹⁰ Intermittently, NRF has targeted the Taliban's positions in northern Afghanistan. The Taliban's ethnic discrimination outlined above will create space for NRF in Afghanistan's resistance landscape. NRF has carried out coordinated operations in the Panjshir valley and adjacent north-eastern provinces of Takhar, Baghlan and Badakhshan.⁹¹

Other anti-Taliban factions which have emerged in the last year include the Afghanistan Freedom Front of the former chief of general staff Yasin Zia, the Afghanistan Islamic National & Liberation Movement of former Afghan Army special forces commander Abdul Mateen Sulaimankhail, Tehrik Islami Azad Milli Afghanistan of Hazara militia leader Abdul Ghani Alipur, and the Noor Guerrillas of former Balkh Governor and Afghan warlord Atta Nur Muhammad.⁹² Other little-known anti-Taliban groups which have publicised their presence include Freedom Corps, Liberation Front of Afghanistan, Soldiers of Hazaristan, and Freedom and Democracy Front.⁹³

Conclusion

Afghanistan and Pakistan are the two most-affected countries by the Taliban's return to power. Though Afghanistan has not attracted a significant number of jihadist militants following the Taliban takeover, the residual threat of terrorism itself is large enough to undermine the peace and stability in both countries with potential spillover into South and Central Asia. If Pakistan enters a peace deal with TTP, which the Taliban are mediating, resulting in the return of the ex-FATA region to TTP control, it will be a major victory for jihadists within a short span of the Taliban's return to power.

Although the Taliban have consolidated their grip on power, their transition from an insurgency to a political movement and a governing entity is lackadaisical. The political flexibility and ideological adaptability required for this transition is lacking in the Taliban. Their internal divisions, coupled with the rising anti-Taliban resistance in the north, leave the door ajar for the regime's unravelling should their internal ethnic, political and ideological differences and power struggles spin out of control. From Taliban leader Haibatullah's speech to a gathering of Afghan *ulema* attending the Loya Jirga, or grand assembly, in Kabul, it is evident that the group will prefer ideological legitimacy over any other pragmatic considerations.

About the Author

Abdul Basit is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He can be reached at isabasit@ntu.edu.sg.

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Beyond Af-Pak: Varied Impacts of the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan in the Rest of South Asia

Iftekharul Bashar and Kalicharan Veera Singam

The impact of the one-year Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has been varied in a few South Asian countries beyond the Af-Pak region. Bangladesh is arguably the most affected country with a few tangible impacts in the political and militant spheres. Meanwhile India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives have been less affected although concerns of growing extremist narratives in the discursive space and jihadist militancy's revival in conflict-prone regions such as Kashmir remain. For India in particular, the Taliban government in Afghanistan serves as a catalyst for violent extremism due to the Taliban's linkages with groups such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), among others.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan in August 2021, there were concerns that this could inspire a wave of terrorist attacks across South Asia. So far, this has proven not to be the case. In the one year since the Taliban's return, a somewhat varied South Asian extremism landscape has emerged. In the rest of South Asia (beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan, or the Af-Pak), the impact of the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan has been confined largely to the informational spheres. That is, the impact is felt through extremists' publications and social media propaganda that vary from country to country, with little physical impacts. The diverse nature of ongoing conflicts and threat situations in different parts of the region, the vast geographical distance between Afghanistan and most South Asian countries, and the leadership style, political priorities and approaches of the Taliban 2.0 are some contributing factors to the trends observed.

In this context, it may not be possible to highlight a generalised regional impact. At any rate, some varying trends can be observed between the impact on the Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority South Asian countries. In the former, a few jihadist groups have become more emboldened following the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. For instance, Pakistan, Afghanistan's closest South Asian neighbour, has faced direct and tangible impacts – such as terrorist attacks, cross-border militant movements and refugee inflows. In other South Asian states, primarily in India and Bangladesh, but also to some extent in the Maldives and Sri Lanka, the impact of the Taliban takeover has been intangible and confined mainly to the pro-jihadist online extremist narrative spheres. In particular, the triumphant narrative of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan and associated narratives have shaped jihadist narratives. Additionally, in the non-Muslim majority South Asian nations, where communal polarisation was already on the rise, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has led to an increase in Islamophobic sentiments by the far-right groups.

A Mixed Threat Picture for India Amidst Cautious Engagement with Taliban

The overthrow of the former US-backed Afghan administration was a significant setback for India, which has since been concerned with the possible revival of cross-border terrorism and increased militant activity in Indian-administered Kashmir.¹ There were also apprehensions that the Taliban regime – which includes entities such as the Haqqani Network that are opposed to India² – would provide a sanctuary to terrorist groups like Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) to launch attacks against India. However, thus far, these threats have not materialised. The threat situation for India has surprisingly been somewhat subdued (mostly uneventful) since the Taliban's return to power. India has not witnessed any large-scale attacks despite multiple threats and aggressive statements from various anti-India jihadist groups. This could be in part due to the Taliban's diplomatic calculation not to compromise its relations with India, given the latter's

humanitarian aid to the cash-strapped and poverty-stricken nation where the humanitarian situation has considerably deteriorated in the last one year.³

Furthermore, the lack of terrorist attacks in India since the Taliban takeover could also be due to India's robust counter-terrorism capabilities, which have successfully identified and thwarted a multitude of threats in recent years. However, a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan gives India-centric jihadist groups an opportunity to use Afghanistan as their operational base to launch attacks against India and its regional interests. India expects the Taliban regime's cooperation to address threats from LeT and JeM as well as Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the so-called Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K).⁴

The current Indian approach to engage with the Taliban is quite different from its 1990s policy of disengagement. Then, India sought to undermine the former Taliban regime's control over Afghanistan by backing anti-Taliban forces such as the Northern Alliance.⁵ India also invested heavily in the Western-backed Afghan government following the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001 in an effort to prevent Afghanistan backsliding into Taliban rule. Given Delhi's consistent anti-Taliban stance in the past, its current openness to talk with the Taliban probably stems from its hope that some benefits could result from its direct engagements, especially on security matters. The Trump and Biden administrations' direct engagements with the Taliban prior to the US withdrawal would also have reduced Delhi's reservations to engage.

Some notable engagements of India include the visit by an Indian team to Kabul in June 2022 to assess the possibility of reopening the Indian embassy to continue consular services. The Indian team noted improvements in the security situation, although it also observed that non-traditional security issues such as health and education have worsened.⁶ Soon after the visit, India opened its embassy in Afghanistan. The Indian foreign minister is also expected to meet the acting Afghan foreign minister on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation foreign ministers' meeting in September 2022.⁷ While these engagements do not imply normalisation of relations, they show willingness from the two sides to cooperate to safeguard their respective interests.

Perhaps the most significant terrorist threat for India after the Taliban takeover comes from AQ, a close affiliate of the Taliban that is at the forefront of jihadist groups' attempt to "refocus" the attention on Kashmir.⁸ AQ has also been localising its propaganda to take advantage of the communal tensions that have recently surfaced in parts of India. The recent *hijab* controversy,⁹ for instance, was addressed in an audio released by now-deceased¹⁰ AQ chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, where he justified his group's motives and agenda and linked it to Muslim grievances. AQ also threatened to carry out suicide bombings in India as revenge attacks for controversial comments made by a former ruling party spokesperson.¹¹ Moreover, the conspicuous silence by other anti-India groups such as LeT and JeM in recent years has opened the space for AQIS and IS-K to fill the anti-India discursive vacuum from terrorist groups in the region. In the last few years, AQIS and IS-K "have been trying to outdo each other in the discursive space over India by reaching out to different demographic groups of the Indian Muslim community".¹² As a result, there is the possibility of some of the jihadist base in India shifting towards the more vocal AQ and IS-K.

Although AQ's narratives have almost no appeal among the Indian Muslims, except to fringe segments of the society, in light of the growing communal polarisation in India, its rhetoric might end up radicalising some members of the community. While the radical Islamist threat has increased post-Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the attendant feed-offs – that is, reciprocal radicalisation of far-right Islamophobic groups that equate the Taliban and Islamist terrorism as mainstream Islamic belief and vilify the general Muslim population – also need careful monitoring as they could further deteriorate inter-communal tensions and spark violence.

Increased Pro-Taliban Propaganda in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's threat landscape, since the Taliban's return, is marked by continuity and change. The Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies have claimed to keep the terrorist threat under check through continued surveillance. The current threat landscape is essentially an extension of the threat situation from 2019 to 2021. However, Bangladesh has concerns about how long this

quiescence will continue, particularly as the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan is energising a segment of local militants, supporters and sympathisers.

In September 2021, a few weeks after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Bangladesh saw a failed bomb attack in the capital Dhaka. The attacker was described as a self-radicalised follower of Ansar al Islam,¹³ an AQ-centric group that has been involved in killing secular Bangladeshi bloggers and activists.¹⁴ Although the country has not seen any major terrorist incidents since then, there has been an increase in vernacular pro-Taliban propaganda on the internet that promotes it as a role model.¹⁵ Likewise, radicalisation through social media continues to remain a key challenge. While the return of the Taliban has energised the AQ-centric groups in Bangladesh, it remains to be seen how these groups will respond in the coming months as the COVID-19-related travel restrictions are lifted.

A wave of pro-Taliban and pro-AQ messaging on social media by Bangladeshi extremist groups and individuals actually pre-dated the Taliban August 2021 return as it has been underway since April 2021. The August 2021 takeover merely exacerbated the trend. Many radicals and extremists saw the rise of the Taliban as the "liberation of Afghanistan" from a "foreign occupation".¹⁶ Some of these supporters have also openly expressed their desire to establish an Islamic Emirate in Bangladesh, which will be ruled by *Sharia* law. Though the demand for *Sharia* law is not new, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has amplified it.¹⁷ If militant activities under the Taliban administration increase, it might become a new inspiration for Bangladeshi militant groups.

At present, the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ansar al Islam (AAI), and Harkat ul Jihad al Islami (HuJI-B) are associated with the AQ ideology, while the Dawlatul Islam Bengal (ISB) or Neo-JMB adhere to the so-called Islamic State (IS) ideology. According to Bangladeshi authorities, the AQ-centric groups are working closely. The AAI is reportedly recruiting women and teenagers.¹⁸ In the country's south-eastern region, the group has also tried to recruit the Rohingya refugees who escaped persecution in Myanmar.¹⁹ Generally, the current trajectory of the Bangladeshi extremist groups will depend on the direction of the groups they follow.

Though there is no direct link between Bangladeshi militant groups and AQ or IS leadership at present, the ideological similarity enables local extremist groups to gain financial support and/or training from global terrorist groups. Therefore, the possibility of gaining support from Afghanistan-based AQ or the IS-K cannot be ruled out. It is noteworthy that in 2014, AQ's As-Sahab Media published a nine-minute video showcasing some Bangladeshi fighters alongside Taliban and AQ fighters in a camp in Afghanistan.²⁰

AQ-centric groups in Bangladesh continue their recruitment and training campaigns,²¹ which is likely to continue in the foreseeable future. AAI is also building dens in the India-Bangladesh border areas to run its activities with the goal of dominating the Indian sub-continent (known as the Ghazwa-e-Hind narrative, or the conquest of the Indian subcontinent).²² Besides, the outfit reportedly views Kashmir as a possible shelter and the Rohingya community in Bangladesh as a recruitment source.²³

According to Bangladeshi observers, there exists some level of support for the Taliban and AQ among the country's Islamists. A militant clique within a hardline Islamist group, Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI), known as the Manhajis,²⁴ is known to openly support the Taliban and AQ and promote a Taliban-style of governance in Bangladesh.

Being geographically distant from Afghanistan, it is natural that the implications of the Taliban's return in Bangladesh are more likely to be gradual, indirect and long-term. Such implications will also be conditioned by Bangladesh's internal dynamics and external environment. Internally, although Bangladesh currently has a much stronger counter-terrorism capability and zero-tolerance policy against terrorism, it remains to be seen how its domestic politics play out, especially as some politicians often court Islamists for votes. Externally, the future threat in Bangladesh will also depend on the broader, complex and diverse South Asian conflict and threat environment, which has both direct and indirect influence on the local extremists in the country. As it stands now, the impact of the Taliban's return on Bangladesh may not be the same as in the

1990s when the Taliban first arrived on the regional scene. The Taliban 2.0 regime has shown some political flexibility and pragmatism in its geo-political relations but it has yet to shake off its support of terrorist elements such as AQ and Pakistani radical groups.

Separately, there has not been any conclusive evidence of Bangladeshi militants travelling to Afghanistan in recent times. But since Islamist militancy in Bangladesh has its historical roots in Afghanistan, and Taliban followers and sympathisers continue to exist in Bangladesh, the future implications cannot be ruled out. Therefore, Bangladesh must continue to monitor developments both in Afghanistan as well as at home, and take necessary security measures to respond to this fluid threat environment, especially the radicalisation of vulnerable local youth in the online domain and the threat of lone-actor terrorism.

Impact on Sri Lanka and the Maldives

The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has had considerably lesser impact on the threat landscapes in Sri Lanka and the Maldives when compared to their larger South Asian neighbours. This is not surprising given that the two countries have not figured prominently in assessments on Islamist extremism in the region. However, when observed relatively and contextually, the growth of Islamist extremism in the two countries gives some cause for concern. In recent years, there have been a few instances of high-profile jihadist violence which suggests the Islamist threat landscape in the two countries might be rapidly evolving. The Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka²⁵ and the bomb attack targeting the former president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed,²⁶ are some high-profile attacks which, although not directly linked to the Taliban, suggest a potent Islamist ecosystem in the two countries that could get a further boost from the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Additionally, the Maldives and Sri Lanka – both small island nations – have lesser resources when compared to their larger South Asian neighbours on whom they have tended to depend heavily for security and intelligence assistance and cooperation. Unlike their larger neighbours, the two countries do not have the capacity to provide economic assistance or exert other forms of soft power vis-à-vis the Taliban government to extract concessions from the latter. The Taliban takeover has also renewed concerns of drug traffic and trade,²⁷ especially in the seas surrounding south India, which forms part of the funds that go into financing terrorist organisations in the two countries.

Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan

Another concern among observers following the Taliban takeover was the possibility of jihadists across South Asia travelling to Afghanistan, in a replay of what happened when the Taliban first came to power in the 1990s. Before the August 2021 fall of Kabul, a senior Bangladeshi police official claimed that some Bangladeshis were trying to reach Afghanistan to join the Taliban,²⁸ leading to concerns that this could be the beginning of a worrisome trend. However, this worry appears mitigated by a few contemporary factors for now. In the year since the Taliban takeover, perhaps except for Pakistan which shares a long border with Afghanistan, no significant travel of jihadists to Afghanistan had been reported. A few factors explain the lack of appeal of travel to Afghanistan among jihadists in South Asia. First, considerable logistical issues, COVID-19 travel restrictions and increased border protections make it harder for fighters to physically travel to Afghanistan. Second, the threat's nature has evolved with jihadist narratives localising, adopting lone-actor terrorism and migrating to online spaces for radicalisation and training, for which travelling to Afghanistan is not necessary. Third, there is a genuine lack of charismatic jihadist leaders with pulling power in Afghanistan. In the current scenario, there is no one of the stature of the Taliban's founding leader Mullah Umar or AQ chief Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan who could attract overseas fighters. Fourth, there might also be a reluctance on the part of the Afghan Taliban to host overseas fighters given the grave humanitarian situation the regime is confronted with. This is notwithstanding the fact that AQ continues to enjoy greater freedom in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, though reportedly confining itself to advising and supporting the de facto authorities.²⁹

Conclusion

Overall, one year after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the threat picture for South Asia looks somewhat varied, with Muslim majority countries – Pakistan and Bangladesh – having witnessed some noticeable traction in the activities of jihadist groups. In the Maldives, while there is no clear evidence to suggest a direct impact of the Taliban takeover, extremist activities by jihadist groups have continued, albeit with limited impact. In the non-Muslim majority countries such as India and Sri Lanka, the impact of the Taliban takeover on their threat landscapes looks limited. In the former, the jihadist narratives – especially that of AQ – have increased and become more India-focused. As one year is not sufficient for the regional impact of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan to be fully manifested, security agencies should nonetheless continue to keep a close watch on incipient signs of the revival of the AQ network in the region and its context-specific nuances.

About the Authors

Iftekhharul Bashar is an Associate Research Fellow and **Kalicharan Veera Singam** is a Senior Analyst at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. They can be reached at isiftekhharul@ntu.edu.sg; isveera@ntu.edu.sg.

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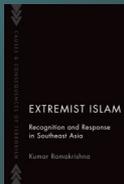
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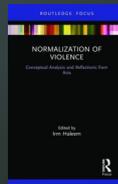


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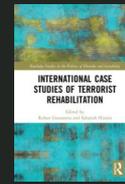
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