
TALIBAN, AFGHANISTAN, AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

The abrupt change in government in Kabul has sent shockwaves through Afghanistan's neighbourhood. While the United States had long telegraphed its intention to leave, it was not always taken seriously, as previous statements seemed to only lead to a reduced American presence rather than departure.¹ The net result was a high level of complacency in many quarters to prepare for the consequences of an American departure. Admittedly, few anticipated such a rapid collapse of the Ghani government and most assumptions were based on the government holding on for some time afterward. Most regional powers had developed relations with different factions within the government and were planning for these to be their key conduits for influence post-American withdrawal. The complete collapse of this group left a sudden vacuum in planning. These reverberations were first and foremost felt in Afghanistan's neighbourhood where regional powers have struggled subsequently to craft effective policies to manage the fallout from the Taliban takeover of the country. Even western countries have struggled to respond, with the U.S. going so far as to send CIA chief Bill Burns to Kabul to start to forge a relationship with the Taliban.² This move may have been a pragmatic response to the situation, but it reflected an extraordinary turn of events given the CIA's role in *Operation Jawbreaker* that went in straight after September 11 to work with the Northern Alliance to overthrow the

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¹ D. Kurtzleben, "CHART: How the U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan Have Changed under Obama," *NPR*, 6 July 2016, www.npr.org.

² W.P. Strobel, "CIA Chief William Burns Met With Senior Taliban Figure in Kabul," *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 August 2021, www.wsj.com.

Taliban government.³ It did, however, reflect the extraordinary shift in the regional geopolitical picture that will result from the Taliban takeover.

In order to explore these consequences, this short paper will seek to divide analysis of the consequences into three broad brackets: first, immediate neighbours; second, peripheral neighbours (mostly large powers with direct stakes); and finally, faraway powers (the U.S. and European powers) who will only be briefly discussed given their broad withdrawal from the current regional dynamics. In each case, the idea will be to explore the consequences of the Taliban takeover and how they appear to be managing their strategies going forwards. Finally, the paper will conclude with some broader thoughts about what this might mean for the west going forwards, and how there is a keen danger that Central Asia is about to return to becoming an arena for geopolitical proxy conflict.

THE NEIGHBOURS

The first bracket of countries to explore is in Central Asia (more specifically, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), Iran, and Pakistan. All are powers that have borders and deep human connections to Afghanistan in the form of diaspora communities of Afghans within their borders or large communities of co-ethnics in Afghanistan. The most immediate impact of this is a tendency for flows of refugees and migrants from Afghanistan to affect them, as well as problems such as extremism and narcotics (and other smuggling). The key concern for most of these countries that emanates from a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is that the country might once again become a haven for militant groups that would use it as a base to cause instability within these neighbour's borders. This has been a consistent concern given the history of militancy in all three regions: pre-September 11, Central Asia saw a number of large-scale terrorist incidents involving networks linked to Afghanistan.⁴ Pakistan has long found Afghanistan being used as an operating base for militants attacking the state,⁵ while Iran has

³ G. Berntsen, R. Pezzullo, *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda: A Personal Account by the CIA's Key Field Commander*, Crown Publishers, 2006.

⁴ S. Erlanger, "The Taliban Are Back. Now Will They Restrain or Support Al Qaeda?," *The New York Times*, 17 August 2021, www.nytimes.com.

⁵ Z.U. Rehman, "Islamabad deeply alarmed by rise in Pakistan Taliban terrorism," *NikkeiAsia*, 28 September 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com>.

had its own diplomats and co-ethnics actively targeted and murdered by the Taliban, while they have also faced attacks within the country that appear to have possible links to Afghanistan.⁶

This reality underpins a recognition early by all of the neighbours that they would need to find a way of at the very least establishing contact with the new authorities in Kabul to try to ensure some way of trying to mitigate a return to these problems. How they have handled this has, however, varied substantially. The Turkmen government, for example, went very early in their attempts to establish contact and develop strong relations with the Taliban. While Turkmen-Taliban contacts are not new—the country has acted as a host for regional talks and at various moments the idea has been floated that Ashgabat could even host a Taliban office at some point while they were fighting the former Republic's government—Turkmenistan was one of the earliest to reach out to the Taliban, hosting them twice in 2021 in February⁷ and July⁸, long before Kabul had fallen. As the Taliban took over the country in 2021, the authorities in Ashgabat held numerous engagements, including encounters that seemed aimed at trying to calm fighting that had reached Turkmenistan's borders.⁹ Since the Taliban have taken over, the Turkmen have continued to maintain regular contacts and have also emphasised their eagerness to get regional economic connectivity projects going again, announcing the restart of a project to establish train links¹⁰ and talking with the Pakistanis about getting the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline going again.¹¹ All of this is in many ways an extension of

⁶ B. Rubin, "A New Look at Iran's Complicated Relationship with the Taliban," *War on the Rocks*, 16 September 2020, <https://warontherocks.com>.

⁷ "Taliban vows to guarantee safety of trans-Afghanistan gas pipeline," *Eurasianet*, 6 February 2021, <https://eurasianet.org>.

⁸ "Taliban Holds Talks with Turkmen Officials in Ashgabat amid Deteriorating Afghan Security," *Gandhara*, 12 July 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org>.

⁹ EHA News, Twitter, 9 lipca 2021 r., 3:34 PM, https://twitter.com/eha_news/status/1413491686559322116.

¹⁰ "Wozobnowleno stroitelstwo zeleznoj dorogi," Ministierstwo inostrannyh diel Turkmienistana, <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/ru/news/2767>.

¹¹ "Priezident Turkmienistana prinial ministra inostrannyh diel Islamskoj Riespubliki Pakistan," *Turkmenistan siewodnia*, 26 August 2021, <https://tdh.gov.tm/ru/post/28457/prezident-turkmenistana-prinyal-ministra-inostrannyh-del-islamskoj-respubliki-pakistan>.

previous policy towards Afghanistan where Turkmenistan preferred not to take sides and simply engage with whoever was in charge.

This approach has been to some extent echoed in Tashkent where the Uzbek government has been active in re-kindling its relations with the Taliban¹² and has been circumspect about the degree to which it is willing to host and support Afghans fleeing the Taliban.¹³ They have played some role in helping Germany to evacuate citizens and Afghans,¹⁴ and they have started to send humanitarian aid across the border.¹⁵ Before the collapse of the government, Uzbekistan had gone to great lengths to emphasise the important role that Afghanistan played in Central Asia, holding a large conference looking at Central and South Asia connectivity, including a keynote speech by then-President Ghani.¹⁶ This reflects a longstanding policy by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev who has pushed a highly activist foreign policy for Uzbekistan, focused on strengthening the country's role as a key regional player. Within this context, it makes sense that Uzbekistan would seek to find a way to engage with the Taliban, though it is interesting to note that the Uzbeks have been less forward in terms of their attempts to bring the Taliban into the regional fold. While they had previously been quite forward about bringing the Republic of Afghanistan into the regional fold, describing the country as part of Central Asia, so far they have appeared circumspect in immediately doing this with the Taliban government.

In contrast to this forward engagement by Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan has instead sought to quite actively position himself as the key supporter of the former Northern Alliance forces that have repeatedly stated their desire to act as opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan. As Afghan forces fled the battlefield in Afghanistan, they

¹² M. Kholdorbekov, "Uzbek leader says in daily contact with Taliban to ensure security," Reuters, 27 August 2021, www.reuters.com.

¹³ B. Abdülkerimov, "Uzbekistan temporarily opens Friendship Bridge on border with Afghanistan," Anadolu Agency, 28 August 2021, www.aa.com.tr.

¹⁴ "Uzbekistan ready to help Germany with Afghanistan evacuations, minister says," Reuters, 30 August 2021, www.reuters.com.

¹⁵ "Uzbekistan sends humanitarian aid to Afghanistan," Xinhua, 14 September 2021, www.xinhuanet.com.

¹⁶ N. Imamova, "Uzbekistan Conference Attracts Global Interest in Central Asia," VOA, 20 July 2021, www.voanews.com.

found a positive reception in Tajikistan,¹⁷ something that the government then pushed further as they sought to engage and host the opposition¹⁸ and publicly celebrated the former leader Ahmad Shah Masood in a clear provocation aimed at the Taliban.¹⁹ At the same time, however, the Tajiks have not seemingly severed all of their links and continue to act as electricity suppliers to Afghanistan²⁰ and have engaged with the Pakistanis to try to find ways of ensuring they can provide humanitarian aid to the communities in the Panjshir Valley, a historical hotbed of anti-Taliban resistance that has not thus far entirely fallen to the Taliban.²¹ Outside the idea of supporting their co-ethnic brethren in the Northern Alliance (a majority Tajik community), the exact logic of Dushanbe's choices are not clear. One reason could be the reports that have emerged that the Taliban has handed over control of parts of the Tajik-Afghan border to extremist Tajik organisations.²² But there is a danger for Dushanbe in assuming that greater security will be possible by relying on the Northern Alliance forces, whose capability is unclear. Nevertheless, Dushanbe appears to have decided to establish itself as the core of the potential opposition, a posture that Paris²³ and Moscow appear to be willing to tolerate within reason.²⁴

The broad assumption underlying all of these calculations is the realisation that the Taliban government is a reality in Kabul and is unlikely

¹⁷ "Tajikistan says it's ready to take in up to 100,000 Afghan refugees," Reuters, 23 July 2021, www.reuters.com.

¹⁸ T. Wheeldon, "Afghan resistance has sanctuary in Tajikistan, but fighting Taliban a 'non-viable prospect'," *France24*, 4 October 2021, www.france24.com.

¹⁹ "Tajikistan awards Ahmad Shah Massoud its highest honour," *The Week*, 2 September 2021, www.theweek.in.

²⁰ K. Ibragimova, "Tajikistan hopes Taliban foes pay for power," *Eurasianet*, 6 October 2021, <https://eurasianet.org>.

²¹ *Riecz na priess-konfieriencyi po itogam pieriegoworow s Priemjer-ministrom Islamskoj Riespubliki Pakistan Imranom Chanom*, Priezident Riespubliki Tadzikistan, 17 September 2021, <http://president.tj/ru/node/26547>.

²² M. Ahmadi, M. Yusufi, N. Fazliddin, "Exclusive: Taliban Puts Tajik Militants Partially In Charge Of Afghanistan's Northern Border," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 27 July 2021, www.rferl.org.

²³ F. Clemenceau, "EXCLUSIF. Afghanistan, réfugiés, Irak, terrorisme... Emmanuel Macron s'explique dans le JDD," *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 28 August 2021, www.lejdd.fr.

²⁴ "Russia urges calm between ally Tajikistan, Afghanistan," Reuters, 30 September 2021, www.reuters.com.

to go away any time soon. As a result, the governments of Central Asia will have to take this reality into their considerations and move forwards. The interesting question in some ways is why the Tajik government has taken such a divergent view from the others, but it is also worth noting that this is a perspective that others in Central Asia seem willing to tolerate. Russia in particular is interesting in this regard, expressing some degree of concern about the path Dushanbe is taking, but at the same time offering military support. This suggests the possibility that Tajikistan's choice is one that is generally accepted and supported by others in the region, none of whom are thrilled with the prospect of having a theocratic fundamentalist Taliban government in power, but do not want to openly confront it themselves, seeing a need to recognise realities on the ground and engage at some level at the very least. By taking the oppositionist path, Tajikistan provides a space in which the others can continue to offer some support to any opposition within Afghanistan that might emerge without having to engage directly.

On the other side of Afghanistan, Pakistan has been widely accused of celebrating the Taliban victory. And to some degree, this assessment is understandable. The authorities in Islamabad have long been strong supporters of the Taliban. Without bases in Pakistan, it is unlikely the Taliban would have been able to survive the past 20 years. However, the relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan has always been fraught. On the one hand, the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and their other militant Deobandi fellow travellers (like Al-Qaida, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed and more) provide a useful set of proxies for the Pakistanis to deploy against regional adversary India. But on the other hand, the extremist narratives they advance create backlash within Pakistan, and the Taliban themselves do not like the reliance on Pakistan.²⁵ The danger to Pakistan comes from anti-state groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that have connections with the Afghanistan Taliban, have been ascendant in Pakistan after a period of remission and are likely to be inspired further by the Taliban victory in Afghanistan. This is both in practical terms (providing ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan for them to plot) and in ideological terms by showing them that victory is possible. Other groups, such as the Baluchi or Sindhi separatists,

²⁵ *State of the Taliban, January 6, 2012*, International Security Assistance Force, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/world/asia/23atwar-taliban-report-docviewer.html?_r=0.

have also sometimes used bases in Afghanistan, and the Pakistani authorities have specifically highlighted this in some recent attacks.²⁶

Pakistan has leaned heavily into supporting the Taliban government and has sought to reach out to neighbours to try to bring greater recognition to the Taliban government in Kabul. This reflects efforts undertaken by the Pakistani authorities the last time the Taliban were in power when they sought to support the organisation to become the internationally recognised authorities within the country. In many ways, Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan is largely an extension and repeat of what it was doing before with the Taliban government, though it is clear that the Pakistanis are now much happier with the bilateral relationship they have with the authorities in Kabul. Whereas previously there was a high level of reciprocated hatred and dislike towards the government of the Republic of Afghanistan under President Ghani. With the Taliban-led government, Islamabad has a partner in power that it has some sway and control over. The biggest dilemma for Pakistan now is how to manage the internal troubles within the Taliban that might rip the organisation apart, though it appears that through their support of the more hardline factions associated with the Haqqanis, the Pakistanis are supporting the faction that has most control. This reflects a likely desire by Pakistan to ensure some level of influence in Afghanistan to provide it with so-called "strategic depth" against India, as well as highlighting Pakistan's relevance in regional contexts, a card useful in gaining support from other regional players like China or Russia.

The last power in the neighbours group is Iran, a country that has managed to maintain a relatively stand-offish relationship with the Taliban. In the previous Taliban regime, the government in Iran had an adversary they clashed with regularly, and upon the American-led invasion of the country, actively reached out to Washington to work with them to topple it.²⁷ During the period of the Afghan Republic, Tehran maintained a stable if occasionally quarrelsome relationship with the government. It allowed its city of Mashhad to become a site for Taliban gatherings²⁸, and provided some

²⁶ "Truth on Dasu terror attack surfaces amid unanswered questions, as China and Pakistan step up security for Chinese," *Global Times*, 13 August 2021, www.globaltimes.cn.

²⁷ D. Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker*, 23 September 2013, www.newyorker.com.

²⁸ A. Entous, J. Donati, "How the U.S. Tracked and Killed the Leader of the Taliban," *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 May 2016, www.wsj.com.

support for factions on the ground. It also actively recruited Afghan migrants within its own borders to act as fighters in Syria, creating the Fatemiyoun Brigade.²⁹ However, while Iran had leveraged its contacts with the Taliban to help ensure it had some connections and potential allies in Kabul, it is not clear that this has worked as planned. And while Iranian officials continue to reach out, there is a high level of uncertainty that the Taliban have much interest in engaging positively with Iran.³⁰ Rather, it is likely that Iran is going to find itself with a more complicated situation than it had under the former government where at least it had interlocutors who shared their concern about the spread of anti-Shia sentiment. When added to the pile of issues that Iran faces on the international stage, the situation is not a propitious one for Tehran. It contrasts most from the others discussed and is going to require a different strategy than the one it had employed up to now, likely requiring Iran to play a much stronger defensive effort.

THE GREAT POWER RING

Beyond its immediate borders, Afghanistan sits at the heart of a belt of great powers that stretches from India, through China, to Russia. All three are powers that have a complicated web of relationships between themselves but also divergent views on how to handle the situation in Afghanistan. While all three have sought in different ways to engage with the Taliban, it is clearly a varied and complicated story in each case. The overarching narrative, however, is one of engagement backed by hesitation.

After much waiting, India reached out to the Taliban in the dying days of the Afghan Republic. A longstanding supporter of Northern Alliance factions and consistent adversary to the Pakistan-backed Taliban, India was one of the last (if not the last) of Afghanistan's immediate and near-neighbours to make contact with the Taliban.³¹ The authorities in Delhi waited, however, until after the fall of Kabul to formalise this link, reaching out through its Doha Embassy in a contact focused on humanitarian

²⁹ K. Nawabi, "Fatemiyoun: Iran's 'Good Taliban'," *Tolo News*, 7 February 2021, <https://tolonews.com>.

³⁰ A. Giustozzi, "Russia and Iran: Disappointed Friends of the Taliban?," *RUSI*, 30 September 2021, <https://rusi.org>.

³¹ S. Haidar, "Indian envoy in Doha meets Taliban leader," *The Hindu*, 1 September 2021, www.thehindu.com.

questions.³² The situation is a highly precarious one for India that now finds the scales in Afghanistan firmly turned against it. A power that was frequently overlooked in Afghanistan, India was amongst one of the largest providers of aid, and has consistently been the main port of call for Afghan students and Afghans with medical needs and other services that were hard to get in Afghanistan. It was seen as a close partner by the government of the republic, which shared the Indian authorities' deep scepticism of Pakistan. Now, the balance in Kabul has firmly switched to Pakistan's favour, leaving India concerned the country could once again become a staging ground for anti-India militants to gather with Pakistani support.

China and Russia have both maintained long-standing contact with the Taliban, with both having long and varied histories between themselves towards the group and which recently have turned in different ways into close public engagement. For China, this reached its apex in the last week of July, shortly before the Taliban takeover of Kabul when Foreign Minister Wang Yi publicly met with Mullah Baradar in Tianjin.³³ The meeting was the culmination of a long path of increasingly public engagement that stretched back to the previous Taliban government. Back then, through Pakistan, China had started to gently move towards engaging with the Taliban authorities in the hope that they could be persuaded to mitigate the behaviour of Uyghur militants that had established training camps in Afghanistan. With the fall of the Taliban, Beijing stepped back and played a very backseat role supporting the government of the Afghan Republic, though in 2007 started to re-engage with them through Pakistan once again. As the years passed, however, China's engagements became increasingly direct, and in many ways, the engagement in Tianjin was the culmination of this trajectory. China has followed this up with aid³⁴, hinted as possible larger economic investments³⁵ while soliciting regular declarations of fidelity from

³² "Meeting in Doha", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 31 August 2021, <https://mea.gov.in>.

³³ "Wang Yi Meets with Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 28 July 2021, www.fmprc.gov.cn.

³⁴ "China-provided aid arrives in Kabul, Afghanistan," CGTN, 29 September 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com>.

³⁵ "Why China is best positioned to help Afghanistan reconstruction," *Global Times*, 26 August 2021, www.globaltimes.cn.

the Taliban, who openly see China as a great economic opportunity³⁶, while also demanding regular declarations about the Taliban's willingness to clamp down on Uyghur networks that may be operating within the country, which the Taliban say are no longer present.³⁷

But what is equally clear is that China is not in a hurry to actually do much of great substance beyond this in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding statements of intent, there has been little action beyond very limited aid. The numbers cited—\$31 million in Chinese aid³⁸—are smaller than the USAID offer of \$64 million.³⁹ Rather, China seems to be continuing its policy of hedging in Afghanistan, doing enough to stay relevant and supporting what the authorities in Kabul want, without actually going out on a limb and pushing themselves into a situation where they might be called on to actually try to help resolve the situation on the ground. This is very much an extension of China's previous policy towards the country in which they did enough to be relevant without ever getting themselves into the situation of owning the problem. While their principal concern remains Afghanistan becoming a place from which Uyghur militants might plot instability within China, or increasingly cause trouble against Chinese interests in Central Asia or Pakistan, they have now established a security buffer of sorts and repeatedly highlighted the significance of this problem to the Taliban. There are some hints from the ground that these concerns may have been heard.⁴⁰

The biggest move China still has to make is formal recognition of the Taliban government, something they seem willing to do, but unwilling to lead on. For this, China would rather Russia stepped up first, something it is unlikely Moscow is going to want to do, reflecting a general anxiety in Russia about the consequences for regional stability of a strong Taliban government in Afghanistan. Russia has been an active player in engaging with the Taliban

³⁶ “China can contribute to Afghan development – Taliban spokesman,” Reuters, 20 August 2021, www.reuters.com.

³⁷ R. Gerin, “Taliban Tells China No Sign of Banned Uyghur Outfit in Afghanistan,” Radio Free Asia, 10 September 2021, www.rfa.org.

³⁸ “China offers \$31m in emergency aid to Afghanistan,” BBC News, 9 September 2021, www.bbc.com.

³⁹ “The United States Announces Nearly \$64 Million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan,” USAID, 13 September 2021, www.usaid.gov.

⁴⁰ R. Standish, “Taliban ‘Removing’ Uyghur Militants from Afghanistan’s Border with China,” Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 5 October 2021, www.rferl.org.

for some time, recognizing that the group has taken power in Kabul, while at the same time deploying considerable military resources to bolster Uzbek and Tajik capabilities to defend themselves.⁴¹ From Russia's perspective, Central Asia is a buffer between it and Afghanistan, and a region where there are deep Russian interests. Given China's hesitancy to step forwards, it provides the Kremlin with a perfect opportunity to demonstrate Russia's strength and continuing deep relevance in the region. In this way, Russia is demonstrating its capability to a range of players within the region, while also helping provide for its own national security.

THREE-DIMENSIONAL CHESS

The key lesson to draw from this is that while the region has broadly accepted the Taliban are going to take power, no one is very happy about it, and there is deep hesitation about who is going to go first in terms of formally acknowledging the Taliban as the *de facto* government in Kabul. At the moment, a complicated game of three-dimensional chess is being played by most regional players who seek to engage with the Taliban (reflecting their position of power on the ground), talk to each other in guarded terms (trust is not a widely held commodity in the region), while also seeking ways of likely establishing secret (or less than secret) contacts with some opposition within Afghanistan or the west.

The west (here referring to Europe and North America) has a limited role in this entire effort. While it is clear that there continues to be substantial aid and support that flows from it to Afghanistan, and governments in the west have each sought their own direct contacts with both the Taliban as well as the opposition to hedge against whatever outcomes might occur, the truth is Afghanistan has moved into a secondary rank issue. For the United States, Afghanistan has been overtly relegated to a secondary concern. The key rationale given by the Biden administration for leaving was the need to focus on the growing great power conflict with China. For parts of Europe, however, it remains a primary one, either because of direct links (the UK in particular, explaining the senior-level UK engagement that has taken place in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the fall of Kabul), or through concerns about migrants or instability causing problems across the Eurasian heartland

⁴¹ "Russia Wraps Up Drills with Uzbek and Tajik Troops Near Afghan Border," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 11 sierpnia 2021 r., www.rferl.org.

(a more cynical domestic concern that continues to echo around the halls of Brussels).

What no one in the west appears to have figured out yet is how to engage with the region in trying to resolve the outcomes they want, while striking a balance against what it is the regional powers want from the Taliban. For the most part, the region wants Afghanistan to not be a source of problems to them, but they are likely willing to accept a higher level of instability and risk in the situation that western governments would necessarily tolerate. This might not in itself be a problem, but the dilemma for western governments in particular is that Afghanistan sits almost perfectly at the heart of a triangle of heavily sanctioned countries that are increasingly working together against the west—Iran, China, and Russia. Pakistan has repeatedly shown itself in Afghanistan to be playing a complicated duplicitous game that helps create problems as much as it deals with them, leaving Central Asia as the only clear set of neighbours the west could seek to rely on. And even there, heavy Russian and growing Chinese influence complicate too much engagement.

But these wider geopolitical considerations aside, the biggest dilemma for everyone is whether the Taliban government will survive in some shape or form. Currently, the working assumption everyone seems to be working towards is that it will survive, but it is always possible that rival internal factions may pull the organisation apart. The clashes between the Doha faction and the Haqqani faction seem to reflect wider tensions between the northern and southern Taliban that reflect deeper tribal tensions between groups of Afghans. The more hardline factions with Pakistani support appear to be ascendant at the moment, but it is not a given they will sustain, and the persistent presence of ISIS in the country means that there is always a more extreme option out there for dissatisfied factions to go and join. This exposes the country to the risk of fragmentation and broader Balkanisation, an outcome most neighbours would rather not see happen out of fear of the instability and chaos that would follow. Unfortunately, at the moment it seems no one is able to guarantee how this outcome can be avoided, leading to the current state of persistent hedging. Afghanistan has become less of a field of complicated game playing and more of a stalemate in which everyone is waiting for someone else to resolve the situation.