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With the Taliban Back in Kabul, Regional Powers Watch and Wait

The Taliban's return to power raises questions not only about how the movement will use its newfound authority but also about what Afghanistan's neighbours will do in response. Crisis Group experts offer a 360-degree view of these countries' initial reactions and what is behind them.

On 15 August, the Taliban capped their drive for power in Afghanistan by taking Kabul, the country's capital, for the first time since they ruled most of the country from 1996 to 2001. With the previous government's collapse, the group is now the de facto power throughout the country and is in the process of forming a new government and revamped state system. Questions are swirling about how they will govern, such as whether they will attempt to exercise a monopoly on power or give some roles to other political forces and whether they will try to reimpose the harsh social restrictions, including on women, that they enforced in the late 1990s. As yet, there are no firm answers.

Amid the uncertainty, regional powers are eyeing how to react to the upheaval. In the 1990s, the Taliban government, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, was an international pariah, recognised only by three countries, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and kept at arm's length by others, due partly to activist campaigns decrying their often violent repression of women and girls in particular. Foreign capitals also regarded them warily for offering safe haven to al-Qaeda, the transnational jihadist group that had mounted deadly attacks including the bombings at the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya in 1998. The concern about al-Qaeda of course spiked after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States. Though worries about the Taliban persist, the movement is not as isolated as it was in past. It has tried to cultivate better relations with other countries over the last few years. As it was regaining military strength on the ground, it was seeking to reassure Afghanistan's neighbours that it would govern responsibly. Still, regional powers are taken aback by the Taliban's dramatic advance, which has required many of them to recalibrate their approaches to protecting their interests in the country.

In this commentary, Crisis Group experts look at various regional powers' agendas vis-à-vis Afghanistan, focusing on their relations with the Taliban until now, their responses to the movement's takeover thus far and their options in the months ahead.

Pakistan

For decades, the Taliban have been Pakistan's main ally in Afghanistan and Islamabad's primary means of asserting influence over its western neighbour. Long before the last U.S. troops began leaving Afghanistan, and even before the Trump administration decided to withdraw them, Islamabad was working to facilitate the insurgents' return to government in Kabul. But it wanted to restore the Taliban through power-sharing arrangements that would win international diplomatic and economic support. The Taliban's swift military victory and forcible capture of the Afghan state are thus an opportunity for Pakistan, but one that comes with considerable challenges.

A key question is the composition of the new Afghan government. Islamabad is aware that a Taliban administration that does not share power with other political forces could face Western sanctions and quickly become more of a burden than an asset. It is inclined to recognise a Taliban government, but reluctant to do so unilaterally, fearful of straining relations with Western states, particularly the U.S. and European Union members. Top policymakers insist that Islamabad will take a decision on recognition only after consulting with the extended "troika", which, aside from Pakistan, includes the U.S., China and Russia. To try to sidestep sanctions, Islamabad, which retains close ties with the Taliban, is urging the movement to reach an understanding on future governance structures with key Afghan leaders, particularly Hamid Karzai, the first Afghan president after the U.S. invasion, and Abdullah Abdullah, who was a senior official under the ousted leader Ashraf Ghani. Even the façade of an inclusive government could pave the way for Pakistani recognition, particularly if powers such as China and Russia follow suit. Yet the West could still spurn such a government should it fail to follow through on the Taliban's pledges to respect basic rights and counter transnational jihadist groups, notably al-Qaeda.

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A second issue is reviving economic ties. Many Pakistani businesses see the Taliban takeover and improved relations with Kabul as a chance to boost bilateral trade, which has shrunk from a high of $2 billion in 2013, when Pakistan was Afghanistan's largest trading partner, to less than half that amount due to tensions between Islamabad and the Ghani government. But there is a downside to the new dispensation: so long as Afghan citizens face insecurity and economic deprivation at home, many thousands of refugees could seek shelter in Pakistan. Pakistani people smugglers are already finding willing Afghan customers. If the country suffers a sharp downturn, as appears likely, any hope of economic dividends for Pakistan is likely to be dashed.

As Pakistan forges its Afghanistan policy, however, the top priority will be its own security. Its relations with the next Afghan government will depend on how Kabul deals with Pakistani militants based in Afghanistan, particularly the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Attacks in Pakistan's tribal belt are surging amid reports, confirmed by Pakistan's interior minister, that the Taliban freed scores of Pakistani militants during jailbreaks as they advanced across the country. In an important speech before a military audience on 20 August, Pakistani army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa was surely referring to these incidents when he said: "We expect the Taliban to live up to the promises made to the international community of [respecting] women and human rights and that Afghan soil would not be used [for staging assaults on] any other country". The Taliban will want to avoid antagonising its chief and

longstanding foreign patron, but how much it will want or be able to contain Pakistani militants is unclear. For its part, Islamabad is likely unwilling to abandon its Taliban ally. Yet there is no guarantee that the Taliban, now ascendant in their homeland, will fall in line with Islamabad's preferences.

India

Like the rest of the world, India was taken by surprise at the lightning speed of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Delhi has traditionally looked at Afghanistan through the prism of its rivalry with Islamabad. In 1996, when Taliban fighters first swept into Kabul, backed by Pakistan, India began supporting the Northern Alliance fighters who were resisting the Taliban's rule. After the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened following the 11 September 2001 attacks, India kept its security forces out of Afghanistan, as the U.S. did not wish the country to become another sparring ground for Delhi and Islamabad. But now India faces a strategic challenge. It perceives an increasing threat to its security interests emanating from Afghanistan, but it lacks both substantial leverage to protect them and good lines of communication with the Taliban to make its priorities clear.

India's biggest concern is that Afghanistan will again become a sanctuary for transnational jihadist organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as Pakistani militant groups like Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, which Delhi worries might use the country as a launching pad for attacks on India. According to Indian security agencies, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba is responsible for the November 2008 terror attacks that killed more than 160 people in Mumbai, and Jaish-e-Muhammad for the 2019 Pulwama suicide attack on a security convoy on the Srinagar-Jammu highway, which was allegedly planned in Afghanistan's Helmand province. Both outfits have links to each other, and to the Taliban, and are active in Kashmir. The recent increase in militant attacks in Indian-controlled Kashmir, as well as efforts by Islamist militants to cross the line of control separating Indian and Pakistani troops, are seen by Delhi as signs of things to come.

Praveen Donthi, Senior Analyst for India, contributed this section.

Although Delhi sees the Taliban as under Islamabad's influence, Indian officials and other members of the national security community also hope the Taliban are capable of making deals with other countries on their own and speculate that they may know how to manipulate situations like the difficult India-Pakistan relationship to their advantage. Policymakers wonder, for example, if the Taliban might be willing to trade assurances with respect to Delhi's security concerns for economic cooperation, although such a deal would be difficult under Islamabad's watchful eye. In any case, India is likely to wait until the dust settles, and take its cue from the U.S. and other Western powers, before making any overtures relating to formal diplomatic or economic engagement.

Delhi is in no rush to recognise the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government. At a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Cabinet Committee on Security took the view that India will be neither the first nor the last country to cross the recognition threshold. It will almost certainly watch first to see how much the Taliban is able to exert sovereign control over Afghan territory, and whether it is willing and able to corral groups that India perceives as threatening. Delhi will also test its own ability to make inroads with the group notwithstanding Islamabad's influence. Given

the uncertainty surrounding these important strategic questions, India will likely delay the recognition decision as long as it considers feasible.

Finding a way to work with a Taliban government in order to protect its interests is not going to be easy for India. Delhi had strong links to President Ashraf Ghani's government that the Taliban just toppled. It has invested roughly $3 billion in Afghanistan since normalising relations with the post-Taliban government in 2002. It helped build Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutional capacity, and as recently as one month ago was continuing to affirm its support for the 2004 constitution that the Taliban has consistently rejected.

While it is very unlikely that Delhi will resume its annual aid flows to Afghanistan anytime soon, Indian officials are already seeking to establish better lines of communication with the Taliban. After years of little to no engagement, however, it has proven difficult to do so. Security officials and diplomats have made attempts to reach out to the Taliban over the last few months, especially recently as part of efforts to evacuate Indian citizens in the wake of the Ghani government's collapse, but communication barely exists. At least in the near term, India is likely to seek assistance from Russia and Iran when it needs to talk with the Taliban.

As for whether India might support anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan, this prospect is unlikely at the moment. When the group was last in power, in the 1990s, Delhi aligned its Afghanistan policy with Moscow's, which included support for anti-Taliban forces. But India is no longer following Russia's lead and is highly unlikely to risk stirring things up with Pakistan by involving itself with anti-Taliban activity. India would almost certainly be concerned that such entanglements might lead to conflagration on the line of control in Kashmir at a time when its resources and attention have been diverted to managing border tensions with China.

The situation in Afghanistan is unfolding at an important political moment for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. The party is preparing for 2022 assembly elections in the state of Uttar Pradesh – by far India's most populous – that could well be a harbinger for 2024 national elections. The BJP traditionally campaigns on a platform that relies largely on efforts to divide voters along Hindu-Muslim lines as well as on anti-Pakistan rhetoric. Party leaders may also invoke the Taliban's ill treatment of women to further their polarising political agenda (though the women's rights issue is unlikely to influence the government's future moves). Overall, the BJP will not wish to be seen dealing with the Taliban, which its members characterise as a Pakistan-manufactured Islamist terror outfit that poses a major threat to India. Accordingly, political expediency will most likely dictate that the government follow a dual policy of criticising the Taliban openly but engaging with them covertly.

Iran

What a difference twenty years makes. Before the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Iran and the Taliban were bitter foes. The two sides nearly went to war in 1998, after the Taliban killed eleven Iranian diplomats and a journalist in Mazar-i-Sharif. Three years later, Tehran played a key role in helping the U.S. topple the Taliban and set up a new republic in their place.

Today, with the Taliban back in power in Kabul, Tehran's view of the group seems to have undergone a stunning transformation. The newly inaugurated President Ebrahim Raisi called the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan "an opportunity to restore life, security and lasting peace" in the country. His government advised the media to temper criticism of the Taliban, with state-run outlets portraying the militants as "transformed" and "more moderate

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than before". Officials have started referring to the new Afghan order as the "Islamic Emirate", drawing upon the Taliban's own longstanding lexicon.

This sea change is hardly sudden. Over the years, as the U.S.-backed Afghan government struggled and the Taliban resurged, Tehran saw the writing on the wall. It began hedging its bets by providing financial and military support to the Taliban, which from the mid-2010s onward it has also regarded as a bulwark against the Islamic State. Taliban leaders themselves appear to have seen an advantage in closer ties with Iran, notwithstanding the difficult history, as their relations with their closest foreign patron Pakistan were often strained. Now that the U.S.-backed government has fallen, Tehran is jubilant that another of Washington's projects in its backyard has ended in grief, and it is pleased to see Western troops disappearing from across its eastern border.

Still, even as it celebrates the U.S.-NATO withdrawal, Iran is also concerned that instability and economic woes next door could spill into its territory. Iran shares a 921km border with Afghanistan, through which it trades about $2 billion of goods with its neighbour each year (nearly one third of Afghanistan's trade volume). Afghanistan is Iran's fifth biggest export market – one that would be at risk should Afghans' purchasing power plummet due to international isolation under Taliban rule. Further, the porous border is a major transit corridor for Afghan refugees and opium into Iran, both of which have been long-term burdens for the authorities. For years, the two countries have also been locked in a struggle over the waters of the Helmand river. Iran's ideal would be an Afghan government that boosts trade and freely shares water while stemming the flow of refugees and narcotics. Iran also cares about the fate of Shiite Afghan Hazaras, whom the Talban brutally persecuted when they ruled in the 1990s, but their protection is not among its top priorities.

For now, Iran seems to have no plans to support anti-Taliban groups, though that might change were Tehran to become dissatisfied with Kabul. Iran appears to hope that it can develop cordial ties with the new Taliban-led government and, through its intra-Afghan mediation efforts that picked up steam in July, encourage a more pluralistic power structure. Iran's embassy in Kabul and consulate in Herat remain open. But should the situation deteriorate, it has other options. For example, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' expeditionary Qods Force commander, Ismail Qaani, oversaw Iran's policy in Afghanistan for years before taking his current position, and helped mobilise thousands of Hazara fighters, known as the Fatemiyoun brigade, to fight in support of the Assad regime in Syria. Tehran could choose to attempt this feat again in Afghanistan. Or it could cooperate with internal Taliban opponents with whom it has prior familiarity, such as Ahmad Masoud, the leader of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, who is holding out against the Taliban in Panjshir valley and who lived in exile in Iran for 21 years. Iran also managed to secure the release of former warlord Ismail Khan, who led an anti-Taliban militia and is now in Mashhad, in Iran, after being briefly detained by the Taliban when they recently took control of Herat.

In the weeks ahead, Tehran will likely watch closely how the Taliban tackles government formation and whether it seems capable of delivering on Iranian priorities before it makes major decisions about the direction of its ties with Kabul. As much as Iran wants a constructive relationship with the Taliban, it remains wary of economic collapse or instability in Afghanistan and the corresponding problems these could bring at a time when Tehran is struggling with a severe economic crisis and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Decisions about

whether it will recognise and try to bolster the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government, or work to weaken it by supporting its internal enemies, could well hinge on how well the Taliban manages these concerns.

China

China's interests in Afghanistan are animated primarily by concerns over insecurity that may spill over from an unstable Afghanistan, threatening Chinese citizens and projects in Pakistan and Central Asia, as well as in China itself. China's policy has therefore put at the top of its priorities in Afghanistan advancing stability, largely through diplomatic and economic engagement, including by participating in the former U.S.-led peace process and, over time, developing regional dialogue mechanisms of its own. Past economic engagement in Afghanistan has not been the smoothest for China and has yielded no significant results. Chinese companies have been sitting on two major projects since 2008 (the Mes Aynak copper mine) and 2011 (the Amu Darya oil field), neither of which took off, in part because of an uncertain security environment. A longstanding element of China's policy has been to hedge its bets by maintaining relations with all key Afghan actors, including the former Afghan government and the Taliban, to ensure that Beijing's security interests are protected.

At the geopolitical level, Beijing sees the U.S.-NATO withdrawal as both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, China has always been uneasy about the presence of U.S. military bases so near to its west. The withdrawal also gives China the chance to exert its influence more freely in Central Asia. On the other hand, China is concerned not only about the regional security vacuum left in the wake of the international troops' departure, but also about the heightened pressures it may face in the Indo-Pacific arena, as a Washington freed of Afghanistan devotes its energies and resources more fully to areas to China's south and east.

Amanda Hsiao, Senior Adviser for China, contributed this section.

With regard to a Taliban-led government, Beijing has consistently emphasised two issues so far. First, it believes that the road to internal Afghan stability is through a political accommodation in which the Taliban sufficiently shares power with "all factions and ethnic groups" in Afghanistan. Secondly, it has called upon the Taliban to break with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an anti-China militant group partly based in Afghanistan. According to the UN, ETIM has several hundred members in and around Badakhshan province (where China and Afghanistan share a small border), was active in a July 2020 siege of Afghan security forces and maintains relations with a number of other militant groups. The Taliban has made reassuring noises about ETIM and, so far, appears to be making tentative moves toward a domestic political accommodation, but Beijing does not yet appear confident that Afghanistan's new leaders are willing or able to deliver on either front. A couple of days after the Taliban took over Kabul, official Chinese rhetoric began encouraging the group to pursue "moderate and prudent domestic and foreign policies".

China's conception of relations with an ascendant Taliban has been pragmatic and centred on a simple quid pro quo: the Taliban is to limit the operations of militant groups Beijing does not like in return for China's political recognition and economic engagement. This framework holds but is complicated by the Taliban becoming more dominant than Beijing had anticipated, rather than becoming part of

Afghanistan's political fabric through a negotiated settlement. The Chinese foreign ministry has been welcoming in its statements following the Taliban's takeover, saying China is "ready to continue to develop good neighbourliness and friendly cooperation with Afghanistan", and officials are likely pleased that they had the foresight to engage Taliban leaders at a high-profile meeting in late July.

Beijing will be watching the Taliban's movements closely in the next few weeks, as well as those of other international actors, to determine its own response – its policymaking will evolve with, and largely react to, events. Beijing will want to extend recognition to the Taliban government, likely after or at the same time that Pakistan does so but before any Western country does, though the timing of this step may be partly determined by its success in getting additional reassurances from the Taliban on the two issues that it cares most about. Beijing may push for an easing of sanctions on the Taliban, a policy tool it generally does not support, especially if Russia is on board, and if it sees the lifting of sanctions as helpful for stability. Faced with a cash-strapped Taliban-run government, China may provide a modest infusion of aid. Given past experience, Beijing is unlikely to wade in with grand infrastructure deals and major investments until it sees the dust settling.

Should the security situation in Afghanistan precipitously decline, and China feel that it cannot rely solely on the Taliban government or Pakistan to ensure the safety of its projects and citizens in the region, China may consider developing relations with armed factions on the ground that can. In Myanmar and South Sudan, China maintained and developed ties with armed opposition groups to hedge against governments Beijing supported but was not sure would or could fully look after China's interests. The relationship Beijing built with the Taliban themselves long before their ascendance is a testament to this strategy.

Russia and Central Asia

Compared to Western capitals, Moscow has received the news of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan calmly. Many Russians had predicted that the insurgents would triumph eventually, albeit perhaps not quite so rapidly. Officials likely feel some schadenfreude at the abrupt collapse of the U.S.-backed government in Kabul. Some may even feel that it sheds comparatively positive light on Russia's own troubled record in Afghanistan, which the Soviet Union invaded in 1979 before retreating a decade later. Following the Red Army's departure in 1989, the communist government it backed in Kabul lasted three further years, falling only after the Soviet Union collapsed and the Kremlin's support ceased.

Russian officials emphasise that the Taliban thus far has brought stability to Afghanistan, and stability is at the core of what Moscow wants. Should Afghanistan collapse, Russia and its Central Asian neighbours fear untold numbers of migrants might seek to come in over their borders. Russian President Vladimir Putin has additionally voiced concern that Islamist militants could be hiding among the refugees. Moscow especially wishes to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for those who would attack Russia or the Central Asian states, and it has welcomed Taliban assurances to this effect. It has also expressed hopes the Taliban will keep its promise to put an end to opium production in Afghanistan, and the resulting flow of drugs to Central Asia and Russia.

Moscow has positioned itself well to deal with a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Since 2015, it has played an increasingly large role in intra-Afghan talks, both looking to enhance its diplomatic profile and to hedge against the planned U.S. withdrawal, which it feared could

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be destabilising. The resulting cordial relations with the Taliban are such that the latter has even asked Moscow to help mediate between them and National Resistance Front leader Ahmad Masoud, who has refused to submit to Taliban rule and is threatening to mount a rebellion from the Panjshir valley in the north.

Russia is also pleased to act as both intermediary and bodyguard for the Central Asian countries as they warily navigate their own relations with Afghanistan. These states all have historical reasons to be concerned about the security implications of the Taliban takeover. In the late 1990s, when the Taliban last held Kabul, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan all faced attacks by al-Qaeda-backed insurgents with bases in Afghanistan. At times during the last twenty years, all five Central Asian states have provided basing, overflight, refuelling and other support to U.S. and other international forces in Afghanistan.

Now, however, they are placing their bets with Moscow, which has made clear it wants no U.S. military presence in the region going forward. Russia already has a base in Tajikistan and has promised to provide additional security support to Dushanbe if needed. In mid-August, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan completed joint military exercises with Russia near the Afghan border. The Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization plans more joint drills in Kyrgyzstan in early September. Russia sees the diplomatic and military assistance it is providing the Central Asian states as a way to strengthen its security as well as its hand in the region.

Russian talking points today stress the need for Afghans to make their own decisions about their country's future. Russian officials say they hope to see an inclusive future government but accept the reality that the Taliban are in charge. They are unlikely to join Western powers in pressing hard on Kabul to safeguard the rights of women and girls or to uphold democratic principles. At the same time, the Kremlin is in no hurry to recognise the Taliban's rule formally, or to remove UN sanctions that apply to the movement or its members. Moscow sees these steps as potential points of leverage, and it will likely wait before acting on either front to see whether the Taliban's rule brings stability or conflict, the impact of their ascent on security in Central Asia, and whether they encourage or rein in the regional drug trade. Moscow will also likely look to what other influential powers do, especially the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council, and it will almost certainly coordinate its actions with Beijing, at least to some extent.

As for what Moscow will do if the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, it could beef up its military presence in Central Asia as a bulwark against violent actors coming over the border. If relations with the Taliban go south as well, it might even look to coordinate with Western states, and certainly with others with regional influence, such as Turkey, on measures to prevent and mitigate potential damage. But Russian officials stress that the Kremlin has no intention of sending troops back to Afghanistan.