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Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light orange color, located in the bottom right corner of the page. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and organic shapes, resembling a stylized flower or a traditional Indian mandala.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989
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AFGHANISTAN 2022: LIFE UNDER THE TALIBAN

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2022 was the first full year under Taliban rule. Partly overshadowed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, political and economic developments in Afghanistan received comparatively much less attention than those occurring in the former Soviet space. Nevertheless, Afghanistan witnessed a tumultuous year, amid domestic political adjustments, ethnic power struggles and a dramatic economic and humanitarian situation. Socio-economic conditions have overall worsened under the Taliban with rising levels of food insecurity and refugees both within Afghanistan and in neighbouring states. Internationally, regional countries, including Central Asian Republics, Russia, Pakistan, India and China have maintained their political and economic engagement with the new rulers in Kabul, while refraining from providing official legitimacy to the regime.

KEYWORDS – Taliban government; China-Afghanistan relations; Pakistan-Afghanistan relations; humanitarian crisis.

1. Introduction

In his 2008 co-authored book *Fixing failed states. A framework for rebuilding a fractured world*, former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani noted how the «failed state problem» was «at the heart of a worldwide systemic crisis that constitutes the most serious challenge to global stability in the new millennium» [Ghani 2008: 4]. 13 years onwards, as the Taliban advance was overwhelming Afghan forces amid the US' announced retreat, Ghani left the country in disarray. His fleeing was highly symbolic of the wider dismemberment of Afghanistan's democratic setup, including long fought-for human rights. Inevitably, debates on whether Afghanistan was a failed state started to re-emerge in media [Economist 2021; Young and Faulconbridge 2021], policy [Raine 2022; Crisis Group 2022] and academic [Brick Murtazashvili 2022] circles. Discussions around the idea of «state failure» in the academic and development practitioners literature generally point towards the ability of a government to perform a number of key tasks, including: protect its citizens from different types of violence; have international and domestic legitimacy; look after its citizens' basic needs and therefore possess the capacity to deliver services [e.g. health, education] to the population [Stewart and Brown, 2009]. Against such a backdrop, and given the interest that this

question has generated in discussions around Afghanistan, this article proceeds by first assessing governance under the Taliban in 2022 on the three areas – authority, legitimacy and service delivery – just outlined. Drawing on news reports and official documents from the international and local organisations still operating within the country, the empirical survey provided below reveals that the Taliban authority has been challenged on multiple fronts domestically and not yet legitimised internationally; in addition, despite some mildly positive trends in terms of exports and revenue collection, the socio-economic situation within Afghanistan remains critical in terms of human rights (and in particular women's rights) and living conditions of the wider population. Overall, the analysis details a critical picture suggesting Afghanistan's drift towards a failed state. The final section of this article dissects the country's international relations under Taliban rule, with a focus on the key regional players including Central Asian Republics, Russia, India, Pakistan and China.

2. Taliban authority over Afghanistan

Since returning to power in the second half of 2021, the Taliban have strived to establish full control over the Afghan territory. While their ability to conquer the 34 Afghan provinces in their advance towards Kabul in 2021 was impressive, in 2022 a number of domestic challenges to their authority emerged, primarily from militant groups opposed to their rule. The Taliban have responded to these challenges by strengthening ties with Al-Qaeda, similarly to what had happened in 1996 when the group first took over. The killing of Al-Qaeda's leader Al-Zawahiri on 31 July 2022 by a US drone strike, exemplifies these dynamics.

At the time of his killing, Al-Zawahiri resided in the heart of Kabul's diplomatic area, in a house that was reportedly owned by a top aide of Sirajuddin Haqqani, one of the key Taliban figures and de facto interior minister. Al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul attracted international attention to the Taliban's inability or lack of willingness (perhaps both) to break with Al-Qaeda [Hakimi and Price 2022]. It is unclear how many, among Taliban leaders, were aware of Zawahiri's presence in Kabul. However, his residence in an Haqqani-linked shelter has been interpreted as a sign of the close ties between the Haqqani network and Al-Qaeda, dating back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s [Drevon, 2022]. This was confirmed by a report from the UN Monitoring Team, which noted that the relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda «remains close» [UN Security Council, 2022a: 3].

Such close ties between the two groups have helped the Taliban strengthen their grip over Afghanistan, despite the regime facing a number of challenges stemming from a myriad militant groups operating within the

country. The most visible one has been the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP), the local branch of the Islamic State. The latter has deployed the same insurgent tactics that the Taliban themselves had adopted with the former elected government, in an attempt to challenge the Taliban's ability to maintain security and govern. In order to gather support and build its profile as a challenger to Taliban rule, IS-KP carried out a series of attacks in the northern parts of Afghanistan, that are home to those constituencies that were less favourable to a Taliban takeover [Watkins 2022]. In addition, the IS-KP went for high-profile targets for their attacks, including the Russian Embassy in Kabul (more on this below) and a hotel hosting Chinese nationals, in order to maximise the visibility of their actions and to undermine the Taliban regime in the eyes of important regional players. According to a report by the UN Monitoring Team, the strength of the IS-KP in Afghanistan ranges between 1,500 and 4,000 members, although ethnic differences and geographical distance within the group make effective coordination difficult [UN Security Council, 2022a: 18].

In addition to IS-KP, other opposition groups have emerged, including: the National Resistance Front (NRF), formed by political and military leaders, including former Vice President Amrullah Saleh and coalesced around Ahmad Massoud, son of Ahmad Shāh Massoūd, former leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance [Foschini, 2022]; groups supported by former warlords as well as ones established by remnants of the Islamic Republic's armed forces [Giustozzi, 2022]. While these groups do not necessarily pose a significant threat to the Taliban regime, they force the government to committing large security forces in parts of the north, where these groups are primarily based [Giustozzi, 2022].

3. *Domestic legitimacy*

While internationally the regime has not yet been recognised by any country (more on this in section 5), from a domestic standpoint the question of legitimacy is important as it interlinks with key developments in the year under examination, including the composition of the Taliban government and wider dynamics of representation (or rather lack thereof) in the new political setting.

The Taliban were successful as an insurgent force because of the decentralised structure that allowed Taliban commanders enough independence and autonomy in pursuing the wider common objective of toppling the Afghan government [Motwani 2022]. But in the transition from an insurgent movement to a political organisation tasked with ruling the country, the Taliban are building a centralised, largely Pashtun-dominated structure, which is causing frictions within their ranks, and partly undermining their domestic legitimacy [Motwani 2022]. Some of the internal frictions emerged

over the draconian measures curbing women's right to education (discussed in section 4 below), with interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani unusually airing his discontent towards the group's supreme leader for the policies he has decided to impose in the country.

In addition to internal frictions, the Taliban government is composed of all men and 43 out of 53 members (80%) are ethnic Pashtuns (the non-Pashtuns include two Uzbeks, four Tajiks, one Turkmen, one Hazara, one Nuristani, and one Khwaja) [Bahiss 2022]. Such a Pashtun-dominated government reflects the exclusionary nature of the movement and it has led to the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities in the name of quelling the military resistance in the north justified by ethno-sectarian divisions [Madadi, 2022]. The arrest of popular Uzbek Taliban commander, Makhidoom Alam, in January 2022, is a case in point. Alam, who fought the US and the Afghan government for nearly two decades and who was responsible for the fall of six northern provinces to the Taliban in 2021, was arrested on precise orders from Taliban's former deputy defence minister Mullah Mohammad Fazl, as a way to sideline the commander, whose influence had been growing as a result of his battlefield successes [Pannier 2022]. Following the arrest, hundreds of Uzbek protesters surrounded the Taliban's security headquarters in Maymana to demand his release. Violence erupted and four people were killed. To quell the protest, the Taliban sent reinforcements, including a unit of suicide bombers and the confrontation ended after four days of negotiations [Pannier 2022]. Although the Taliban governor of the province denied any discrimination on part of the movement, one of the protesters in Maymana, interviewed by the Washington Post, noted that local populations «have been victims of discrimination for a long time» and that «the Taliban say they are an Islamic government and in Islam there is no discrimination. So why do they want to arrest our leaders and those who represent us?» [Raghavan 2022]. Overall, this episode epitomises the exclusionary nature of the Taliban regime to any non-Pashtun elements of the Afghan society, thereby undermining their domestic political legitimacy, especially in the northern parts of the country.

4. Service delivery and socio-economic conditions under Taliban rule

Since the Taliban's takeover, the Afghan economy is projected to contract cumulatively between the second half of 2021 and the whole of 2022 close to 30-35% [World Bank 2022]. Low growth rates (between 2.0 to 2.4%), and no signs of improvement in per capita incomes owing to high population growth and no significant improvement in poverty or food insecurity, suggest a critical general picture regarding the Afghan economy. A UNDP report [2022] noted that the freeze on \$9 billion in foreign assets belong-

ing to Afghanistan's central bank, coupled with international sanctions, have caused a severe liquidity crisis in the country, also contributing to a rise in the food basket's price by almost 35 percent. According to the report, nearly 20 million Afghans are classified as experiencing high or critical levels of food insecurity, almost twice the average in the preceding three years.

Despite an overall gloomy outlook, two areas stand out with a slightly more positive performance: domestic revenue collection and exports. As for the former, according to the World Bank, total revenue reached US\$ 1.1 billion between 22 December 2021 and the end of August 2022 (exceeding last year's collections during the same period). This was the result of increased revenues collected at borders (including import duties and the Business Receipt Tax), following a decline in corruption in customs and at road checkpoints [Byrd 2022; Watkins 2022; World Bank 2022]. With regards to the increase in exports, Afghanistan's coal exports to Pakistan went up significantly as a result of the price difference between Afghanistan's coal price and that of other coal exporters. Coal exports amounted to US\$ 63.6 million in 2021 but have jumped to US\$ 81.8 million in just Q1-2022 [World Bank 2022].

Besides the economic situation, social and humanitarian conditions within the country remained extremely difficult. From the first report to the UN's Human Rights Council by the UN's Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, a dramatic picture emerges regarding the condition of women under Taliban rule. The report notes «the staggering regression in women and girls' enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights» and that women and girls have «rapidly disappeared from all spheres of public life» [UN Human Rights Council 2022: 3]. Measures to that effect include sacking civil servants and female judges as well as suspending secondary education for girls; the stipulation that women should stay at home; the ban on certain travel without a mahram (a close male relative) and mandatory dress codes. In addition, the Taliban issued an order by which «male family members are punishable for women's conduct» and, as the UN Special Rapporteur noted, this is «effectively erasing women's agency and prompting increased domestic abuse». [UN Human Rights Council, 2022: 4].

The situation of refugees in the country remains likewise critical. According to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), almost 32,400 people have left their homes this year due to fighting. In addition, close to 727,900 people have returned from neighbouring countries to Afghanistan (including 661,600 from Iran and 66,300 from Pakistan) [UNOCHA 2022]. Overall, according to the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner (UNHCR) there are nearly 3.4 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Afghanistan, in addition to refugees and asylum seekers abroad as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in 2022, by top 5 host countries.		
Host Country	Refugees	Asylum Seekers
Pakistan	1.539.046	24.559
Iran	820.714	0
Germany	183.631	41.300
France	55.681	9.066
Austria	43.725	0
<i>Source: Data compiled by the author from UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder</i>		

What is interesting to note from the data on the top 5 host countries, is that there are only two (i.e. Pakistan and Iran) of Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries who have taken refugees. On the contrary, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, all Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbours, have decided not to take refugees within their own borders. The motivations behind this choice are discussed in the next section.

5. *The international relations of Afghanistan under the Taliban*

By the end of 2022, the Taliban regime was not yet recognised internationally. However, such a formal lack of recognition did not necessarily translate into a lack of engagement, especially as far as regional countries were concerned. Central Asian Republics (CARs) acted as key diplomatic hubs, hosting regional meetings with stakeholders to engage the Taliban leadership. China, on its part, has announced its readiness to align the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the development strategies of Afghanistan and to include the latter in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). India too, a country that had consistently and unflinchingly backed anti-Taliban forces, from the Northern Alliance in the late 90s all the way through to the Ghani-Abdullah government in more recent years, has adjusted to the new reality and started engaging the Taliban leadership.

5.1 *The Central Asian Republics’ regional diplomacy*

CARs have played an important role as hosts to a number of meetings that brought together Taliban representatives and regional countries. Such a diplomatic activism was prompted by the fact that threats to regime stability and national security represent the main lens through which CARs interpret the Afghan scenario. The concerns around the risk of a domestic spillover for CARs from an unstable Afghanistan are therefore best epitomised by the refusal by Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to allow refugees in perma-

nently out of a fear they might be accompanied by militant extremists. To allay some of these concerns, on 26-27 May, Tajikistan hosted a meeting of national security advisers from China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Uzbekistan. Participants encouraged the de facto authorities to create inclusive political structures, pursue a sustainable domestic and foreign policy, ensure compliance with the norms of international law and take steps to eradicate terrorist elements [UN Security Council 2022]. On 26 July, Uzbekistan hosted a conference on Afghanistan which saw the participation of a Taliban delegation led by the de facto Minister for Foreign Affairs, Amir Khan Motaqi. Like in the Tajikistan meeting, participants emphasized the importance of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics efforts as well as inclusive governance and respect for human rights [UN Security Council 2022]. Beyond security considerations, economic and infrastructure talks were part of CARs relations with Afghanistan in 2022. For instance, in early June a Turkmen delegation visited Kabul to discuss the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project. Similarly, in early August, the Government of Uzbekistan and the Afghan authorities announced that the survey and mapping for the proposed Termiz-Mazar-Kabul-Peshawar railway project had started [UN Security Council 2022]. While looking promising in principle, these infrastructural projects have been regular staples in discussions between Afghan governments and regional partners well before the Taliban took over. Little progress was made over the past 20 years, and it is difficult to see how any genuine infrastructural endeavour could materialise with the precarious security situation in the country.

5.2 *The Kremlin and Kabul: Developing trade ties amid political caution*

Russia's approach to Afghanistan was two-pronged: politically, Moscow has not officially recognized the new regime in Kabul, and it has hosted in November 2022 the Moscow consultation process without inviting the Taliban leadership. Economically, the Kremlin has instead engaged with the Taliban regime by signing a preliminary deal for the sale of Russian oil to Afghanistan.

As just noted, one of the most visible manifestations of Russia's role in the Afghan scenario was the 4th meeting of the Moscow format of consultations on Afghanistan, held in the Russian capital on the 16th of November 2022, and including India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Established in 2017 as a regional forum involving special envoys of 11 countries, the forum's main aim was to ensure regional security. Moscow took the leadership role in this process, so that it could pursue two of its core national security interests: 1) preventing the potential threats deriving from instability, violence, and extremism in Afghanistan and the rest of Central Asia; and 2) Moscow's long standing opposition to any US or Western security presence in Central Asia. Although dynamics on the ground have changed in 2022, with the Taliban regime

now in power, security and geopolitical concerns are still paramount for Russian policymakers. Evidence of this can be found from the official statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry after the meeting. While calling on the US and NATO to «compensate for the damage inflicted on the Afghans over the years», it also called the Taliban leadership to form a «truly inclusive government in Afghanistan, reflecting the interests of key ethno-political groups, as well as the need to eradicate terrorist, drug and other threats emanating from this country» [Tolo News, 17 November 2022]. The most visible manifestation of this threat came on 5 September 2022, when the suicide bombing of the Russian embassy in Kabul exemplified Russian concerns about the IS-KP's expanding presence in Afghanistan. That was the first attack on a foreign embassy since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021.

On the economic front, Moscow and Kabul agreed on a preliminary deal that would involve Russia supplying around one million tonnes of gasoline, one million tonnes of diesel, 500,000 tonnes of liquefied petroleum gas [LPG] and two million tonnes of wheat annually [Yawar and Greenfield 2022]. Importantly, both Russia and Afghanistan (alongside Iran) are countries that are de facto isolated and cut out of the international banking system. If finalised, the deal would represent the first major trade deal that the Taliban have agreed since taking power in 2021. While the benefits to the isolated landlocked country are clear, less so are Russia's motivations behind the deal. Some observers noted that agricultural goods and the prospect of future access to Afghanistan's natural-resource wealth could be on the table [Scollon 2022]. Overall, Russia's approach to Afghanistan has remained largely in line with that of previous years, with the only important difference of a renewed willingness of stepping up economic engagement.

5.3 *India and the Taliban: Recovering the lost ground*

New Delhi's position vis-à-vis the Taliban regime at the outset of the new Taliban era in 2021 was the weakest among regional countries. Years of unflinching support to anti-Taliban forces prevented policymakers in New Delhi to establish meaningful relations with the Taliban. 2022 was the year in which India was forced to take a U-turn and engage with the Taliban leadership. On 2 June, a delegation of senior Indian officials travelled to Kabul to meet with Taliban leaders. During the meeting, the two sides reportedly discussed «India-Afghan diplomatic relations, bilateral trade and humanitarian aid» (Reuters, 2022). Shortly after, on 23 June, India reopened its diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. These symbolic moves, while aimed at showing some overtures to the Taliban regime, also carried important implications for Delhi's own national security concerns. Reports suggest that in return for India's moves towards the Taliban, the latter has pledged to take action against some of the jihadi groups (e.g. Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed) that have safe havens in Afghanistan [Bacon and Mir, 2022].

India's attempt to engage the Taliban also aims at driving a wedge between the Taliban and Pakistan, at a time in which the latter is concerned about the Taliban's relations with the Pakistani focused Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). But India's engagement with the Taliban rests on the latter's capacity to control militant groups operating from Afghanistan, which has come under question. The Taliban's crackdown against IS-KP, which has fallen short of providing some clear successes, suggests that they may still struggle to conduct targeted operations. Similarly, it is unclear whether they will be able to keep the promise of reining in LeT and JeM, and how that might affect ties with Pakistan.

5.4. Pakistan and the Taliban rule: Emerging strains in bilateral ties

As opposed to India, in 2021 Pakistan emerged as the country which seemed in an ideal position vis-à-vis the Taliban takeover, given the long-cultivated ties between the Taliban and authorities in Islamabad [Boni 2022]. However, since the initial euphoria which accompanied the return of the insurgent group in Kabul, a number of challenges emerged for Pakistan.

First, the Pakistan-focused faction of the Taliban, the TTP, has gained new strength and has repeatedly carried out attacks on Pakistani soil. In 2022, the number of terrorist incidents in Pakistan was at its highest level (630) since 2016 (1032). Moreover, in 2021 Pakistan only recorded four suicide attacks, while in 2022 there were thrice as many (13), most of which claimed by the TTP [South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2023]. Such a worrying trend has raised concerns in Islamabad about the Afghan Taliban's willingness to rein in this faction. After all, TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud's pledge of allegiance to Maulvi Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Afghan Taliban leader, is a potent reminder that ties between the two are strong, and that it might be difficult for Pakistan to navigate its relations with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to its advantage. While the Afghan Taliban have indeed facilitated the agreement of a five month truce between Pakistan and the TTP (which came to an end in November 2022) Pakistan has so far failed to rein in the terrorist group, whose main operational area remains in Northwestern Pakistan and in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) [Zafar 2022]. The TTP is composed of mostly ethnic Pashtuns, which partly explains the strong bond with the Afghan Taliban, whose lands encompass the areas across the Pakistan-Afghan border (known as the Durand Line).

The latter represents another contentious point in bilateral ties between Islamabad and Kabul. In line with previous Afghan governments who considered the Durand Line an artificial border, the Taliban have refused to accept it as the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In September 2022, the spokesman of Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense, Enayatullah Khwarazmi, claimed that Pakistan has «no right» to separate Pashtuns living on either side of the Durand Line. Pakistan, on its part, has been building since 2016 a 2,600 km long border fence, to prevent infiltration of militants on its soil.

As evidence of Pakistan's preoccupation with the volatile security situation across the porous border, in August 2022 the Pakistani Defence Minister Khawaja Asif warned the National Assembly of a growing TTP threat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and anti-TTP protests were held across KP [The Express Tribune 2022; The Friday Times 2022].

The third contentious point in bilateral ties is related to Pakistan's geopolitical ambitions to bridge its economy to those of CARs, especially at a time in which its foreign policy has significantly tilted towards China (and Asia more broadly) and away from the US [Corsi 2021; Boni 2021a]. Between 2020 and 2021, Pakistan's business council has published for the first time three country profiles of Central Asian states (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan), as a sign of Pakistan's desire to boost trade with the region [Abbas 2022]. Similarly, works are underway for the construction of the Central Asia-South Asia Regional Trade and Transmission Project (CASA-1000) a 1,270km power transmission line that is expected to export excess hydropower generated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to energy-hungry Pakistan through Afghanistan.

In order to meet Pakistan's trade and energy needs, as well as its wider geopolitical ambition of reorienting its foreign policy towards the surrounding region, a stable Afghanistan and a good working relationship with the leadership in Kabul are pre-requisites. Both were lacking in 2022.

5.5 China in Afghanistan: Pursuing security

China's approach to Afghanistan in 2022 has largely followed Beijing's engagement of the previous years [Boni, 2021b]. Those who were expecting China to fill in the void left by the US' withdrawal were up for disappointment. The economic slowdown following the zero Covid policy, coupled with unprecedented country-wide public protests, meant that China's main focus was to preserve domestic stability. In many ways, this also helps explain China's key security concern vis-à-vis Afghanistan. To policymakers in Beijing, as with many of their counterparts in the region, the first and foremost preoccupation is that the Afghan territory becomes a fertile ground for groups whose main target is China, and in particular its Westernmost region, Xinjiang. While the Taliban have reassured China that they will not allow their territory to become a base for militants to organise and launch operations against other countries, there are signs that Uyghur militants maintain a presence in Afghanistan. Notably, Abdul Haq, the leader of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), was seen celebrating Eid in the country alongside family members [Pantucci 2022]. A report from the UN Monitoring Group in February highlighted that there were some 200-700 fighters associated with TIP in Afghanistan [UN Monitoring Group 2022].

As we have seen before with the Moscow format of consultations on Afghanistan, China too has developed its own multilateral setting to coordinate regional countries' efforts at stabilising Afghanistan and addressing

the potential security challenges stemming from it. Known as the «Tunxi Initiative of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan on Supporting Economic Reconstruction in and Practical Cooperation with Afghanistan», it held its third meeting in China at the end of March 2022. Interestingly, in the statement issued at the end by China's Foreign Ministry, it was mentioned that «China supports the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor [...] and is ready to promote synergy between the Belt and Road Initiative and the development strategies of Afghanistan, and support the smooth operation of the China-Afghanistan freight train services, to help Afghanistan better integrate into the regional economic integration process» [MFA-China 2022a]. Similar remarks were made a few days before by then Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who made a surprise visit to Kabul and met Amir Khan Muttaqi, Acting Foreign Minister of the Taliban government [MFA-China 2022b]. Talks about extending the BRI to Afghanistan are not new [Boni, 2022]. Yet, very little has materialised in the past few years in terms of actual infrastructure investments, whether within or outside the aegis of the BRI. While in 2022 Beijing has removed tariffs on 98% of imported Afghan goods and it has re-established an air transport corridor for Afghan pine nuts (worth around \$800 million annually), these are fairly low-level engagements that signal caution more than anything else (Fiala 2022). The attack on a hotel in Kabul in December 2022, claimed by the IS-KP and reportedly targeting Chinese citizens, is an important reminder that before any meaningful economic engagement can take place, and before the Taliban regime is recognised, Beijing, like the other regional players, would be looking for security reassurances.

6. Conclusion

The first year of Taliban rule was characterised by struggles for domestic legitimacy between the Taliban and other militant groups seeking to challenge their authority. In addition, the group's Pashtun-dominated, exclusionary structure has further alienated ethnic minorities, especially in the northern provinces and have led to popular demonstrations against the Taliban regime. While in 2021 many observers questioned whether this time the Taliban would be a more moderate force which would adopt policies preserving some of the basic human rights, the first year of Taliban rule revealed the true face of the movement. Curbing women's rights and their participation to public life; excluding ethnic minorities from key posts in the new administration; the banning of music in the country, all these Taliban actions cast a very murky shadow over the country's present and future. The evidence presented in the article also displays some signs of Afghanistan drifting towards being a failed state, especially regarding questions of legitimacy, both domestic and international. Regional countries have been

mainly preoccupied that Afghanistan does not become a fertile ground for militant groups targeting their own soil. But the killing of Al-Qaeda's leader from a safe house linked to a Taliban leader, alongside the presence of TTP and TIP leaders in the country, are potent reminders that stability in Afghanistan is far from achieved, and that security considerations are likely to continue dominating the agenda for the foreseeable future, as they did in 2022.

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