

Central Asian Republics and the 'Taliban Question' in Afghanistan

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Abstract

When the Taliban emerged in Afghanistan in early 1990s, the regional powers like India, Pakistan, Central Asian Republics (CARs), had just attained their independence from the erstwhile Soviet Empire. Some of the CARs have a history of meaningful cooperation with Russia, India and Iran in 1990s to help former Northern Alliance in fighting the Taliban. Having completed 30 years of their independence, the CARs face the 'Taliban Question' once again, although this time, they are more mature and prepared to deal with it. From an Indian perspective, it is important to analyse the Central Asian response to Taliban 2.0 and compare it with their response to Taliban 1.0 in 1990s. The response of the CARs to Taliban 2.0 has undergone a change compared with their response to Taliban 1.0. They have not tried to achieve a 'cordon sanitaire' against the Taliban this time by supporting anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan. The CARs have sought to engage and accommodate Taliban, something which Russia was already doing since the last decade. They also want regional economic cooperation between South and Central Asia for which peace and stability in Afghanistan is a must.

Introduction

"The Americans may have the watches, but we have the time", was the motive of Taliban's long drawn war with the US in Afghanistan¹. Taliban's patience proved too much in the end for the US which hastily withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, a month in which the Taliban recaptured Kabul after they were thrown out of power by the US led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in December 2001. The US and its Western allies are now preoccupied with the Russia-Ukraine crisis while Afghanistan seems to have lost immediate relevance for them. This also heralds the beginning of the post-American Central Asia as observed by US academic Alexander Cooley². The impact of these developments in Afghanistan would be felt most by the regional

powers like India, Pakistan, Central Asian Republics (CARs), China, Russia and Iran. When the Taliban emerged in Afghanistan in early 1990s, the CARs had just attained their independence from the erstwhile Soviet Empire. Some of the CARs have a history of meaningful cooperation with Russia, India and Iran in 1990s to help former Northern Alliance in fighting the Taliban. Having completed 30 years of their independence, the CARs face the 'Taliban Question' once again, although this time, they are more mature and prepared to deal with it. From an Indian perspective, it is important to analyse the Central Asian response to Taliban 2.0 and compare it with their response to Taliban 1.0 in 1990s. This would offer some important strategic insights for India in its Afghanistan and Central Asia policies.

Taliban 1.0 and Response from the CARs

In its earlier avatar, Taliban was able to capture Kabul by September 1996 establishing Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which sent shockwaves around the region and the world alike. One of the first moves made by the Taliban was to institute a strict interpretation of *Quranic* interpretation and jurisprudence. While in practice, it turned into merciless policies for women, political opponents and religious minorities devoid of any respect for human rights³. Taliban resorted to strict religious ideology mixing *Deobandi* traditionalism with *Wahhabi* puritanism with a conservative *Pashtun* social code known as *Pashtunwali* to create a brutal and repressive regime⁴. One of the authoritative Pakistani voices on Taliban, journalist Ahmed Rashid had argued that Taliban created a new radical model for Islamic revolution and as an ever expanding enterprise, it sought new markets like Central Asia⁵. The regional countries were quite concerned regarding Taliban's intolerance and barbarism leading to anti-Taliban sentiment.

Three Central Asian countries can be termed as frontline states – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as they share a porous border with war ravaged Afghanistan and are directly impacted by its security scenario. They also share ethnic links with Afghanistan as Turkmens, Uzbeks and Tajiks are part of ethnic minorities in Afghanistan while Pashtuns are in majority. However, their response to Taliban 1.0 differed according to their own strategic, geopolitical and economic needs. Turkmenistan had enunciated the concept of 'permanent positive neutrality' in 1995 that focused on developing favourable and peace-loving foreign policy conditions to achieve internal development (economic prosperity)⁶. Hence, Turkmenistan remained on good terms with all the warring sides in Afghanistan conflict and avoided making

statements that could contradict its neutral status. It was also interested to protect the viability of a planned gas pipeline to Pakistan transiting through Afghanistan⁷. However, Ashgabat was also concerned about Taliban's conduct and had contacts with the opposition forces as well⁸. Its consulate in Herat remained open during Taliban rule in late 1990s.

According to Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, Uzbekistan was the first country that established direct contacts with the Taliban but was criticised for doing so⁹. Uzbekistan believed that Taliban would inspire Islamic radical activity on its territory that would threaten political stability in the country¹⁰. To stop Taliban from reaching Uzbek border, the then President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, developed a close relationship with General Abdul Rashid Dostum who was leader of ethnic Uzbeks in Afghanistan. Dostum was aligned with anti-Taliban Northern Alliance headed by ethnic Tajik, Ahmad Shah Massoud¹¹. Northern Alliance controlled the northern areas of Afghanistan bordering the frontline Central Asian states and acted as a buffer between Taliban ruled South Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, in 1999 and 2000, the connections between Taliban and terrorist organisations in Central Asia became public when Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) used its bases in Tajikistan and some Taliban controlled areas in North Afghanistan to launch raids in south Kyrgyzstan¹². In February 1999, IMU had also attempted but failed to assassinate President Karimov through six car bombings to establish a Taliban-like regime in Uzbekistan¹³. Like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan also ended up with a bitter taste in its experiences with the Taliban 1.0. Tajikistan was already undergoing a civil war when Taliban came to power in Afghanistan. The opposition elements in Tajikistan professed their commitment to Islamic fundamentalism (much like the Taliban) and were able to find refuge in Taliban ruled areas of Afghanistan¹⁴. Safety of ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan was another important issue for Tajikistan which prompted Dushanbe to support the Northern Alliance. It allowed supply of military hardware by Russia to Northern Alliance fighters via its territory while India had established a military hospital at Farkhor near Afghan-Tajik border to treat wounded fighters of Northern Alliance¹⁵. Northern Alliance received support from Russia, Iran, India, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan while the Southern Alliance comprised of the Taliban which was supported by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, UAE and covertly by the US as well¹⁶.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do not share a direct border with Afghanistan which had impacted their response to Taliban 1.0. The then Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbaev had cautioned that Afghan

conflict was approaching the border of Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) while Kyrgyzstan had cautioned against direct interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs cautioning against the Soviet experience in 1980s¹⁷. Both countries pursued policy of non-interference in Afghanistan but were not averse to give it up and seek Russian assistance if Taliban directly threatened their security¹⁸. When the US and its Western allies launched Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, the CARs had supported this effort as they viewed US-NATO military presence as an asset against rising tide of terrorism from Afghanistan. The US had established military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan but they were eventually closed due to rising anti-American sentiment in the region. Kazakhstan had allowed NATO to ship nonlethal cargo to Afghanistan through its territory that was to be used against the Taliban¹⁹. The Taliban did not directly get involved in terrorist attacks in CARs but they provided safe havens to anti-Central Asia terror outfits like IMU which led to spirit of bad blood between the Taliban and the CARs.

CARs Response to Taliban 2.0

Taliban was able to mount a stunning comeback in August 2021 as the Ashraf Ghani led government in Afghanistan fell like a house of cards and there was almost no resistance when Taliban recaptured Kabul in mid-August 2021. The countries from Central Asia have responded with a difference in their approach to Taliban 2.0 and some of them were already preparing for this eventuality even before Taliban actually came to power. CARs have been engaging with the Taliban but at the same time, the statements made by their official representatives continue to show concerns about Taliban's conduct and support to anti-Central Asia terror outfits. They did not close down their embassies in Afghanistan while the Taliban has tried to assuage concerns among the Central Asian leaders saying they have no plans to expand into the CARs. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan had established official contacts with the Taliban even before they captured power in Afghanistan. Despite this engagement, President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov had publicly stated that Afghanistan question was a cause of worry for all CARs²⁰. Turkmenistan wants to make TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) gas pipeline a success for which it has been trying to keep the Taliban in confidence. A Taliban delegation was hosted by Turkmenistan in February 2021 which had ensured security for the TAPI gas pipeline and projects related to it²¹. In March 2022, Turkmenistan became the first country from Central Asia to recognise Taliban envoy to Afghan embassy in Ashgabat²².

Like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan has enough reasons to engage Taliban so as to reap economic benefits out of this engagement. In addition, the Taliban has given security guarantee that no one would be allowed to use Afghan territory to launch terrorist attacks on other countries. Rail and road connectivity between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan has improved in last two decades,²³ which helps a double landlocked country like Uzbekistan to join local, regional and global supply chains. In February 2021, a trilateral agreement was signed between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan for rail connectivity between Central Asia and the Arabian Sea. This initiative was approved by Afghanistan's Taliban government in January 2022. By the end of 2021, all the CARs except Tajikistan had sent their delegations to meet top Taliban leaders in Afghanistan,²⁴ a clear cut demonstration by the CARs to engage with the Taliban. None of the Central Asian countries has tried to achieve a '*cordonsanitaire*' to isolate the Taliban this time. Tajikistan has its share of concerns regarding status of ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan and has made it clear that there should be an inclusive government in Afghanistan that represents all the minorities. However, Tajikistan along with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan continue to export electricity to the Taliban ruled Afghanistan despite doubts over Taliban's ability to pay for it²⁵. Kyrgyzstan has been dependent on Russia for security assistance while Kazakhstan has better economic and security capabilities to deal with the Taliban issue compared to other CARs. 'Engagement without recognition' is the policy of CARs in response to Taliban 2.0 while Tajikistan has been the most cautious and outspoken against Taliban regime's oppressive policies. Taliban is not being described as a terrorist organisation and 'interim government' is the phrase being used to describe them by the CARs. Uzbekistan has been at the forefront to facilitate engagement between the Taliban and other countries, as in a July 2022 conference hosted by it, nearly 30 nations attended to engage with the Taliban²⁶. The reasons for such a different response from the CARs towards the Taliban 2.0 can be explained by following factors.

(a) **Trend towards Regional Cooperation:** The older generation of leaders in Central Asia is giving way to newer and young leaders who want to work together as a bloc with the regional countries. They are open to balance the great powers in the region with their own economic initiatives²⁷. After coming to power, President of Uzbekistan ShavkatMirziyoyev has taken steps in this direction. Historically, Uzbekistan was a vital trade hub during the ancient Silk Route days between Central and South Asia and it is making attempts to achieve that status again²⁸. Economic benefits of inter-regional connectivity are shaping CARs response to the Taliban 2.0 where they want to see end

of war in Afghanistan so that Kabul can connect Central and South Asia. The withdrawal of the Western countries from Afghanistan would decrease flow of aid and investment not only to Kabul but also towards the CARs, a trend that would push these countries towards regional economic cooperation and prompt them to work with the Taliban to achieve stability and peace in the region²⁹. This could ensure that Afghanistan becomes part of regional supply chains in trade, energy, lithium and rare earths, although it may be little too early to predict such an eventuality.

(b) **Lack of Strong Domestic Opposition to Taliban:** Unlike the last time when Northern Alliance was quite formidable force opposing Taliban's hegemonic ambitions within Afghanistan, it could not repeat its earlier success against the Taliban this time. A relatively weaker Northern Alliance did not find any support from its former backers like Russia, India, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Another possible reason partially could be that most of the CARs are now members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which professes that its member states would not interfere in internal affairs of other states.

(c) **Russia-Taliban Ties:** One of the factors that have seriously impacted CARs response to Taliban 2.0 is Russia's cultivation of ties with the Taliban. When Taliban 1.0 came to power in 1996, former Security Council Secretary of Russia, Aleksandr Lebed had stated that the Taliban were eyeing the territory of CARs like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan³⁰. However, Russia's view about Taliban 2.0 is totally different. Zamir Kabulov, President Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan had said in 2015 that Taliban was now behaving like a national liberation movement, which was defending their cultural and religious traditions against the Americans³¹. Kabulov continues to argue that the Taliban has learnt from its mistakes and the nature of their movement has changed over the years³². Given Russia's clout with Taliban and its security profile in the Central Asian regions, the CARs changed their Taliban policy accordingly from confrontation to accommodation and engagement.

Challenges

Everything is not hunky dory for the CARs and their engagement with the Taliban poses some serious questions for their future prosperity. *First*, the 'entrenched secularism' model of governance in CARs is anti-thesis of religious rule of Taliban in Afghanistan³³ that would remain an ideological threat for peace and security of the CARs. The Central Asian countries would have to work to prevent solidarity in the name of Islam

as such forces in Central Asia would look for support from the Taliban to destabilise the regional governments. The authorities in Central Asia have been working to make people aware against extremist ideas and indoctrination. In Uzbekistan, Imams are involved in projects like ‘enlightenment against ignorance’ where they preach values like tolerance³⁴.

Second, with new threats like the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) appearing on the horizon, additional challenges would also emerge. Islamic State could use Taliban’s cooperation with repressive Central Asian regimes as a pretext to recruit more Central Asians to fight not only the Taliban but also launch attacks against the CARs³⁵. To undermine Taliban’s rule, Islamic State has been launching attacks against the Central Asian countries from Afghanistan’s territory. In April-May 2022, Islamic State had fired rockets into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in order to provoke a response from these countries that could put their ties with the Taliban in the dock³⁶.

Thirdly, the Taliban have been showing aggressive behaviour with CARs like Tajikistan which have not softened their stand towards them. In June 2021, Taliban had handed over security of Tajik-Afghan border in five districts of Badakhshanto *Jamaat Ansarullah*, an organisation designated as terrorist entity by Tajikistan³⁷. This means that Taliban cannot be trusted, a development which has been pushing the CARs to upgrade their security along their borders with Afghanistan. Russia and China have been individually and collectively helping CARs through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the SCO to deal with security threats emanating from Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The response of the CARs to Taliban 2.0 has undergone a change compared with their response to Taliban 1.0. They have not tried to achieve a ‘cordon sanitaire’ against the Taliban this time by supporting anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan. The CARs have sought to engage and accommodate Taliban, something which Russia was already doing since the last decade. They also want regional economic cooperation between South and Central Asia for which peace and stability in Afghanistan is a must. The Taliban have given security guarantees to the CARs that they would not allow Afghan territory to be used against them by terrorist groups like IMU and Islamic State. However, engagement with the Taliban has its own share of challenges for the CARs whose secular model of governance is anti-thesis of Taliban’s conservative religious model. So far, the CARs have concluded that

Afghanistan could emerge as a rogue state if left isolated and hence, they have been engaging with the Taliban led Afghanistan without recognising it. At the same time, they have been also beefing up their security mechanisms and have been cooperating with Russia and China in order to boost their capabilities to tackle potential threats that might emerge from Taliban ruled Afghanistan. For India, it is important to cooperate with the CARs in areas like intelligence sharing, capacity building and de-radicalisation as both sides face similar threats that originate from Afghanistan. India-CARs cooperation is important for regional stability and it can become model of regional consensus to deal with the Taliban in coming years.

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