

Responding to the Taliban's Diplomacy for International Recognition

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Summary

This paper examines the political dynamics of the Taliban's diplomacy aimed at gaining international recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. The Taliban's uncompromising stance towards women's rights and inclusiveness has proved to be the biggest hurdle in the way of their international recognition. Based on their political values and long-term foreign policy goals in the region, a divergent group of countries are adopting different approaches towards engagement with the Taliban. This paper argues for a flexible approach towards the Taliban regime, in which it can be engaged in a variety of ways short of full diplomatic recognition.

In a significant geopolitical move, Russia is reportedly considering removing the Afghan Taliban from its list of terrorist organisations.¹ While no final decision has yet been announced, Moscow's invitation to the Afghan Taliban to attend an international economic forum in Kazan in May 2024 seems a signal of Russian intent in this direction.² If Russia goes ahead and takes the Taliban off its list of terrorist groups, it would be a major diplomatic victory for the Taliban which have been struggling for diplomatic recognition for their regime. On 30 January 2024, China recognised a Taliban representative, Bilal Karimi, as an official envoy to Beijing.³

International recognition is an indicator of the legitimacy of a political entity governing the state. The survival of a state system is more secure when it enjoys wider international recognition, often considered identical with admission into the United Nations (UN). As the Afghan Taliban are still a great distance away from getting membership in the UN, their strategy is to enter into mutually-beneficial bilateral ties, participate in as many regional forums as possible and gain membership in various regional groupings since these activities are usually considered as stepping stones towards achieving the ultimate objective of formal international recognition. The move by both Russia and China – 'pragmatic engagement without official recognition' – has given rise to a number of practical issues. One such pertains to the extent to which other countries are willing to engage in diplomatic activity with the Taliban without being understood to have recognised the latter as a sole sovereign representative of the Afghan state.

- ¹ Ayaz Gul, "Russia: Taliban could be removed from terror blacklist", *Voice of America*, 2 April 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-taliban-could-be-removed-from-terror-blacklist-/7554037.html>.
- ² "Taliban invited to participate in 'Russia - Islamic World' forum in Kazan — envoy", *TASS*, 1 April 2024, <https://tass.com/politics/1768691>.
- ³ Ruchi Kumar, "Why has China recognised Taliban's envoy to Beijing?", *Aljazeera*, 14 February 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/14/is-chinas-recognition-of-afghanistan-envoy-a-diplomatic-win-for-taliban>.

Little less than three years following the Afghan Taliban's military capture of power in Kabul, the United States (US)-led Western world is still searching for a 'magic bullet' to deal with the new ground realities in Afghanistan. The deepening socio-economic crisis in Afghanistan demands greater diplomatic engagement with the outside world whose relationship with the country's de-facto rulers continues to remain in a more or less confrontational mode. A clear contradiction has emerged in the responses of the US-led West and the China-Russia-Iran nexus in terms of their respective strategies concerning engagement with the Taliban regime. As the West's expectations from the Taliban regarding inclusiveness and human rights do not necessarily align with the group led by Russia and China, the latter seems far more comfortable in embracing the Taliban regime.⁴

Upholding their own idiosyncratic, regressive version of Islamist governance, the Afghan Taliban have proved to be unrelenting to Western demands on inclusivity and women's rights. It is becoming increasingly clear that those who expected Taliban 2.0 to be more moderate were not accurate in their assessments. This explains many of the Western predicaments and dilemmas towards the Taliban regime. While acknowledging that the Taliban regime exists in contravention of the conventional practices of international law, it would be counterproductive to present it as a 'black hole' in the international community of recognised states any longer. Can we forget that there are many regimes that themselves do not qualify as "inclusive" members of the UN?

A combination of unprofessional administrative practices, antiquated governance structure, lack of organisational discipline and ideologically driven leadership has resulted in a great deal of idiosyncratic decision-making that stymies efforts aimed at systematic engagement with the Taliban. Thus, cooperation with de facto state authorities in the Taliban-led Afghanistan is surely controversial and ad-hoc but that should not be an excuse for inaction on several crucial issues including humanitarian aid for ordinary Afghans and the country's reconstruction. Some of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours have shown that there is no bar to pragmatic or constructive engagement with the Taliban.

Afghanistan faces an increased level of socio-political risks due to the contraction of its economy and the reduction of donor funding.⁵ In the longer run, the international community's reluctance to provide financing could sharpen ethnic and sectarian divisions and lead to more deterioration in the condition of women and the minorities. While the principal blame for Afghanistan's disastrous plight lies with the Taliban, who stubbornly refuse to compromise on their approach towards women's rights and ignore calls to make their government more inclusive, it is the ordinary people of Afghanistan who are enduring terrible consequences of four decades of chaos, conflict and humanitarian crises. Although the Taliban consider any formal acknowledgement or acceptance of the Western interpretation of the criminal justice system as a direct challenge to the group's coherence and domestic legitimacy, there is ample space for pragmatic arrangements benefiting

⁴ Muhammad Faheem and Minhas Majeed Khan, "Recognition of the Taliban Government in Afghanistan and International Community", *Strategic Studies*, 42, no. 1, 2022: 81-96, Journal of Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, https://strategicstudies.org.pk/index.php/strategic_studies/article/view/14.

⁵ "Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis", Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 15 April 2024, <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/afghanistan-humanitarian-crisis/>.

women and the minorities. A degree of regular interaction with the Taliban officials is thus necessary and useful.

The Taliban have always been a difficult partner in human rights and humanitarian aid. The new Taliban regime too seems to be lacking a coherent agenda for political and economic change as its governance capacity remains severely crippled. For a country which has been devastated by decades of armed conflict, the existence of a minimalist state apparatus is not good for regional security and stability. A major obstacle to greater engagement with the Taliban regime remains the contested legal status of the Taliban. However, it must be remembered that sovereignty is a matter of degree, and international law provides a wide range of instruments to deal with entities that do not enjoy formal diplomatic recognition. Therefore, there is no solid reason why the de facto Taliban state cannot be integrated into international society without formal recognition. Moreover, official recognition is a formal expression of eagerness to enter into diplomatic relations with a state and does not necessarily signify any moral or political approval of its governing ideology. And however much we may dislike the Taliban's ideological orientation and abhorrent cultural policies, it is not sensible to ostracise a regime that has authority over a vast territory and population. This Taliban regime is much stronger and more resilient than its previous version. Despite a strong challenge from the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, there is no perceptible alternative to the Taliban.

Vigorous diplomatic efforts are being undertaken by the Taliban to step up interaction with powerful regional states. Increased bilateral engagement between Afghanistan and many regional states opposed to the West – Russia, Iran and China – undermines the policy of sanctions being pursued by the US and its allies. Though there has been little coordination among them on the nature and scope of engagements with the Taliban, they seem to be learning from each other as to how to deal with the Taliban since their aim is to make inroads into Afghanistan through pragmatic collaboration involving counter-terrorism, border security, water management, foreign investment and trade.

Despite current frictions between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the question of anti-Pakistan terrorists, the Afghan Taliban do not seem to be worried about their long-standing ties with Islamabad since other regional actors are willing to accommodate the new Afghan rulers. Iran has been engaging the government in Kabul in a pragmatic fashion, proving to be a key facilitator in the process of mainstreaming the Taliban regime.⁶ Over the years, the Taliban have developed cooperative ties with Qatar, which had hosted the second meeting of Special Envoys on Afghanistan in Doha in February 2024.⁷ Many Central Asian countries are likewise exploring multiple ways to accommodate the Taliban regime, with Kazakhstan taking the lead by announcing the removal of the Afghan Taliban from its list of terror organisations in December 2023.⁸ Not to be left behind, India is trying to find ways to re-

⁶ Vinay Kaura, "Iran-Taliban ties: Pragmatism over ideology", Middle East Institute, 11 April 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-taliban-ties-pragmatism-over-ideology>.

⁷ "We all want an Afghanistan at peace, UN chief says in Doha", UN News, 19 February 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/02/1146657>.

⁸ Jason Wahlang, "The Dynamics of Central Asian Engagement with the Taliban Government", *IDSAC Comment*, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 19 February 2024, <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/the-dynamics-of-central-asian-engagement-jwahlang-190224>.

establish relations with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. Aimed at maintaining a semblance of influence in Afghanistan, New Delhi has begun to engage the Taliban in 'various formats' by attending regional meetings on Afghanistan both at the digital and international levels.⁹ In a symbolic move intended to present a positive image, the so-called 'Justice Ministry' of the Taliban is claiming to have initiated the process of restoring properties to displaced members of the Hindu and Sikh communities, who left Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover.¹⁰ They were given shelter by India.

While high-level multilateral negotiations with the Taliban regime are difficult to conduct in an atmosphere of mutual distrust, there is space for some constructive or pragmatic compromises to ensure that women and girls are not pushed to the margins of the country's deeply-entrenched patriarchal system. The conflict over women's rights is not surprising since the position of women has long been a key factor in Afghan politics. That is why women's rights have again become the most hotly-debated topic in current Western debate on diplomatic recognition.

In a recent survey report released by some UN agencies, Afghan women are deeply anxious about the negative impact of potential international recognition of the Taliban regime.¹¹ They are entirely justified in their demand that such international recognition should be conditional upon the removal of major restrictions imposed by the Taliban against women and girls. We may also be emotionally and theoretically persuaded against the maltreatment of communities in the Taliban-led Afghanistan. However, the 'counter-recognition' approach is not likely to succeed in the long run under the unbearable weight of geopolitics, especially when there is no realistic prospect of refusing interaction or engagement with the Taliban authorities. The failure of two decades of US-led military intervention in Afghanistan has already severely damaged the credibility of any coercive approach towards the Taliban. Further diplomatic isolation of the Taliban would only make it more intransigent. Moreover, the idea that pragmatic engagement by Western-oriented states would inevitably lead toward 'creeping recognition' may have some theoretical merit, but should not be taken too seriously in the era of heightened superpower rivalry.

The Taliban's admission to the UN, whenever it comes, will be the litmus test of their legitimacy because it removes any doubts as to Afghanistan's status as a sovereign state. However, the Taliban cannot gain admission to the UN via any 'backdoor'. Diplomatic recognition is always a deliberate and formal act, not something which can be granted surreptitiously or accidentally through bilateral or multilateral engagement. When China recognised Karimi as an official Afghan envoy to Beijing early this year, it simultaneously clarified that the acceptance of his diplomatic credentials need not be interpreted as Beijing's official recognition of the Afghan Taliban. During a press briefing, the spokesperson

⁹ Kallol Bhattacharjee, "India engaging the Taliban in 'various formats', says MEA spokesperson", *The Hindu*, 1 February 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-engaging-the-taliban-in-various-formats-says-mea-spokesperson/article67801854.ece>.

¹⁰ Kallol Bhattacharjee, "Taliban restoring property to displaced Hindus and Sikhs: spokesman", *The Hindu*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/taliban-restoring-property-to-displaced-hindus-and-sikhs-spokesman/article68047607.ece>.

¹¹ Anselma Ellingwood, "Afghan Women Voice 'Deep Disappointment' and 'Dread' Over Potential Taliban Recognition", *Ms.*, 22 April 2024, <https://msmagazine.com/2024/04/22/afghan-women-taliban-recognition/>.

of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated the Taliban must form an inclusive government and pursue moderate policies to gain formal diplomatic recognition, clarifying that "diplomatic recognition of the Afghan government will come naturally as the concerns of various parties are effectively addressed".¹²

No moral guidelines govern the practice of recognising states under international law. If any principles bind recognition decisions, they can be legal, not moral. Having said this, it is not illegal or illogical for recognition decisions to be subject to evaluation by moral principles; diplomatic recognition of unjust political entities such as the Taliban by admitting them to the international community and conferring upon them the rights and privileges accompanying the statehood is often seen as reinforcing their coercive policies and practices. In other words, the Taliban's wider acceptability in the international community would be seen as a huge setback for the concept of democratic legitimacy.

However, even if countries are motivated by value-based considerations to deny official recognition to the Taliban, there is considerable latitude as to what kind of political and diplomatic activity they can engage in Afghanistan. The format of such engagements should be flexible and the approach patient, even though the Taliban prefers to take a maximalist position. During the February 2024 Doha meeting of special envoys on Afghanistan, the Taliban were not represented because, as informed by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, the set of conditions for their participation "were not acceptable" and their scope was tantamount to recognition.¹³ Guterres suggested forming a "contact group" but differences in the composition of the group seem to have hindered any progress in this direction; Pakistan is reported to be against its arch-enemy India's participation in the proposed group.¹⁴

Conclusion

The international community is in limbo with respect to revisiting the notion of official recognition of the Taliban regime. Different countries have different concerns and responses which are driven by their foundational political values and long-term foreign policy goals. In essence, the liberal democratic world needs to do a balancing act to satisfy its strategic interests in the emerging new global order without jeopardising the normative landscape of fundamental human rights confronting it regarding the scope and scale of any pragmatic engagement with the Taliban.

The greater presence of the global diplomatic community as well as aid agencies in Afghanistan need not be seen as a negative phenomenon; it is likely to facilitate peace-building while making life easier for the poor and marginalised sections of the Afghan

¹² Roshan Noorzai, "What Will It Take for Taliban to Gain Recognition From China, Others?", *Voice of America*, 10 December 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/what-will-it-take-for-taliban-to-gain-recognition-from-china-others-/7390814.html>.

¹³ "Taliban's conditions to attend UN meeting 'unacceptable', Guterres says", *Aljazeera*, 19 February 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/19/talibans-conditions-to-attend-un-meeting-unacceptable-guterres-says>.

¹⁴ Kamran Yousaf, "UN contact group on Afghanistan stalled", *Express Tribune*, 13 April 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2462418/un-contact-group-on-afghanistan-stalled>.

population. For the sake of millions in Afghanistan, concerted efforts are required to make the international community's relationship with the Taliban more functional.

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