

Policy Briefing Paper

Evolving US Foreign Policy on Afghanistan Under Second Trump Presidency

By Hameed Hakimi

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Hameed Hakimi is a Senior Fellow at CHS. He leads the Afghanistan Research and Policy Initiative (ARPI). Hameed has over 15 years of experience in delivering high-impact interdisciplinary projects, leading strategic dialogues, and developing multidimensional research for complex contexts. Since 2013, his work on South Asia (particularly Afghanistan) has centred on the nexus between development, state-building, peace, violence, and security.

Hameed is also an Associate Fellow at Chatham House and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council. At the University of Cambridge, his interdisciplinary doctoral research critically examines the reconceptualization of the notion of Security and its intersection with the securitisation of migration in Europe. Hameed obtained his MSc in International Security and Global Governance from Birkbeck College, University of London, his BA in Politics (with honours) from Queen Mary University of London, and his qualification in research methodologies from the University of Birmingham.



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I. Executive Summary

The return of Donald Trump to the White House for a second term in January 2025 has led to a decisive shift in US policy towards Afghanistan. While the Biden administration never formally recognised the Taliban regime, it maintained humanitarian aid and cautiously sustained contact with the Taliban leaders and representatives through facilitated dialogues and meetings in third countries such as Qatar. Trump's "America First" foreign policy has reversed this posture.

Within the first 90 days of its term, the Trump administration halted USAID's programming in Afghanistan, cutting approximately \$1.8 billion in aid. By March 2025, it had eliminated 83% of USAID's contracts. As a result, humanitarian agencies operating in Afghanistan began suspending operations, leaving millions of Afghans without essential food, healthcare, or protection services. Aid from the United States, formerly the single largest source of support, has all but disappeared, exacerbating the socioeconomic and service delivery challenges in Afghanistan.

The ideological reorientation under Trump towards 'America First' policies means Afghanistan no longer features prominently in US global priorities. Rather than supporting long-term stabilisation and state building in Afghanistan, Washington's engagement is now primarily reactive, focusing narrowly on aspects of counterterrorism and hostage recovery. This hands-off approach has created both challenges and opportunities for the Taliban leaders, particularly in recalibrating their regional diplomacy.

In the absence of Western recognition or developmental support, the Taliban's government, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

(IEA), has sought to build a web of regional relationships to compensate for the financial and political vacuum that US-led Western disengagement has left in place. However, these efforts have met mixed results. Relations with Pakistan – once seen as the Taliban's closest ally – have become frosty as Islamabad has accused the Taliban of harbouring Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan has conducted airstrikes in Afghan territory and continues to deport significant numbers of Afghan refugees, further straining bilateral relations and overwhelming Afghan authorities.

Simultaneously, Taliban-Iran relations have been tested by the mass forced return of Afghans from Iran, often under abusive conditions, and the implications of war between Iran and Israel. Nonetheless, pragmatic cooperation between Tehran and Kabul persists, among others, because of mutual economic interests and shared concerns over regional instability.

In Central and South Asia, the Taliban has enjoyed warmer, though still informal, relations with countries like Uzbekistan and India. In July 2025, Russia became the first country to formally recognise the IEA, a development more likely driven by Moscow's geopolitical posturing than by meaningful bilateral alignment. The practical benefits of this recognition remain to be seen. While withholding a formal recognition of the Taliban's government, China welcomed an official Taliban envoy in January 2025 to lead the Afghan diplomatic mission in Beijing. Despite Taliban's regional outreach, including several business deals signed with Chinese companies, no transformative economic partnerships or infrastructural investments have

materialised, and Afghanistan remains largely isolated from global financial institutions.

The Trump administration's consideration of Afghanistan as a low policy priority is unlikely to change unless major geopolitical developments force it to alter course. Any expectations that Trump will pursue significant policy modifications or reclassify Afghanistan as a priority within foreign policy considerations appear unrealistic.

Given this complex landscape, the paper delves into deeper analysis and ends by offering a set of strategic recommendations and concluding thoughts as a roadmap, aimed at both Afghan and international stakeholders:

- I. **Address Returnee Crises:** Joint humanitarian planning is urgently needed to manage the large-scale forced returns of Afghans from Iran and Pakistan.
- II. **Invest in Resilience:** Non-Western donors must be encouraged to invest in health and education infrastructure.
- III. **Bridge the Development-Humanitarian Divide:** A dual-track approach is needed where development initiatives resume alongside continued humanitarian interventions.
- IV. **Facilitate Financial Access:** International actors should explore pathways to reconnect Afghanistan with global financial systems, including through sanctions workarounds and mediated engagements.
- V. **Encourage Domestic Inclusion:** The Taliban must articulate a cohesive political vision for the country and a pathway for building an inclusive system of governance.

II. Introduction

It has been four years since the Taliban movement seized power from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021. Despite the huge reduction in conflict-related insecurity in the country, Afghanistan's deepening socioeconomic, political, and environmental vulnerabilities persist. Russia became the first country to formally recognise the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in July this year. Nonetheless, international sanctions and the lack of broader formal recognition of the Taliban government adversely impact the survival of national institutions and exacerbate the hardship facing ordinary Afghans. International development assistance is almost entirely halted, with external support solely available for humanitarian programmes since the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Since 2021, humanitarian spending in the country has heavily depended on funding from the United States, particularly assistance from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Several other Western and non-Western countries have also assisted, but the American contribution has been the most significant in terms of funds from a single country.

Prior to Donald Trump's return to the White House as president in January 2025, the US government remained the biggest donor to the humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan, providing \$3.63 billion between October 2021 and December 2024.¹ US humanitarian funding for Afghanistan dropped precipitously under the Trump administration as Washington deepened its 'America First' policies, reversing the course and trajectory that had defined a 'globalist' American foreign policy for decades. According to the quarterly report

1 Hakimi, H. (Feb 2025) *What the West can do now in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan*, Chatham House, 05 February 2025

in April by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR), the shutdown of USAID programmes in Afghanistan resulted in cutting the full amount of approximately \$1.8 billion that was pledged towards humanitarian and basic services.² The full details of the international aid programmes suffering funding cuts in Afghanistan are still emerging as the United Nations and other agencies are forced to 'reprioritise' commitments to adjust to the shortage of funds. For countries like Afghanistan that are significantly aid-dependent, Trump's decision to shut down the USAID will be hugely consequential in the immediate and long-term future.

The initial 90-day halt of US international aid, announced in January 2025,³ immediately began impacting humanitarian efforts on the ground in Afghanistan. Following USAID's temporary halt, the Taliban's deputy minister of economy announced that 50 international organisations across 28 provinces had suspended humanitarian activities.⁴ Subsequently, the announcement⁵ in March 2025 that the Trump administration would cut 83 per cent of USAID's contracts meant that the flow of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan would suffer severely.

While Afghanistan does not feature prominently in the agenda of the current Trump administration, there have been some comments and, at times, contradictory messaging about the country. Trump has expressed an ongoing dissatisfaction with the manner of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. He has demanded that

the Taliban must return military hardware which departing US troops left behind in Afghanistan.⁶ Taliban spokesmen have persistently dismissed such demands, contending that any American equipment remaining in Afghanistan is securely in the possession of the Taliban and constitutes the legitimate asset of the IEA.

Notwithstanding Taliban leaders' ostensible claims to establish favourable relations with the neighbouring countries, the IEA has not achieved any transformative partnership or regional economic cooperation initiatives that offer prospects to elevate the economic crisis facing the Afghan people. Despite the earlier bilateral warmth, relations between the Taliban government and Pakistan's military and civilian authorities have deteriorated. In recent months, Pakistani military jets have bombed Afghan villages and districts near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, citing security threats from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) inside Afghan territory.

Shockwaves from the recent war between Israel and Iran have further exacerbated the socioeconomic and humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan.⁷ A significant increase in the number of Afghan returnees from Iran and the disruption to trade and fuel imports have added to the existing difficulties. Although brief, the conflict between India and Pakistan in May 2025 also underscored the volatility and vulnerability of Afghanistan's immediate and regional neighbourhoods to risks associated with geopolitical fragility and wars.

2 SIGAR (Apr 2025) *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 30 April 2025

3 NPR (Jan 2025) *U.S. puts virtually all foreign aid on 90-day hold, issues 'stop-work' order*, 24 January 2025

4 Amu (Jan 2025) *Taliban official says US aid freeze has forced 50 humanitarian groups to suspend operations*, 29 January 2025

5 The Guardian (Mar 2025) *Rubio says 83% of USAid programs terminated after six-week purge*, 10 March 2025

6 VOA (Jan 2025) *Trump seeks return of US military equipment from Afghan Taliban*, 20 January 2025

7 UN News (Jun 2025) *Senior envoy warns Iran-Israel conflict deepening crisis in Afghanistan*, 23 Jun 2025

Meanwhile, crises in other parts of the world, notably the wars in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and a new regime in Syria, take up most of the US-led Western bandwidth for intervention and engagement. Without a practical path for political engagement with the West, and the lack of a viable mediation mechanism led by an external actor to facilitate meaningful dialogue, the Taliban's diplomatic efforts have not yielded results, failing to gain any Western diplomatic recognition. Although the key developments impacting Afghanistan the most are likely to continue to be regional, Western diplomatic recognition is a prerequisite for the Taliban to be allowed into the international financial, development, and UN-led diplomatic ecosystems. However, while Taliban leaders are keen to establish relations with the West, there is an ostensible stalemate. Recent reports confirm that Germany allowed two Taliban-appointed officials to formally occupy positions in the Afghan diplomatic missions in Berlin and Bonn. The move is widely regarded as establishing 'technical engagement' with Kabul primarily to facilitate efficient deportations of failed Afghan asylum seekers from Germany, as opposed to any meaningful diplomatic recognition of the Taliban.⁸

Domestically, for the Taliban, evidence of deepening internal disagreements points to a rift developing among the leaders. Though they seem contained so far, such reported rifts will likely create distractions from focusing on the challenges of governance, socioeconomics, security, and external relations the current government faces. Meanwhile, since returning to power in August 2021, Taliban leaders have stressed their 'effective governance' policies, highlighting the stability of the local

currency, the Afghani,⁹ as a benchmark of success in preventing inflation,¹⁰ whereas neighbouring Iran and Pakistan both suffer from spiralling levels of inflation. With foreign aid to Afghanistan facing significant cuts, the country's economic challenges are likely to deepen. Any significant depreciation of the Afghani will add to the fears of long-term inflation.

As Trump and his senior officials adopt a harsher tone on foreign policy matters, it is unclear what precise steps Washington might pursue toward Afghanistan. Facing the prospects of a less generous and more erratic administration in Washington, compounded by rockier relations with Pakistan, Taliban leaders are unlikely to continue enjoying ambivalence and rigidity: the Taliban's policy hallmark and a seemingly contradictory approach in managing Afghanistan's external relations. However, a set of key questions remains: will there be a 'rethink' in Washington on Afghanistan beyond implementing funding cuts as part of the overall dismantling of the USAID? How will the Trump administration's policies – or lack thereof – instil a sense of urgency amongst Taliban leaders to opt for positive engagement internationally and take steps toward more inclusive domestic politics? What is the likely outcome of worsening Afghanistan-Pakistan relations since Islamabad previously advocated for better US-Taliban engagement in the past? How does the Taliban government balance relations with other countries in the region, such as Iran, China, India, and Central Asia? And, crucially, what would be the impact of these dynamics on the socioeconomic and humanitarian crises facing the Afghan people?

8 DW (Jul 2025) [Germany allows Taliban envoys to facilitate deportations](#), 21 July 2025

9 Kabul Now (May 2025) [Taliban claims the most stable currency in South Asia](#), 06 May 2025

10 The Diplomat (Sep 2024) [Evaluating the Taliban's Economic Policies](#), 13 September 2024

The paper unpacks two key themes. First, it evaluates the actions and steps taken by Washington since January 2025 under the new Trump administration towards Afghanistan and the likely interplay of these developments with Afghanistan's internal dynamics. Second, the paper explores evolving regional dynamics, and their implications for the Taliban's attempts to reset Afghanistan's external relations with Washington and others. The paper ends by offering concluding reflections and policy recommendations.

In addition to extensive desk research, the findings in this report draw on the discussions and expertise at the two-day workshop in Doha that was organised by the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) in February 2025. The workshop, organised as an invite-only expert roundtable, brought together subject-matter experts, scholars, practitioners, and various institutional stakeholders for in-depth deliberations. The workshop was the second in the series under CHS's Afghanistan Research and Policy Initiative (ARPI). The ARPI aims to strengthen evidence-based research and policy recommendations on Afghanistan and the region and amplify perspectives that support actionable steps to achieve comprehensive peace and stability.

III. The Taliban vs. Trump 2.0

The term 'unprecedented' risks becoming a cliché in the context of Afghanistan, not least because of its overuse in describing various eras of instability, political challenges, and crises facing the country. However, the current juncture seems to be a starkly unprecedented and unique moment in Afghanistan's recent history as the authorities struggle to chart a way

forward in foreign relations, especially with the US – and other major Western governments. The unpredictability instilled by the new Trump administration's decisions to majorly alter American foreign policy has unsurprisingly generated nervousness across policymaking corridors in the world, including in Afghanistan. In the last twenty years, fewer nations have felt the effects of US foreign policy as profoundly as Afghanistan. The country was shaped in a multitude of ways by the US military invasion, political influence, and development aid. The US's precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, followed by the severing of ties with the country ruled by the IEA, has left a gaping vacuum that no other external state actor has filled so far. Taliban leaders are acutely aware of this glaring reality, which explains why the Taliban's foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, continues to argue that the Taliban would like positive relations with Washington.¹¹

Taliban spokesmen and leaders continue to adopt a defiant tone against Western leverage, reiterating the narrative of a triumphant Jihad against the former US-led military presence in Afghanistan. This is particularly true in messaging to domestic audiences and in rare interviews with Western media outlets. Realistically, however, the persistence of unpredictability underpinning Trump's approach to foreign policy can potentially harm Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The predictability of the Biden administration's pro-human rights rhetoric and Biden's deliberate attempts to divert focus from Afghanistan to portray a closed chapter in US foreign policy benefitted the Taliban. As a result, the IEA achieved a status quo: expecting some level of aid inflow with substantial US funding injections for the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, complemented by regular cash shipments of

¹¹ DW (Mar 2025) [Afghanistan: US citizen released by Taliban](#), 20 March 2025

US dollars – under UN monitoring – that help stabilise the value of the Afghani. The shifting US foreign policy following the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2025 has disrupted this status quo and continues to alter the aid and humanitarian funding landscape in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, as with Afghanistan's foreign relations overall, there is a divergence of opinion among Taliban leaders on the return of Donald Trump to the White House. Spearheaded by Taliban's Kandahar-based supreme amir, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, Taliban hardliners hold a sceptical view of the US, perceiving Western governments in general as foes and anti-Islamic that would want to undermine the IEA. It is highly unlikely that a new president in the White House would alter the deep scepticism among senior Taliban leaders. On the other hand, there were some indications of cautious optimism within mainly Kabul-based Taliban circles, including those who were previously part of the Taliban's political negotiation team in Doha that engaged with officials of the first Trump administration. Immediately after Trump won the election in November 2024, a Taliban foreign ministry spokesperson expressed optimism that the IEA would be able to open a new chapter with the US under another term of Trump's presidency.¹² As Trump reiterated his staunchly anti-war and anti-interventionist stance in election campaigns, and with Afghanistan featuring less notably in his policy pledges, some Taliban leaders seemed hopeful that a transactional administration at the White House would benefit their regime in Kabul. While such Taliban views presumably disregarded the risks of a complete suspension of US funding for humanitarian aid efforts

in Afghanistan, the calculations were not a misjudgement. Having fought a ferocious insurgency for nearly twenty years, there is a prevalent sense of self-confidence among the Taliban that their government could thrive if the US lifted all sanctions, returned Afghanistan's frozen banking assets to the IEA, and ceased using human rights – particularly the rights and dignity of Afghan women – as leverage against the Taliban's system of governance. Trump's transactional approach to foreign relations, therefore, would suit such a calculated perception among the Taliban.

In addition, Taliban leaders based in Doha before 2021 had experience of holding direct negotiations with officials representing the previous Trump administration. This included primarily representatives of the US government and key figures such as Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad.¹³ The dialogue then culminated in the signing of the Doha Agreement in February 2020, with Qatar's effective mediation role. Predictably, some Taliban leaders, including in cabinet roles based in Kabul, favoured Trump's return to power, believing they had a legacy of direct and senior-level dialogue with the previous Trump team, compared to the occasional engagement with the Biden administration after 2021. To the Taliban's dismay, however, the new Trump team includes senior members who are avidly anti-Taliban, including some with military background and experience of deployment in Afghanistan, such as the current defence secretary, Pete Hegseth.

12 Amin, A (Dec 2024) *In Afghanistan, Trump will have to play a balancing game*, Al Jazeera English, 24 December 2024

13 Biography of Zalmay Khalilzad available on the archived website of US Department of State: <https://2021-2025.state.gov/people/zalmay-khalilzad/>

1. Afghanistan's Significance in US Foreign Policy

Following the October 2001 American military invasion of Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan featured notably in the US foreign policy agenda and electoral politics for nearly twenty years, albeit with varying degrees of significance. It is highly unlikely that Afghanistan will regain such prominence in Washington in the near future, as America's focus turns to geopolitical considerations it deems more crucial: wars in the Middle East, the role of China, the war in Ukraine, and other pressing matters such as global trade relations. Under Trump, there is also a clear tendency to move away from the narratives of the era that defined America's so-called 'War on Terror' and epitomised US foreign policy following the 9/11 attacks. This slipping down in the list of priorities partly explains the lack of enthusiasm in Washington to actively welcome or support any anti-Taliban Afghan factions, including those in exile who were evacuated by the US following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021.

As anti-immigration laws take shape in the US, the Trump administration has not spared the Afghan evacuees by cancelling the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Afghanistan, citing the country's 'improved security situation' and that 'permitting Afghans to remain temporarily in the United States is contrary to the national interest of the United States'.¹⁴ The termination of TPS for Afghanistan took effect in July 2025, subjecting over 11,000 Afghans in the US to immediate detention and prospects for deportation.¹⁵

Now in power for four years, the Taliban's ability to successfully maintain territorial control and establish order across Afghanistan has contributed to the view in Washington and some Western capitals that supporting anti-Taliban armed resistance could plunge Afghanistan into yet another cycle of civil war; this is viewed as perilous for the region and beyond as it will most likely empower nefarious actors such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). The destabilisation of Afghanistan would also result in a staggering increase in the outflow of refugees, an issue that is of significant concern for European policymakers in particular. Experts have argued that the Taliban's isolation would create more space for China and Russia to fill, largely a result of the vacuum left by US disengagement.¹⁶ The IEA has not yet acquired any politically or economically transformative deals from Beijing or Moscow despite the latter's formal recognition, and the former's signals such as accepting Taliban ambassadorial credentials. Russia's endorsement of the Taliban government followed the group's removal from Moscow's list of terrorist organisations in April, over twenty years after banning the group as terrorists in 2003.¹⁷ Beyond the symbolic value of Russia's formal recognition, and its potential snowballing effect for further external recognition of Kabul, for instance, by Central Asian states, it is not yet clear what tangible benefits the Taliban's first external formal diplomatic endorsement espouses.

For the Taliban regime in Kabul, not being on Washington's priorities list is both a blessing and a disadvantage. Afghanistan's

14 US Citizenship and Immigration Services (May 2025) [DHS Terminating Temporary Status for Afghanistan](#), 12 May 2025

15 Human Rights Watch (Jul 2025) [US Terminates Protected Status for Afghans](#), 10 July 2025

16 Felbab-Brown, V. (Aug 2024) [The Taliban's three years in power and what lies ahead](#), Brookings, 14 August 2024

17 The Guardian (Apr 2025) [Russia removes Taliban from list of banned terrorist groups](#), (17 April 2025)

multilayered socioeconomic and humanitarian crises desperately rely on foreign aid, and the US has been a pivotal actor in providing such assistance. With no dedicated envoys or senior diplomatic personnel to handle the Afghanistan file under a Trump-centred administration in Washington, the Taliban could face a brick wall in pursuing engagement with the US, especially to advocate for US assistance and political recognition of the IEA. Yet, for the same reason that Trump symbolises unpredictability and drives foreign policy on personal preferences, being out of Washington's sight could be a blessing for the Taliban leaders. In the meantime, Trump has continued claiming that China controls the Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan and that the US should 'get it back'¹⁸ – a claim the Taliban spokesmen vehemently deny.¹⁹ More recent rumours about the US military planes being spotted at Bagram Airbase and in the Afghan skies have also been rejected by the Taliban.²⁰

The Taliban leaders are keen to weave better relations with the Trump administration. The release of at least four American citizens since January, held in detention by the Taliban, indicates increased contact between Kabul and Washington – primarily through Qatar's mediation. In January, hours before the inauguration of Donald Trump, the Taliban reached a prisoner swap agreement with the Biden administration, resulting in the release of two American citizens held by the Taliban for the release of a Taliban member sentenced in the US to life imprisonment in 2008.²¹

In March, for the first time since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, a US delegation visited Kabul, headed by US hostage envoy, Adam Boehler. Zalmay Khalilzad also travelled as part of the delegation to meet Amir Khan Muttaqi. The visit resulted in the release of George Glezmman, an American citizen, who was detained by the Taliban in Afghanistan in December 2022. Despite initial excitement in the Taliban-friendly social media landscape, it was clear that the Taliban authorities and the American delegation that visited Afghanistan had different interpretations of the development. According to Khalilzad, the Taliban released Glezmman with the mediation of Qatar as a gesture of goodwill to the US president and people, stressing the prisoner-release element of the visit to Kabul.²² The Taliban, however, maintain that releasing US detainees is part of the efforts by the IEA to normalise its external relations – a claim that is not acknowledged by any US official.²³

Nevertheless, shortly after the US delegation visited Kabul, the United States lifted multimillion-dollar rewards for information leading to the arrest of three Taliban members, including the \$10 million bounty on Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani Network and the Taliban's current interior minister.²⁴ Haqqani's spokesman and supporters welcomed the news, although the State Department confirmed Mr Haqqani and the other two members will continue to be listed as 'Specially Designated Global Terrorists and

18 NDTV (Feb 2025) [Trump On Bagram Airbase](#), 27 February 2025

19 The Independent (Mar 2025) [Taliban dismiss Trump's claim about Chinese presence at Bagram airfield](#), 03 March 2025

20 Arab News (Apr 2025) [Taliban deny reports of American airbase takeover](#), 08 April 2025

21 CNN (Jan 2025) [Two Americans held in Afghanistan traded for Taliban prisoner in final Biden deal delayed until Trump took office](#), 21 January 2025

22 CNN (Mar 2025) [American detained by Taliban in Afghanistan is freed in deal mediated by Qatar](#), 20 March 2025

23 Al Jazeera (Mar 2025) [Taliban releases US detainee George Glezmman in Trump administration deal](#), 20 March 2025

24 BBC (Mar 2025) [US drops bounties on key Taliban leaders](#), 25 March 2025

[that] the Haqqani Network remains designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.’²⁵

In September, Boehler and Khalilzad visited Kabul for the second time, stressing that the issue of American prisoners’ release was ‘very important to President Trump’.²⁶ For the Taliban’s part, Muttaqi is keen that the Taliban regain control of the Afghan embassy in Washington, D.C. – a key goal among other thorny issues such as the unfreezing of Afghanistan’s assets. At a recent press conference in London, Trump reiterated his view that his administration would be keen to regain control of the Bagram Airbase because it is situated ‘an hour away from where China makes its nuclear weapons’.²⁷ It is unclear, however, whether such statements are part of Trump’s anti-China rhetoric or an assertion of intent to engage the Taliban for what would be a dramatic shift in US foreign policy by aiming to re-establish military presence in Afghanistan.

II. Implications of Shifting US Foreign Policy for Humanitarian Efforts in Afghanistan

The adverse effects of a drastic reduction in aid due to the Trump administration’s decision to dismantle USAID will reverberate across the world, including in Afghanistan. It will exacerbate the shortage of humanitarian aid flowing into Afghanistan, which was already facing challenges. The humanitarian consequences of the funding freeze are both immediate and severe. Critical aid agencies, including the World Food Programme (WFP), have been forced to close services, leaving millions of Afghans in desperate conditions.

Following the funding freeze and subsequent reductions, over 200 health facilities have shut down, blocking access to primary healthcare for approximately 1.8 million to 2.4 million Afghans.²⁸ Projections indicate that 3.5 million children will suffer from acute malnutrition in 2025—a 20 per cent increase compared to the previous year.²⁹ In the immediate aftermath of the suspension of USAID funding, the WFP reported that more than 6 million of the 15 million Afghans facing acute food needs would not receive sufficient rations during the harsh winter months.³⁰ Although the IEA has taken steps to stem the speed of currency devaluation, the US announcement of an aid freeze in January 2025 immediately caused a drop of over 10 per cent in the value of the Afghani in a week. Whereas the local currency has regained strength against the US dollar, exchanging at around 70 Afghanis against 1 US dollar at the time of writing, Afghanistan’s economic vulnerabilities are persistent and face weaker prospects of improvement in the immediate future.

The humanitarian and economic impacts of American aid suspension are overwhelming in their own right. There are potential political implications of removing aid. Taliban authorities have relied heavily on the existence of a parallel international aid ecosystem to meet the basic needs of the population, allowing the group to sidestep direct governance challenges. The removal of that support system could expose the IEA and Taliban leaders to public discontent, loss of legitimacy, and growing dissent. It can also exacerbate the Taliban’s internal disagreements

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Dawn (Sep 2025) *Situationer: Taliban seek quid pro quo from US*, 18 September 2025

²⁷ Fox News (Sep 2025) *Trump: US trying to get Bagram Airbase ‘back’ from Taliban in Afghanistan*, 18 September 2025

²⁸ ACAPS (Apr 2025) *Afghanistan: Implications of the US foreign aid cuts on the humanitarian response*, 01 April 2025

²⁹ AP (Apr 2025) *Afghan children will die because of US funding cuts, aid official says*, 16 April 2025

³⁰ Reuters (Jan 2025) *“Just bread and tea”: WFP says aid cuts to Afghanistan leave millions hungry this winter*, 27 January 2025

as key Taliban leaders rely on various population centres as political constituencies. In this regard, there is a prevalent perception among the public and aid actors that the availability and distribution of humanitarian assistance at the local level have benefitted communities that might have perceived receiving aid as a direct consequence of the Taliban being in power.

Without international humanitarian flows, the Taliban must confront the reality of governing a population on the brink of severe socioeconomic crises. The discontent stemming from unemployment, malnutrition, and the collapse of medical services could breed strong resentment that can eventually cause unrest, or even splintering within Taliban ranks as local commanders seek to distance themselves from an increasingly unpopular central leadership. Historically, humanitarian crises in Afghanistan have been part of the drivers of political instability, exacerbating socioeconomic pressures at the community level. The large-scale forced returns of Afghans from Iran and Pakistan will add to the complexity of governing stressed out populations in socially and economically fragile settings.

International and national humanitarian organisations currently employ a relatively substantial number of people in Afghanistan, providing an economic lifeline to individuals and their families. Aid organisations also pay taxes to the Taliban government, rent properties, and create localised and national economic activity that supports local businesses, among other contributions. A large-scale closure of these organisations due to funding cuts, primarily by the US, will further deepen the unemployment

challenges across the country. While the IEA has been attempting to project proactive action to address unemployment, such as through announcements that it is working to send Afghan workers to countries like Qatar,³¹ it is highly unlikely that any meaningful replacements for US funding cuts will be secured soon. Thus, the necessity to restore workable external relations with countries across the world is an urgent task facing the Taliban leaders. Afghanistan's relationship with the US will likely shape any rapprochement with the broader set of countries in the West that are likely to follow the lead of US foreign policy towards the Taliban regime in Kabul.

IV. Shifting Regional Dynamics and the Taliban

Afghanistan's immediate and regional neighbours have remained largely tolerant of the Taliban's government in Kabul, demonstrating varying – and sometimes fluctuating – levels of warmth with the IEA. This approach to Afghanistan is primarily borne out of security concerns and a preference for Taliban rule rather than a power vacuum in the country. An additional reason for the development of cordial relations is the outreach by Taliban leaders actively seeking to promote peaceful relations with neighbouring and regional countries, emphasising that the IEA does not favour external confrontation.

Nonetheless, the IEA is faced with the difficult politics and the impact of domestic challenges in the two most critical neighbouring countries: Pakistan and Iran. Central Asian neighbours, led by Uzbekistan, have sought to establish an enduring partnership on a geo-economic agenda with the IEA. However, insecurity and socioeconomic instability in Pakistan – and

31 Tolo News (Apr 2025) [Afghanistan Reaches Preliminary Agreement to Send Workers to Qatar](#), 14 April 2025

more recently in Iran as a result of its war with Israel – are going to be more consequential for Afghanistan's economic prosperity and regional relations.

1. Challenges and Developments with Pakistan and Iran

Pakistan

Earlier in 2025, the deteriorating bilateral relations between Pakistan and the Taliban government in Afghanistan emerged as one of the most salient developments. In December last year, the Pakistani military carried out airstrikes inside Afghan territory – the third time since the Taliban's return to power – claiming the attacks were aimed at the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban.³² Pakistan has accused the IEA of tolerating the presence of, and providing sanctuary to, the TTP, which has been responsible for inflicting devastating attacks inside Pakistan, primarily targeting the military and state personnel. The Taliban leaders have denied Pakistan's accusations, blaming Islamabad for failing to take care of its domestic security matters. The TTP attacks inside Pakistan put immense pressure on the Pakistani state to demonstrate it is in control, as it faces anger from the public and the country's economy suffers. The airstrikes in Afghanistan should be viewed as part of the Pakistani army's response to reassure the public in Pakistan that it is taking strong action. Meanwhile, Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan – some for decades since the 1980s – have become the target of anti-Afghan sentiment simmering inside Pakistan, as the state and media have portrayed the TTP as a problem that emanates

from Afghanistan, effectively externalising what is to a large extent a domestic security problem in Pakistan. It is inconceivable that the IEA would bow to pressure from Pakistan to act against the TTP leaders in Afghanistan's bordering region with Pakistan. For the Taliban leaders, it is more important to preserve the equilibrium with the TTP elements, as any operations against them by the Taliban inside Afghanistan will make Kabul vulnerable to other extremely violent groups like the ISKP.³³

Notwithstanding the recent tensions, Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan are shaped through multiple complexities underpinned by geographic, economic, and historical connections. Many in Pakistan viewed the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 as a win for Pakistan's 'Strategic Depth' doctrine in Afghanistan. Since the 1980s, Pakistan's military establishment, especially the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has sought to install a 'friendly' government in Kabul to ensure that Pakistan is not encircled by antagonistic neighbours. This deep preoccupation with framing Afghanistan as a strategic backyard is primarily shaped by Pakistan's policies toward its arch-rival and neighbour, India.³⁴ In essence, by seeking strategic depth, Pakistan believes it is denying India any influence in Afghanistan. For decades, the doctrine of strategic depth has defined Pakistani foreign policy and engagement in Afghanistan. With the US military withdrawal resulting in the collapse of the Islamic Republic, the Taliban's return to power signified a pivotal moment of success for Pakistani military and civilian leaders who were instrumental in providing the Taliban leaders safe havens and operational spaces within Pakistan after 2001. However, Taliban

32 The New York Times (Jan 2025) [Tensions Escalate After Pakistan Pounds Afghanistan With Airstrikes](#), 01 January 2025

33 Hakimi, H. (Dec 2024) [Analysis: Why have Pakistan's ties with the Afghan Taliban turned frigid?](#), Al Jazeera, 28 December 2024

34 Rehman, A. (Dec 2023) [What Went Wrong with Pakistan's "Strategic Depth" Policy?](#), South Asian Voices, The Stimson Center, 14 December 2023

leaders, now in power, are keen to demonstrate they are statesmen. They want to build domestic constituencies and project a sense of pride in Afghan national identity; thus, a healthy distance from their past in Pakistani safe havens is an appealing and expected strategy.

As the security situation has deteriorated inside Pakistan in recent years, the government, media, and security sector have portrayed Afghan refugees inside the country as part of the problem. Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghans since the 1980s; hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been able to access some level of education, including higher education in Pakistan. Yet, there is a historical legacy of threatening mass deportations of Afghans when Islamabad-Kabul ties deteriorate. Afghans residing in Pakistan are 'held responsible, often without proof, for criminal and terrorist activities'.³⁵ As a result, Afghans in Pakistan are faced with a profound sense of vulnerability. So far, Pakistan has rejected all appeals by international and humanitarian actors to stem the tide of forced returns of Afghans, as Afghanistan is overwhelmed by the volume and intensity of the arrival of returnees not only from Pakistan but also from Iran.

The future of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations hinges on how the Taliban transforms from an insurgency to an effective government, and how far the Pakistani security establishment, particularly the army leadership, invests in a geoeconomic-centred foreign policy towards Afghanistan. There are indications of a growing acceptance in Pakistan that the country needs to focus its foreign policy

priorities. Primarily, this means that Islamabad does not favour confrontation on multiple fronts with neighbouring states. Although Islamabad has not formally recognised the IEA, it agreed with Kabul in May to elevate the status of their charge d'affaires to ambassadors in their respective embassies.³⁶ The bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan reached nearly \$1 billion in the first 6 months of the current year, with 28% of this figure comprising Afghan exports to Pakistan.³⁷ Nonetheless, policies such as the continued forced return of Afghans residing in Pakistan increase the scale of socioeconomic problems for Kabul. According to the data released by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in the 30-day period between 03 April and 03 May 2025, nearly 110,000 Afghans returned home via main border crossings with Pakistan in Afghanistan's eastern and southern provinces of Nangarhar and Kandahar.³⁸ Representatives of humanitarian and international organisations supporting the Afghan returnees contend that an absolute majority of the returns are forced, and even those returning 'voluntarily' do so to avoid the almost-certain prospects of harsh treatment, detention, and an aggressive deportation process by Pakistani security and police forces.³⁹

Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are inherently interdependent. Some challenges supersede the national capacities in both countries, such as environmental degradation and the adverse effects of climate change. Both countries are ranked among the top ten most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Landlocked and reliant on the artery of transit routes, Afghanistan's closest access to an ocean

35 International Crisis Group (May 2025) *Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive*, 22 May 2025

36 Dawn (May 2025) *Kabul also levels up its Pakistan diplomat to ambassador as ties see 'normalisation'*, 31 May 2025

37 Tolo News (Jul 2025) *Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade Nears \$1 Billion in First Half of 2025*, 12 July 2025

38 IOM (May 2025) *Nearly 110,000 Afghans Returned from Pakistan in a Month*, 06 May 2025

39 CHS Workshop in Doha, February 2025

port is through Pakistan. Economic relations are marked by a combination of formal and informal trading ties, including the people-to-people trade. As Pakistan seeks a broader regional and international profile to improve its dire economic conditions, it needs to consider the risks posed by instability and persistent tension in bilateral ties with Afghanistan. Expanding trading ties with Afghanistan, including by opening market opportunities for Afghan products, can play a key role in building mutual confidence.

Iran

Like Pakistan, Iran shares historical, religious, and cultural links with Afghanistan. Iranian relations with the Taliban movement, however, have a chequered history. During the first period of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan (1996 - 2001), Taliban-Iranian relations were largely sour. This was primarily due to an attack on Iran's consulate in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998 that killed nine Iranian diplomats, and Tehran blamed the Taliban for the attack.⁴⁰ Iran was also concerned about the prospects of having a hardline Sunni religious group with anti-Shia leanings at the helm of power in neighbouring Afghanistan. Although the flow of goods to Afghanistan via Bandar Abbas continued unabated during the first period of Taliban rule, the political and diplomatic relations remained strained. Tehran hosted anti-Taliban former Mujahideen leaders, and refused to formally recognise the Taliban regime in power.

After the US military invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the subsequent toppling of the first Taliban regime, Iran adopted a two-

pronged approach: formally recognising the US-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as the legitimate Afghan government while quietly engaging with the Taliban leaders who were fighting a fierce insurgency against the US-led forces and the Afghan Islamic Republic regime. Senior Taliban leaders reportedly travelled to Iran, which is inconceivable to have taken place without the facilitation of the Iranian government. Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the previous Taliban supreme leader, was killed in a US drone strike in 2016 as he entered Pakistan's Baluchistan region while returning from a trip to Iran.⁴¹ During anti-Taliban operations, Afghan security forces at the time reported regularly that the Taliban fighters were in possession of Iranian-made weapons, and it was widely believed that there was a consistent movement of Taliban members into Iran.⁴² After returning to power in 2021, Taliban leaders have maintained warm relations with Iran. Tehran welcomed Taliban representatives to assume control of the Afghan embassy in Iran,⁴³ and has maintained an ambassador-level diplomatic presence in Kabul, much to the satisfaction of the IEA.

Iran has several key long-term interests in Afghanistan which define its foreign policy towards the country, particularly in the past two decades. First, Iran has security concerns driven by fears of instability, power vacuum, and socioeconomic crises in Afghanistan that could threaten Iran's security and cause further flows of Afghan refugees into Iran. The emergence of extreme anti-Shia militant groups like the ISKP deepens Iran's security concerns. Second, Iran's foreign policy towards Afghanistan is influenced by geopolitical factors, forming

40 The New York Time (Sep 1998) [Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats' Deaths](#), 11 September 1998

41 The Guardian (May 2016) [US drone strike in Pakistan kills Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor](#), 22 May 2016

42 Taban, B. (Jul 2025) [The Unexpected Consequences of War Between Iran and Israel on Afghanistan](#), The Diplomat, 02 July 2025

43 Voice of America (Feb 2023) [Iran Hands Over Afghan Embassy in Tehran to Taliban](#), 27 February 2023

part of Tehran's efforts to limit global and regional rivals, influence in Afghanistan and to maintain stronger ties with the Afghan Shia communities. Third, Afghanistan is a key market for Iranian exports, and fuel. According to the Tehran Times, Iran accounted for 35% of Afghanistan's import market by the end of 2023.⁴⁴ Both heavily sanctioned by the US, Iran and Afghanistan have found a convergence of interest to advance bilateral trade and strengthen economic ties. Yet, since the Taliban's return to power, there have been instances of cross-border attacks between Iranian and Afghan border security forces. Such violent clashes are blamed on water disputes (and occasionally on disputes over trade and people movements but the '[Afghan-Iranian Helmand-River Water Treaty](#)' - signed in 1973 - is one of the rare successful bilateral agreements for managing transboundary water resources. While the effects of climate change and Taliban's desire to achieve greater control over water flow by building dams in Afghanistan have increased anxiety in Iran, the Taliban government has managed to avoid any serious conflict over the water issues so far. There is no evidence that any Afghan government since 1973 has used the Helmand River Water Treaty as a tool against Iran, or refused the specified water rights to Tehran.⁴⁵

The recent 12-day war between Israel and Iran, and the US military attack on Iran in support of Israel, marked a dangerous juncture in the fragility of the region. In a post on 13 June, the Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, issued Kabul's robust condemnation of Israel's

attack on Iran, including on Iranian scientists and senior officials.⁴⁶ The prospect of regime change in Tehran would pose a significant challenge for the IEA as Taliban leaders would face the risk of an anti-clerical government in Iran that is unlikely to be friendly towards Afghanistan, which is ruled under a strict Taliban interpretation of Sharia law. As a gesture of goodwill to Tehran while Iran's aviation industry remained shut during Israeli bombings, the IEA granted visa exemptions to Iranian Hajj pilgrims returning from Saudi Arabia to Iran via Afghanistan; the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Iranian pilgrims would be exempt from visa requirements for up to a month.⁴⁷

In the aftermath of the war with Israel, Iran has cracked down on dissidence and has arrested scores of individuals suspected of collaboration with Israel's intelligence services; the arrests include some Afghans accused of spying for Israel.⁴⁸ As a result, anti-Afghan and anti-migrant sentiments in Iran have peaked, with reports of serious mistreatment of Afghans by the Iranian public and security forces. While nearly 500,000 Afghans left Iran between June and July this year, both through deportations and forced by the prevailing hostile environment, many returnees were camped in makeshift shelters.⁴⁹ The IEA has asked Iran for compassionate and dignified treatment of the returnees, but aid agencies are concerned that the speed and scale of returns from Iran are extraordinarily overwhelming. According to Islamic Relief, around 35,000 returnees have been crossing from Iran on a daily basis, with

44 Tehran Times (Nov 2023) [Iran accounts for 35% of Afghanistan's import market](#), 04 November 2023

45 Sadat H., Sayed N., (Dec 2024) [Water as Leverage? Improving Iran's Treatment of Afghan Migrants](#), South Asian Voice, The Stimson Center, 17 December 2024

46 Kabul Now (Jun 2025) [Taliban Condemns Israeli Strikes on Iran as 'Violation of International Law'](#), 13 June 2025

47 Ariana News (Jun 2025) [Afghanistan grants visa exemption for Iranian pilgrims](#), 19 June 2025

48 Al Jazeera (Jul 2025) [500,000 Afghans leave Iran in a month amid deportation crackdown](#), 08 July 2025

49 Ibid.

a significant number of the returnees being women and children.⁵⁰

Shaken by the war with Israel, the Iranian government and security leadership are likely to prioritise reestablishing a grip on domestic security. Portraying Afghan refugees as a security threat will continue to fuel xenophobia and anti-Afghan sentiment within Iranian society, which in turn will sustain the high and challenging influx of returnees to Afghanistan. It is likely that the continued mistreatment of Afghans in Iran will fuel resentment against the people and government of Iran in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the IEA relies on Iran for fuel imports and the important transit routes, among other key economic factors. For Iran, Afghanistan is a crucial export market, and payments by Afghans for Iranian goods are an important source of foreign currency exchange while the Iranian regime remains heavily sanctioned. In the near to mid-term future, the current status quo with Iran will persist.

2. The Balancing Act with the Region

During and after the brief India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025, the IEA managed to avoid taking sides while urging de-escalation and emphasising that war was not in the region's interest. Taliban spokesmen condemn individual acts of violence in the neighbouring and regional countries, but aim for a neutral position on contentious regional disputes. Unlike their first period in power, the current Taliban government has managed to forge better relations with India. In June, India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry reported that bilateral trade with Afghanistan had breached the \$1 billion mark between April

2024 and March 2025, a significant milestone for the IEA. Crucially, this figure includes nearly \$700 million in exports to India, making New Delhi Afghanistan's largest export partner.⁵¹ In a meeting with a visiting senior Indian official in April, Amir Khan Muttaqi urged India to resume issuance of visas to Afghan nationals to strengthen mutual ties.⁵² New Delhi's direct engagement with the Taliban signifies a transformation of India's position on the group. However, the engagement with Kabul is marked with caution. India reportedly has a diplomatic presence in Kabul through a 'technical mission', but it is unlikely that New Delhi would offer the Taliban formal recognition anytime soon.

Immediately after returning to power in 2021, it seemed that the Taliban leaders pinned hopes on a transformative relationship with China. For Beijing, the departure of the US-led military presence in Afghanistan provided a timely opportunity to deride the American 'misadventures' which end up in 'turbulence' and 'deaths', among other ills in countries invaded by Washington.⁵³ China's first foreign policy priority in Afghanistan is Beijing's security concerns, particularly around the threat of militancy and extremist non-state actors such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Islamic State. Although an ideological Sunni group, the Taliban movement is not transnational. There is, therefore, a convergence of interest between Kabul and Beijing at present. Beijing maintains that its position on Afghanistan has been informed by adherence to respecting Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty, religious sensitivities, and customs. Furthermore, China

50 Relief Web (Jul 2025) [Afghan families ordered to leave Iran now need urgent food and shelter](#), 11 July 2025

51 Ariana News (Jun 2025) [Afghanistan-India bilateral trade over \\$1 billion in 2024-25 fiscal](#), 30 June 2025

52 Amu TV (Apr 2025) [Taliban urge India to resume visa issuance during Kabul meeting](#), 27 April 2025

53 NBC News (Sep 2021) [For China, Taliban rule in Afghanistan brings both opportunity and risk](#), 06 September 2021

has publicly committed to 'never interfere' in Afghanistan's internal affairs or seek a 'sphere of influence' in the country.⁵⁴

Chinese investors are now frequently seen in Afghanistan, and Taliban delegations often visit China. However, actual investments have been mostly made by private entrepreneurs at a small-scale level. In June this year, the IEA's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum terminated a 25-year contract worth \$540 million that was signed in January 2023 with a Chinese firm to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin.⁵⁵ Taliban authorities cited non-performance and breach of agreements by the Chinese partner as reasons for termination of the contract. The idea of including Afghanistan in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains aspirational. In May, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, affirmed Beijing's vision to extend BRI's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan.⁵⁶ However, the progress on including Afghanistan in Chinese-backed major infrastructure projects has been noticeably weak.

In contrast to the earlier period after 2021, the IEA, in general, and the foreign minister, in particular, have focused on looking beyond China to achieve what Amir Khan Muttaqi referred to as the Taliban's pursuit of a 'balanced foreign policy'. Although maintaining amicable relations with China is crucial for the IEA, Beijing has not delivered the financial and economic cooperation that is desperately needed to address Afghanistan's socioeconomic crisis. For China, engaging the Taliban government and building positive relations is simply embracing the reality that the

IEA is likely to control Afghanistan for years. The recent India-Pakistan and Israel-Iran conflicts have highlighted the regional instability threatening China's sphere of influence and economic interests. Meanwhile, the IEA has demonstrated pragmatism in maintaining external relations and control over domestic security in Afghanistan, putting Beijing and Kabul in a state of cautious amicability.

Afghanistan's neighbours in Central Asia have engaged in building friendly relations with the IEA. As the most prominent proponent of Afghanistan's regional integration, Uzbekistan has played a pivotal role in facilitating dialogue on the cross-regional economic agenda. While concerned about security and transboundary water issues, Uzbekistan has adopted pragmatism in dealing with Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Uzbekistan has not offered full recognition of the IEA, but Kabul recently sent an ambassador to Tashkent, affirming a de facto mutual recognition. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have built quiet engagement with the Taliban leaders even as the former continues to host some vocal elements of the anti-Taliban armed opposition. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan has taken practical steps towards pragmatic engagement with the IEA. For instance, earlier in 2024, the Kazakh government removed the Taliban from its list of groups involved in terrorism, and there is anticipation that the \$1 billion mutual trade will increase in volume as a result of these measures.⁵⁷

The most significant development in the Taliban's regional dynamics has been Russia's formal recognition of the IEA in early July, marking the first country to recognise the

54 Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC (Apr 2023) *China's Position on the Afghan Issue*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 12 April 2023

55 Kabul Now (Jun 2025) *Taliban Terminates Major Oil Extraction Deal with Chinese Firm*, 17 June 2025

56 Ministry of Foreign Affairs - China (May 2025) *Wang Yi on the Outcomes of the Trilateral Meeting of Foreign Ministers of China, Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 21 May 2025

57 Avdalani, E. (Dec 2024) *Central Asia's Taliban thaw*, *The Lowy Institute*, 02 December 2024

Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Seen from the Taliban perspective, Russia's formal recognition is only a natural step in endorsing the political realities in Afghanistan. However, it is argued that the timing of Russia's endorsement of the IEA is noteworthy, revealing a much deeper anxiety in Moscow as Russia has steadily become an insignificant actor in 'Southwest Asian geopolitics'.⁵⁸ The fall of the Assad regime in Syria, the devastating Israeli attacks on Iran, and the ongoing catastrophic war in Gaza underline the steady loss of Russian influence to affect geopolitical tensions and conflicts. Although it is unclear what benefits Moscow's recognition brings to the Taliban government, the pragmatism of the Taliban leaders – among other factors – likely played a key role in persuading Moscow to endorse the IEA formally.

V. Conclusion and Ways Forward

In less than a year since his January 2025 inauguration, Donald Trump's second term as president has already ushered in a distinct recalibration of US foreign policy, including with regard to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The fundamental principle of non-recognition of the Taliban is seen as a cornerstone of American policy that is unlikely to change soon. However, the practical engagement and underlying objectives of the US foreign policy have demonstrably shifted. This new approach is characterised by a heightened transactionalism, an almost complete termination of humanitarian and development aid, a focused emphasis on perceived national security threats, and a diminished prioritisation of human rights

and long-term stability in Afghanistan. A defining characteristic of the second Trump administration's foreign policy is its unabashed pursuit of what Trump terms the 'America First' principles. For the Taliban in power, 'America First' translates to a near-total disengagement of Washington from nation-building and a profound scepticism towards multilateralism and traditional alliances. Beyond tacit cooperation on counterterrorism to target ISKP, the Trump administration is unlikely to invest any substantial political capital in relations with the Taliban. Although the Biden administration made attempts to remove Afghanistan from foreign policy priorities for the US, this did not succeed due to the precipitous and chaotic US military withdrawal in 2021 and the Taliban's speedy victory. In a similar vein, the current Trump administration also does not view Afghanistan as a policy priority and is more likely to be able to hold that line unless there are seismic geopolitical events emanating from Afghanistan. Therefore, any expectation among Afghans that Trump will implement a significant change, let alone reclassify Afghanistan to even a medium-level priority within foreign policy concerns, appears to be unrealistic.

Against this background, the IEA and Taliban leaders, in general, are likely to continue pursuing better relations with neighbouring and regional countries. Addressing the socioeconomic crisis in Afghanistan and confronting the barrage of problems facing returnees from Iran and Pakistan will remain key challenges. Iran's refusal to acknowledge any pleas for stopping the forced returns of Afghans can strain relations with the IEA, as the numbers and circumstances of those

58 Rana, MA., (Jul 2025) *Irony of history*, DAWN, 06 July 2025

being returned overwhelm Afghan authorities and humanitarian actors on the ground in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, tackling the intersecting crises depends on the choices, smart policy options, and wisdom of the current Afghan authorities. It is undeniably clear from Afghanistan's contemporary history that any regime in power will find it impossible to confront substantial economic challenges that breed public resentment while simultaneously failing to improve external relations. During times of socioeconomic and political crises, functioning external relations can serve as a valve to alleviate political heat and domestic tensions.

This paper was primarily conceived to analyse the dynamics and shifts of US policy towards Afghanistan under Trump's second presidency. In addition, it aimed to capture the Taliban's interplay of relations with neighbouring and regional countries. The following recommendations are provided as concluding thoughts on ways forward.

The recommendations are aimed at international actors (state and nonstate), INGOs and the IEA:

1. Consultations and planning on long-term reintegration and resettlement of returnees from Iran and Pakistan should be prioritised. Afghan stakeholders should be given technical assistance and supported in undertaking a comprehensive needs assessment.
2. Non-Western donors should be encouraged to invest in resilient health and education facilities and systems, as hundreds of thousands of returnees are leaving Iran and Pakistan.
3. Humanitarian-only interventions will not resolve the longstanding developmental challenges in Afghanistan. To restore confidence in the country's future and to reduce growing aid dependency, international actors, and the IEA must maintain ongoing dialogue to promote developmental initiatives while humanitarian appeals continue in parallel. The IEA needs to lead on building regional alliances for cooperation on energy, agriculture, and regional cooperation institutions.
4. Mediated external support should focus on reconnecting Afghanistan with global financial institutions to carve out workarounds while the international sanctions remain in place.
5. Afghanistan's long-term challenges require political stability and an inclusive system that utilises the country's human capital. The Taliban leadership should clearly articulate the vision for an inclusive, sustainable, and capable system of governance in Afghanistan. This is likely the only conceivable path to restoring functioning external relations and instilling full domestic confidence.



CENTER FOR CONFLICT AND
HUMANITARIAN STUDIES

Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies
Al Tarfa Street, Al Daayan-Wadi Al Banaat
Doha, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha
Tel: +974 4035 6943
Email: chs@chs-doha.org

www.chs-doha.org

Cover image: President Donald Trump speaks to U.S. forces during a surprise Thanksgiving Day visit at Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, November 28, 2019.

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