

# The Rise of Taliban and Its Security Implications

SOUMYODEEP DEB

**W**ith the fall of Kabul, the Taliban is ready to exert control over Afghanistan 20 years after US-led forces deposed the organization. This has generated a sense of panic, leading to a mass exodus of foreign diplomatic missions and local Afghans and a commiserate return of human rights violations, which the United Nations has warned could become a full-blown “humanitarian catastrophe.”<sup>1</sup>

The return of Taliban to power not only bodes ill for the ordinary Afghan population but also threatens the regional and international security architecture. The sole purpose of the US invasion of Afghanistan was to destroy the terrorist infrastructure that prevailed under the Taliban regime and to restore the human rights that the organization had destroyed in Afghanistan. However, the current Taliban leadership would have the world believe that the group’s perception has changed and become much more moderate compared to the Taliban of 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

Few in the international community view this claim as serious. Reports have surfaced that indicate that the Taliban has carried out atrocities in the regions it recently captured<sup>3</sup> and has executed surrendered Afghan special forces.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, with the Taliban’s return to power, it can be argued that various nontraditional security threats—ranging from illicit drug trafficking to the revival of terrorist safe havens—will be major issues of concern.

## Taliban’s Drug-based Economy

According to a report of UN Office of Drug and Crime (UNODC), in 2020, there was a 37-percent increase in opium cultivation in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> The Taliban had previously used drugs as a major revenue model, making trafficking a major part of the organization’s economy. Previously, the Taliban had tried to ban poppy cultivation in the early 2000s to obtain international legitimacy; however, this met with a significant backlash, which the organization to change its stance.<sup>6</sup> These factors led the former UNODC executive director Yuri Fedotov to claim Afghanistan is on the path to becoming a “full-fledged narco-state.”<sup>7</sup>

With the Taliban’s lack of effective understanding of public administration and policy, the organization had always counted on drugs to fund its objectives. As per an official UN report, the Taliban earned more than USD 400 million between

2018 and 2019 from the drug trade.<sup>8</sup> According to a Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report, the United States spent an estimated USD 8.6 billion between 2002 to 2017 to uproot the drug trade and crush the Taliban's financing.<sup>9</sup> American politicians explicitly stated that winning the war on drugs in Afghanistan was necessary to winning the war on terror.<sup>10</sup> However, with the return of Taliban to power, this drug war looks to slip out of US hands and represents a major security challenge for the region and beyond.

As a landlocked nation, Afghanistan is heavily dependent on the various border passes like Zaranj in the Afghan–Iranian border for the transit of goods. The control of these border crossing points, with Tajikistan in the north, Iran in the west, and Pakistan in the south, allows the Taliban to traffic drugs more easily.<sup>11</sup> With the ever-growing demand of these illicit products, the coming of a supplier like the Taliban will boost the global drug problem, posing a major challenge to the regional nations and rendering them the epicenter for drug abuses and peddling. Therefore, one could argue that the resurgence of Taliban will have profound implications for the global drug problem. In the era of globalization, an Afghan narco-state will not only pose a major challenge for region but also provide greater supplies to the lucrative markets in Europe and North America, making it a major security issue.

### **Afghanistan as the Hotspot for International Terrorists**

The return of the Taliban has raised the speculation that Afghanistan will once again become the nexus of global terrorist organizations.<sup>12</sup> The previous Taliban regime harbored al-Qaeda operatives who planned and executed various terror attacks from Afghan soil, including the 9/11 attacks. This became the primary reason for the American intervention to uproot the Taliban and its allies, who posed a major security challenge for the United States. However, with the withdrawal of American and allied troops and the Taliban resurgence, Afghanistan may well become prime real estate for terrorist groups willing to pay for training grounds in the failed state.

As mentioned above, the newly ascendant Taliban seeks to project a new, modern, and moderate face. Its leaders claim to be much more open-minded and tolerant compared to those serving in its previous regime. The organization pledged to prohibit Afghan soil from being used as a launchpad by international terrorist outfits.<sup>13</sup> This rhetoric seems aimed at obtaining international recognition and legitimization from major powers. However, how much these assurances will really hold true is open for speculation.

Moreover, as pointed out by various agencies, Afghanistan is already a mixing pot for various jihadi organizations, including al-Qaeda, the Islamic State (ISIS),

and their affiliates. A UN report pointed out that terrorist elements like al-Qaeda and others have aligned with the Taliban and are openly celebrating the West's withdrawal, seeing the situation as a win for global Islamic radicalization.<sup>14</sup> Another UN report states that there are around 400–600 al-Qaeda operatives fighting alongside the Taliban.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, numerous ISIS fighters, operating under the banner of Islamic State–Khorasan (IS–K), are in-country, rendering Afghanistan already a prime location for terrorist organizations. According to this report, there are around 2,200 armed men from IS–K, fighting mainly in Kunar Province, along the Pakistan border.<sup>16</sup>

Additional reports indicate Pakistan-based terror outfits have joined in aiding the Taliban's takeover.<sup>17</sup> It is an open fact that the military and intelligence community in Pakistan has fully backed the Taliban takeover, expecting to thereby expand Islamabad's strategic sphere of influence. The Pakistani deep state has always used terrorists to obtain its major foreign policy objectives. Now, with the Taliban in power, these puppet masters can use Afghan camps to train the various terrorist outfits Pakistan operates and increase infiltration along the Indian border in Kashmir. Therefore, it is just a matter of time before Afghanistan becomes the key base of operations for various terrorist organizations from Pakistan and surrounding regions. Obviously, as pointed out by retired British Army General Sir Richard Barrons, this poses a grave security problem that could see a significant increase in the risk of terror attacks in Europe.<sup>18</sup>

With the Taliban re-establishing its rule in Afghanistan, the resultant nontraditional security issues will pose major concerns well beyond the confines of Central and South Asia. These issues will not only be restrictive to illicit drug trafficking and a resurgence of global terrorism but also include human migration and trafficking, arms smuggling, and more. The UN and the world's major geopolitical powers must establish a mechanism to check the rise of these activities for the betterment and security of all.

### **Soumyodeep Deb**

Mr. Deb is a PhD student at Lingnan University, Hong Kong, and a researcher with the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers. His areas of study include China's foreign policy, India–China relations, geopolitics of rising powers, strategic signaling, and great-power politics.

### **Notes**

1. 'Afghanistan on Brink of "Humanitarian Catastrophe," UN Agencies Say,' Reuters, 13 August 2021, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-urges-afghanistans-neighbours-keep-borders-open-crisis-looms-2021-08-13/>.

2. 'Factbox: Taliban Seek to Present a Moderate Face as They Take Control in Afghanistan.' Reuters, 15 August 2021, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-seek-present-moderate-face-they-take-control-afghanistan-2021-08-15/>.

3. 'Afghanistan: Threats of Taliban Atrocities in Kandahar.' Human Rights Watch, 23 July 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/23/afghanistan-threats-taliban-atrocities-kandahar>.

4. 'Taliban Fighters Execute 22 Afghan Commandos as They Try to Surrender - CNN'. Accessed 20 August 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/13/asia/afghanistan-taliban-commandos-killed-intl-hnk/index.html>.

5. 'Afghanistan: 37 per Cent Increase in Opium Poppy Cultivation in 2020, While Researchers Explore Novel Ways to Collect Data Due to COVID-19'. United Nations: Office on Drugs and Crime. Accessed 20 August 2021. [//www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/May/afghanistan\\_37-per-cent-increase-in-opium-poppy-cultivation-in-2020--while-researchers-explore-novel-ways-to-collect-data-due-to-covid-19.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/May/afghanistan_37-per-cent-increase-in-opium-poppy-cultivation-in-2020--while-researchers-explore-novel-ways-to-collect-data-due-to-covid-19.html).

6. 'Profits and Poppy: Afghanistan's Illegal Drug Trade a Boon for Taliban.' Reuters, 16 August 2021, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/profits-poppy-afghanistans-illegal-drug-trade-boon-taliban-2021-08-16/>.

7. Dahl, Fredrik. 'Afghanistan Risks Becoming "Narco-State": U.N. Official.' Reuters, 9 October 2013, sec. APAC. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-drugs-unidUSBRE9980OF20131009>.

8. Landay, Jonathan. 'Profits and Poppy: Afghanistan's Illegal Drug Trade a Boon for Taliban.' Reuters, 16 August 2021, sec. Asia Pacific. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/profits-poppy-afghanistans-illegal-drug-trade-boon-taliban-2021-08-16/>.

9. 'The World Bank Statement on the April 2018 SIGAR Report'. Text/HTML. World Bank. Accessed 20 August 2021. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/statement/2018/04/25/the-world-bank-statement-on-latest-sigar-report>.

10. Coyne, Christopher J., Abigail R. Hall Blanco, and Scott Burns. 'The War on Drugs in Afghanistan: Another Failed Experiment with Interdiction.' *The Independent Review* 21, no. 1 (2016): 95–119. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43999678>.

11. O'Donnell, Lynne. 'The Taliban Are Breaking Bad.' *Foreign Policy*. Accessed 20 August 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/19/taliban-expanding-drug-trade-meth-heroin/>.

12. 'Afghanistan: Will It Become Haven for Terror with the Taliban in Power?' BBC News, 16 August 2021, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58232041>.

13. Mashal, Mujib. 'U.S. Peace Talks with Taliban Trip Over a Big Question: What Is Terrorism?' *New York Times*, 7 March 2019, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/07/world/asia/taliban-peace-talks-afghanistan.html>.

14. 'United Nations Security Council – Letter dated 20th May 2021 from the chair of Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the security council, <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2021/486>

15. United Nations Security Council – Letter dated 19th May 2021 from the chair of Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the security council. [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2020\\_415\\_e.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2020_415_e.pdf)

16. *Ibid.*

17. 'Pak's Terror Groups Join Taliban War, India Wary.' Hindustan Times, 11 July 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/paks-terror-groups-join-taliban-war-india-wary-101625942135382.html>.

18. Quinn, Ben. 'Afghanistan Could Become Terrorist Base Again, UK General Warns.' The Guardian, 8 August 2021. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/08/afghanistan-could-become-terrorist-base-again-uk-general-warns>.

### **Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed or implied in JIPA are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.