

PH.D. THESIS

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL AND
STRATEGIC DYNAMICS IN AFGHANISTAN
AFTER 2021: REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS**



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2025**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ph.D. Degree in Discipline)
Social Sciences with specialization in Political Science at the Faculty of Social Sciences
International Islamic University Islamabad.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following individuals who have supported me throughout my research journey. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Masood Ur Rahman Khattak, for his invaluable guidance, expertise, and patience. I also would like to thank to my wife and my kids for their unconditional support throughout this journey

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER-1.....	1
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Introduction of the Study	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem	3
1.3. Objectives of the Study	3
1.4 Research Questions	3
1.5. Significance of the Study.....	4
1.6 Literature Review	4
1.7. Research Methodology.....	19
1.8. Research Design:	19
1.9. Population:.....	20
10. Sampling:	20
1.11 Instrumentation:	20
1.12. Data Collection:.....	21
1.13. Data Analysis:.....	21
1.14. Theoretical Framework- Regional Security Complex Theory.....	21
Chapter-2	26
THE US WAR AGAINST TERROR: A <i>CRITICAL APPRAISAL</i>	26
2. Introduction	26
2.1 Emergence of Al-Qaeda: <i>Nightmare for the US</i>	29
2.2. Core Leadership Al-Qaeda	30
2.3. Most Terrifying Incident in America: <i>The 9/11 Saga</i>	33
2.4. The September 11 Commission and its Findings	40
2.5. The Hunt for Osama Bin Laden	43
2.6. The US Attack on Afghanistan: <i>Vengeance</i>	43
2.7 An Al-Qaeda, Taliban Nexus.....	44
2.8 Resurgence of Taliban: <i>Bloody Transition</i>	50
2.9. Pakistan's Geographical Predicament After 9/11.....	54
2.10 Pakistan's Role in War against Terror.....	55
2.10.1 Gen Musharraf and G. Bush Era- (2001-2008)	56
2.10.2 . Pak-US Engagement During Democratic Era- (2008-2020).....	58
2.10.3 NATO Supply Routes: <i>Life Line</i>	61

2.10.4	Joint Intelligence Cooperation: <i>CIA & ISI</i>	63
2.10.5.	Negotiations Process between Afghan Taliban & US	65
2.10.6.	Pak-US Convergence and Divergence: <i>Lessons Learnt</i>	66
2.11.	The US- Taliban Peace Deal- 2020: <i>Safe Exit</i>	67
2.12	The Withdrawal in 2021: <i>A Critical Appraisal</i>	68
2.12.1.	Ultimate Pronouncement to Leave Afghanistan	71
2.12.2.	Preparation for the Departure from Afghanistan	73
2.12.3	Caveat about Possible Withdrawal	76
2.12.4	Initiating the Evacuation:	77
2.12.5	The Evacuation and the Attack at Abbey Gate	78
2.12.6	Transformation of Lasting Capabilities:	83
2.12.7	Putting the United States on Stronger Footing	87
Chapter- 3		89
3	CHANGING STRATEGIC DYNAMICS OF AFGHANISTAN: <i>SECURITY NIGHTMARE</i>	89
3.1	. Introduction	89
3.2	The Changing Strategic Dynamics of Afghanistan: <i>Security Nightmare</i>	96
3.3	Rise in Terrorist Attacks	98
3.4.	Anti-Taliban Terrorist Groups: <i>Regional Security Challenges</i>	98
3.4.1.	Rise Islamic State Khorasan Province	99
3.4.2.	Northern Alliance: <i>National Resistance Front</i>	100
3.4.3.	Reformation of High Council for National Resistance	102
3.4.4.	Other Militant Factions Against Taliban Regime	103
3.4.5.	Transnational Terrorist Groups	104
3.4.6.	The Afghan Taliban's Strategy: <i>Counter Actions</i>	104
3.4.7.	Transformation in Strategy and Tactics	106
3.4.8.	Challenges for Taliban to Control Afghanistan	107
3.4.9.	Taliban's Counteract Moves	109
3.4.10.	Initial Success Amid Challenges for Taliban	115
3.5.	Future Likely Security Challenges for Afghanistan	116
3.5.1.	Division in Taliban Ranks	116
3.5.2.	Merger of Hostile Groups	117
3.5.3.	Insurrections by Other Jihadist Groups	118
3.5.4.	Foreign Funding to Insurgent Groups	119
3.5.5.	Regional Security Implications	120
3.5.6.	The Peril of Unilateral Strikes	122

3.5.7. Future Prospects for Cooperation	123
3.5.8. The Security of Afghanistan: <i>Priority Concern</i>	125
Chapter-4	127
4.1 REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF AFGHAN IMPASSE	127
4.2 Following are the Key Implications:	127
4.2.1 Terrorism and Extremism:	127
4.2.2 Refugee Crisis:	128
4.2.3 Border Security:	130
4.2.4 Economic Impact:	133
4.2.5 Geopolitical Competition:	137
4.2.6. Proxy Conflicts:	140
4.2.7 Narcotics Trade: Opium Production:	141
4.2.8 Human Rights Concerns:	143
4.2.9 Strain on Regional Relations:	144
Chapter-5	148
5.1 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	148
5.1.1 Inclusive Dialogue and Reconciliation:	148
5.1.2 Support the Afghan Government:	148
5.1.3 Humanitarian Assistance and Development:	148
5.1.4. Regional Cooperation:	148
5.1.5 Counterterrorism Measures:	148
5.1.6 Women's Rights and Social Inclusion:	148
5.1.7 International Diplomacy and Aid:	149
5.1.8 Civil Society and Media:	149
5.1.9 Economic Diversification:	149
5.1.10 Long-Term Commitment:	149
5.1.11 Track Progress and Adjust Strategies:	149
5.2. The <i>Instability in Afghanistan</i> :	149
5.2.1 Taliban Insurgency:	149
5.2.2 Weak Afghan Security Forces:	150
5.2.3 Political Instability and Corruption:	150
5.2.4 Economic Challenges:	150
5.2.5 Regional Influence and Proxy Wars:	150
5.2.6 Ethnic and Sectarian Divisions:	150
5.2.7 Narcotics Trade:	150

5.2.8	Deteriorating Humanitarian Situation:	151
5.2.9	COVID-19 Pandemic:	151
5.2.10	Lack of Consensus on Peace Process:	151
5.3	Findings in General:	151
5.3.1	Afghanistan's Political Landscape Transformation	151
5.3.2	Disintegration of the Afghan National Government.....	152
5.3.3	The Taliban's Approach to Governance	152
5.3.4	Pakistan's Strategic Goals	152
5.3.5	China's Interaction with the Taliban.....	152
5.3.6	Russia and Iran's Cautious Engagement.....	152
5.4	Findings through Survey	153
5.4.1	Gender and Age Distribution:	153
5.4.2	Nationality:	153
5.4.3	Political Situation in Afghanistan (Q4):.....	153
5.4.4	Factors Contributing to Political Dynamics (Q5):	153
5.4.5	Taliban's Approach (Q6):	154
5.4.6	Tackling Issues (Q7):	154
5.4.7	Regional Implications (Q8):	154
5.4.8	Concerns (Q9):	154
5.4.9	Additional Comments:.....	154
5.5	Based on the responses provided following are Findings:.....	154
5.5.1	Perception of Political Situation:	154
5.5.2	Factors Contributing to Political Dynamics:	155
5.5.3	Taliban's Approach towards Transnational Terrorism:.....	155
5.5.4	Effectiveness of Taliban in Tackling Issues:.....	155
5.5.5	Regional Implications of Political Dynamics:.....	155
5.5.6	Concerns about Regional Spillover Effects:	155
5.6.	Key Findings Overview:	155
Chapter-6.		157
6	CONCLUSION	157
7.	References	174

ABSTRACT

Afghanistan, amidst its tumultuous history, faces an unparalleled confluence of challenges including a precarious security landscape, a fragile economy, the omnipresent threat of transnational terrorism, rampant drug trafficking, and a concerning lack of international recognition. The post-2021 security situation in Afghanistan looms large with far-reaching implications for regional and global security paradigms. This study endeavors to undertake a comprehensive examination of the evolving political and strategic dynamics of Afghanistan in the aftermath of the US withdrawal in 2021. Central to this endeavor is an in-depth analysis of the Afghan Taliban's approach towards transnational terrorist groups and regional proxy conflicts within Afghanistan, shedding light on their intricate efforts to maintain a strategic equilibrium vis-à-vis Pakistan and India. Moreover, the research endeavors to meticulously evaluate the regional and global ramifications stemming from the evolving political and strategic landscape of Afghanistan. Adopting a qualitative research methodology with a primary focus on conducting insightful focus group interviews, the study aims to capture the nuanced perceptions and opinions of stakeholders on the subject matter. Additionally, the research seeks to draw upon the theoretical underpinnings of international relations, particularly leveraging the insights provided by the Regional Security Complex Theory. By employing this theoretical framework, the study aspires to enhance our understanding of the post-2021 political and security situation in Afghanistan and its implications for regional and global security architectures. Through a meticulous examination of these multifaceted dimensions, this study aims to provide valuable insights to inform policy-making efforts aimed at addressing the complex challenges confronting Afghanistan and its broader geopolitical context. In delving deeper into the changing political and strategic dynamics of Afghanistan, the study endeavors to unravel the complex interplay of domestic, regional, and global factors shaping the country's trajectory. It seeks to elucidate the underlying drivers behind the Afghan Taliban's evolving approach towards transnational terrorist groups and regional proxy wars, with a keen focus on deciphering their strategic calculus vis-à-vis neighboring powers such as Pakistan and India. Additionally, the research aims to shed light on the varying perceptions and attitudes of regional and global stakeholders towards the evolving political and security landscape of Afghanistan, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the multifaceted implications of these dynamics. Through an exhaustive analysis of primary data collected through focus group interviews and secondary sources, the study seeks to generate nuanced insights that can inform evidence-based policy-making efforts aimed at promoting stability, security, and prosperity in Afghanistan and the wider region. Furthermore, the study endeavors to contribute to the existing body of scholarly literature on Afghanistan and international security by providing a nuanced analysis of the post-2021 political and strategic dynamics in the country. By employing a qualitative research approach, the study aims to offer rich and contextually grounded insights into the perceptions, opinions, and strategic calculations of key stakeholders involved in shaping Afghanistan's future trajectory. Additionally, by drawing upon the Regional Security Complex Theory within the framework of international relations theory, the research seeks to provide a theoretical lens through which to understand the complex interplay of regional and global dynamics influencing Afghanistan's security landscape. Through its comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach, the study aims to offer valuable insights and recommendations that can inform policy-making efforts aimed at addressing the multifaceted challenges facing Afghanistan and its broader geopolitical context in the post-2021 era.

CHAPTER-1

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction of the Study

Afghanistan is passing through the toughest phase of its history. Afghanistan for the last few decades suffered due to the foreign interventions, proxy wars, civil wars, drug trafficking, corruption and widespread lack of governance. Due to these factors, it has never enjoyed structural peace. This study will focus on the evolving strategic dynamics in Afghanistan and its regional and global implications. The study would focus on the post 9/11 US war against transnational terrorist group Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. After almost two decades of military engagement in Afghanistan the US ultimately decided to leave Afghanistan in 2021. These two decades needs a strategic evaluation of the strategic mistakes which the US and her allies carried out in Afghanistan, which has cost them trillions of dollars of financial losses and humiliating retreat from Afghanistan. The US purpose of coming to Afghanistan was to defeat transnational terrorist threat in strategically located country to maintain its check on strategic rival Russia, economic competitor China, emerging nuclear weapon state Iran and only Muslim country with nuclear weapons Pakistan. In the initial period the US achieved its first objective of containing the translational terrorist threat by eliminating Al-Qaeda safe heavens in Afghanistan and removed Afghan Taliban regime from power which provided shelter to many transnational terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan had spillover effects for the regional and global powers. Post US invasion of Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda and their affiliates moved to Pakistani tribal areas and later dispersed in urban areas to evade Pakistani intelligence agencies or Central Intelligence Agency- (CIA) of USA (Ahmed, 2020) & (Bagchi, 2021).

Pakistan played an important role in dismantling Al-Qaeda network in its tribal belt and in urban areas by initiating counter terror operations in 2002 with operation Al-Meezan which culminated with Operation Zarb-I-Azb in 2015 and Intelligence based operation Radd-UI-Fassad in 2017, which focused primarily on urban areas of the country (Coll, 2004). Pakistan successfully contained militancy in its tribal belt however the US despite huge financial resources and military capabilities could not contain Taliban in Afghanistan. This study would primarily focus on the reasons that why NATO despite the most powerful military alliance failed in Afghanistan and withdrew in 2021? On the other hand, what would be the impact of hurried US withdrawal from

Afghanistan for regional states like Pakistan, Central Asian states, Iran and China. The US moved resources from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2003 and reduced focus on Afghan security, which created strategic gap and allowed Afghan Taliban to regroup and reorganize themselves. Geographically Afghanistan is a huge country that required greater strategic efforts by the US led alliance to secure all parts of the country. But US after 2003 never deployed adequate troops which could maintain pressure on the Afghan Taliban and ensure security for whole Afghanistan. That created power vacuum in the Pashtun dominated southern belt of Afghanistan. Slowly and gradually the Afghan Taliban consolidated their position in Pashtun areas and established shadow government after 2007.

On the other hand, newly established Afghan force was not trained enough to take on highly motivated, well organized Afghan Taliban. They suffered huge casualties against Afghan Taliban because of the motivational factor. The Afghan National Security Forces- (ANSFs) were ill trained, ill motivated and marred with ethnic and tribal loyalties which resulted in their sudden collapse in 2021. The US spents of dollars on the Afghan forces but at the end of the day could not develop a strong, disciplined, organized and motivated force. Which resulted in their dramatic surrender after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. The US departure from Afghanistan was a huge setback for the Afghan government which totally relied on the US military support. Soon after the US retreat from Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban took over the country within a week and establish their government (Qureshi, 2022).

Now after 2021 the strategic dynamics of Afghanistan evolved rapidly. Pakistan, China and Russia along with Muslim states under OIC banner showed de facto political support to the newly established Taliban regime. According to Professor Sheharyar Khan, “Afghanistan is facing relative peace, there is no war going on but still it needs global connectivity and political legitimacy” (Khan, 2025). On the other hand, the US is still analyzing the changing strategic dynamics with their own prism to understand how Taliban would work this time. Will there be flexibility in strict version of Islam, relaxation for women and minorities under new Taliban regime? Are they going to cut ties with Transnational terrorist outfits like Al-Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, East Turkestan Islamic Movement and Tarik-I-Taliban Pakistan etc.? will they contain drug trafficking, which is undermining the regional and global security? Will they connect with the developed world and allow them to extract huge mineral resources? How they are going to manage the regional tensions/proxy wars specially Indo-Pak strategic

competition and work for the inter-regional connectivity. This study would analyze the changing strategic dynamics in Afghanistan from 2021 to date and how these developments would impact the regional and global security (Azizi, 2016).

1.1. Rational of the Study

Evolving political and strategic dynamics in Afghanistan would have far reaching implications for the regional and global states. Afghanistan after 2021 situation have become important flash point for the US/EU, Russia, India, and China. All these global actors want to pursue their goals in Afghanistan. Some of them want political and strategic engagement with Afghanistan whereas some actors want purely economic ties to explore huge natural resources. But situation under Taliban is not conducive for regional or global partnership because of their close ties with transnational terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, IMU, ETIM, TTP and others. In addition, drug trafficking, smuggling, emergence of ISKP and ethno-political clashes are creating serious challenges for Afghanistan to get recognition from the global fraternity. This study would explore changing political and strategic dynamics in Afghanistan and how it is going to impact on the regional and global powers. How Afghanistan can become an important partner for regional and global development, growth and integration.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The changing strategic dynamics in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal would have far reaching implications for regional and global security. Practical manifestation of the issues post reemergence of Taliban in Afghanistan as a political force and impacting the regional and global politics.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine changing political and strategic outlook of Afghanistan in the post-US withdrawal situation in 2021
2. To analyze the Afghan Taliban's approach towards Transnational Terrorist groups and regional proxy wars in Afghanistan
3. To assess the regional implications of evolving political and strategic dynamics of Afghanistan.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How Political and Strategic dynamics in Afghanistan are evolving in the Post 2021 withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan?
2. How the Afghan Taliban are tackling the issue of transnational terrorism, proxy wars and drug trafficking in Afghanistan?
3. What are the implications of evolving political and strategic dynamics of Afghanistan at regional level?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This research emphasizes on the post 2021 American withdrawal of Afghanistan and its impact on South Asia. The research covers some pivotal areas like the likelihood of transnational terrorism and global security, drug trafficking, changing political dynamics in Afghanistan and its regional and global impact etc. This study would contribute new knowledge on Afghanistan's evolving strategic dynamics and its regional and global impact, which is going to help academicians, researchers, policy makers and students working on related fields.

1.6 Literature Review

The research focuses on the shifting strategic dynamics in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal in 2021 and its ramifications at regional and global levels. Within this framework, the study conducted a comprehensive analysis of the relevant literature sources, which were deemed pertinent to the current study and warrant further investigation.

The authors of The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security are Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True. This source is relevant to the current study as it specifically focuses on human rights, particularly in relation to women in Afghanistan. The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda comprises United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which was adopted in 2000, together with seven supplementary Resolutions. This agenda is an all-encompassing worldwide benchmark and collection of guidelines that specifically concentrates on the impact of conflict on women and girls. The objective is to safeguard individuals from sexual and gender-based violence, promote their participation in peace and security initiatives, and assist them in their capacity as peace advocates in the prevention and reconstruction of societies during periods of conflict. The execution of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda has been slow, both domestically and internationally, as well as within peace and security operations, despite significant global endeavours to advance it (Azizi, 2016).

This publication functions as a comprehensive compendium, bringing together the knowledge and experience of scholars, advocates, and government officials to provide valuable insights on successful approaches for advancing women's participation in peace and security efforts. The approach highlights the need of stakeholders working together to tackle the complex issues that women confront in conflict and post-conflict situations. The journal seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the intricate issues related to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) by incorporating a wide range of perspectives. The book primarily emphasises the advancement

of women's involvement in peace processes and decision-making. It promotes the involvement of women in all aspects of peacebuilding, acknowledging their distinct viewpoints and contributions to resolving conflicts and achieving reconciliation. Furthermore, the book emphasizes the significance of safeguarding women and girls against sexual and gender-based violence, along with other infringements of human rights, in both conflict and post-conflict scenarios.

Moreover, the publication delves into the role of women in preventing conflicts, emphasising the necessity of include their viewpoints and knowledge in efforts to promote peace. This highlights the importance of local and grassroots initiatives in establishing lasting peace and acknowledges the constraints in comprehending WPS. It proposes potential paths for additional scholarly investigation to enhance understanding in this field. The report provides analysis and reflections on the findings of the 2015 Global Study on Resolution 1325, which was commissioned by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Resolution 1325 highlights the significance of women's involvement in peace negotiations and the safeguarding of women and girls in times of conflict. The paper highlights the interdependence of peace and security activities on a global level by analysing the links between WPS and other UN resolutions and goals.

The manual is divided into six sections and addresses many aspects of WPS, such as fundamental principles, practical implementation in conflict prevention, peacekeeping operations, post-conflict reconstruction, arms control, protection of human rights, and protecting of civilians. This resource offers a thorough examination of the multiple aspects of WPS, providing essential perspectives for researchers, politicians, and practitioners alike. Although there has been success in promoting the WPS agenda, the publication recognises the current and future challenges that WPS projects encounter. The journal aims to provide a valuable contribution to global initiatives promoting gender equality, peace, and security by identifying and addressing key obstacles and offering effective solutions to overcome them.

The geopolitical landscape of Afghanistan has been marred by conflict, instability, and foreign interventions for decades, shaping its political and strategic dynamics in profound ways. With the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021, the security situation in the region has entered a new phase, raising concerns about the capacity of Afghan security forces to maintain stability in the absence of international support (Smith, 2020). This transition has significant implications for regional and global security, as Afghanistan's internal dynamics have often spilled over into neighboring countries, exacerbating tensions and fueling instability.

One of the key questions post-withdrawal revolves around the Taliban's approach towards transnational terrorism. While the Taliban have pledged not to allow Afghan soil to be used for terrorist activities, concerns persist about their ability to control extremist elements within their ranks (Alizai, 2021). The resurgence of the Taliban following the US withdrawal has raised questions about their commitment to combating terrorism and their willingness to cooperate with the international community on counterterrorism efforts. Understanding the Taliban's stance on this issue is crucial for assessing the security implications post-2021.

Afghanistan has long been a battleground for regional proxy wars, particularly between Pakistan and India, each vying for influence in the country. The resurgence of the Taliban could potentially alter the dynamics of these proxy conflicts and impact regional stability (Kumar, 2019). The Taliban's ability to navigate their relationships with Pakistan and India and maintain a strategic balance between the two countries will shape the future trajectory of regional dynamics. Moreover, the role of other regional actors, such as Iran and China, in Afghanistan's post-withdrawal landscape adds another layer of complexity to the regional security calculus.

The evolving political and strategic dynamics of Afghanistan have broader implications for regional and global security. Instability in Afghanistan has the potential to destabilize neighboring countries and create a breeding ground for terrorism, posing a threat to international peace and security (Barfield, 2020). The international community's engagement with Afghanistan post-2021 will be critical in addressing these challenges and promoting peace and stability in the region.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative approach, emphasizing focus group interviews to gain insights into stakeholders' perceptions and opinions on the post-2021 political and security situation in Afghanistan. By engaging with key actors, including policymakers, academics, and practitioners, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play. Additionally, drawing upon the Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan & Weaver, 2003), the study seeks to analyze the interplay of regional actors and the implications for regional and global security.

Initially, the US government failed to effectively assess successful outcomes other than achieving a clear military triumph. As a result, they chose plans that overstated the likelihood of such an outcome. Furthermore, the United States exhibits a sluggishness in recognizing and formulating or discarding unsuccessful tactics. In both scenarios, American authorities maintain

the belief that their strategies are operational and successful during the implementation phase, despite the worsening circumstances. Furthermore, after the United States makes the decision to depart, imbalances in bargaining power and differences in strategic approaches undermine the chances of achieving a smooth transition or reaching a mutually agreed-upon resolution. Drawing from historical precedents and firsthand encounters, Kolenda articulates nuanced and pragmatic assessments regarding the efficacy of American military prowess in contemporary global dynamics. These discernments offer a foundational framework for prospective scholarly inquiries and as a catalyst for pivotal transformations in national security strategies (Kolenda, 2021).

Christopher D. Kolenda, the author of "Zero-Sum Victory: What We're Getting Wrong About War," offers a comprehensive examination of the United States' counterterrorism efforts. Within this analysis, Kolenda asserts that the post-9/11 security landscape in Afghanistan had a profound destabilizing impact on regional security dynamics in Central Asia. Highlighting the critical need for a meticulous inquiry into the Afghan impasse, Kolenda underscores the imperative for Central Asian nations to augment their security efforts in Afghanistan through bolstered collaboration with NATO. This book provides a comprehensive analysis of the regional security situation in Central Asia. The issue of international terrorism in and around Afghanistan necessitates a comprehensive approach that takes into account human security, socio-political factors, energy considerations, and the conventional military aspect. The book's discoveries augment our comprehension of the underlying factors that contribute to transnational terrorism and the efficacious methods for addressing security concerns in this field. The book is segmented into five distinct sections: Firstly, it examines the responsibility of NATO in ensuring enduring security in Afghanistan. Furthermore, it analyses the reactions of Central Asian nations towards political instability, organised crime, and international terrorism originating from Afghanistan. Furthermore, it tackles the matter of energy security in the Central Asia region and its surroundings. Additionally, it examines the intricacies of global rivalry and collaboration in connection with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Lastly, it examines the participation of regional security organisations in the fight against global terrorism in Afghanistan (Tanrisever, 2013). This book is relevant to the current body of literature and will help in comprehending the theoretical aspects of the inquiry.

The book is titled "Afghanistan and Central Asia: NATO's Role in Regional Security". O.

Tanrisever is the author of the book "Since 9/11". This book is part of a series that provides primary source documents and expert analysis on global efforts to combat terrorism. This source specifically examines the approaches adopted by the United States to tackle global security concerns. The text examines and evaluates the United States' strategy in addressing security challenges on a global scale, highlighting a departure from exclusive reliance on military force.

Instead, it prioritises the utilisation of many types of non-military influence and a global perspective. This site offers a comprehensive overview of the United States' perspectives and attitudes towards the overall global security situation. The text addresses various topics, including the security status in Afghanistan, terrorism in East Africa, the growing participation of NATO, and the collaboration between the United States and other governments, such as the European Union and China, in the fight against terrorism (Kristen Boon, Aziz Z. Huq and Douglas Lovelace, 2012). This website offers a thorough examination of the United States' approach to dealing with transnational terrorism, but it does not specifically analyse the shortcomings in Afghanistan. The present study seeks to rectify this inadequacy.

The Western military presence in Afghanistan is decreasing, which is causing changes in the security environment and posing challenges to borders and stability in Central Asia. This book explores the way in which the conflicts surrounding the restructuring of military presence from outside forces impact the aspirations of regional nations and create difficulties for the borders that are already disputed by several dividing lines. The study examines a complicated political environment where there is concern about the potential expansion of radical Islam linked to international terrorism, as the worldwide mission that began after the 9/11 attacks comes to an end (Rytövuori-Apunen, 2016).

Craig Whitlock authored the book titled "The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War." This source is pertinent to the current study as it examines how three consecutive US Presidents and their respective military commanders intentionally misled and mislead the public a year later over America's prolonged war, which ultimately predicted the Taliban's recapture and reoccupation of Afghanistan. In contrast to the conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq, the United States' military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 enjoyed almost unanimous backing from the general people. Initially, the objectives were unambiguous and explicit: vanquish al-Qaeda and avert a recurrence of the 9/11 attacks. However, shortly after the United States and its allies ousted the Taliban regime, the mission deviated from its intended path and US authorities lost sight of their

main goals. The US military, consumed by the war in Iraq, found themselves entangled in an intractable guerilla struggle in a foreign country, lacking knowledge of the terrain and struggling to effectively combat terrorism. However, none of the presidents of the United States of America were willing to acknowledge the failure, especially in a war that began with a righteous motive. Contrary to this, the administrations of Bush, Obama, and Trump deployed increasing numbers of armed troops to Afghanistan and consistently claimed that they were making advancements, although being aware that achieving a complete victory was not really possible. Furthermore, the writers acknowledged that the techniques employed by the US administration were problematic, the nation-building endeavor was a monumental failure, and their partners in the Afghan government were heavily influenced by narcotics and corruption (Whitlock, 2021). This site is an intriguing read that offers a comprehensive critique of the United States' political and strategic shortcomings in Afghanistan (Azizi, 2016).

This source, "Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field" by Antonio Giustozzi, is especially pertinent to current research as the author thoroughly examines the revival of the Afghan Taliban. This book examines the Afghan Taliban's operations as a cohesive and structured entity, focusing on its organizational dynamics and functioning. To what extent is it united? Do its structures possess a high level of strength, or do they exhibit unexpected fragility? Do personal relationships and networking, which are rooted in traditional familial and ethnic connections, solely define the organizational capacities, or are there ongoing efforts to establish more formalized hierarchical structures? To what extent is the New Taliban cohesive, and how does it sustain its unity despite the losses it has experienced in combat? To what degree can the leadership effectively enforce changes in strategy among the lower-ranking members, considering the challenging topography and inadequate communication infrastructure in Afghanistan?

This book provides answers to these questions. The book "Decoding the New Taliban" comprises several comprehensive analyses of particular locations or provinces that have particular importance for the Taliban and provide valuable insights into their growth and expansion. In addition to the geographical studies, the volume also contains in-depth examinations of the process of negotiating with the Taliban, the media efforts of the Taliban, and their strategic vision, as discussed by Giustozzi in 2012. This material is very relevant to current research and would greatly contribute to our understanding of the operations, capabilities, and organizational framework of the Afghan Taliban.

The examination of political and strategic dynamics in Afghanistan post-2021 requires a solid theoretical framework that combines perspectives from political science, international relations, and security studies. This framework is vital for comprehending the intricate interactions among domestic governance, regional power tensions, and global geopolitical interests that have influenced Afghanistan's path since the Taliban's resurgence. By leveraging significant theories and concepts, this section lays a conceptual groundwork for evaluating the political and strategic dynamics in Afghanistan, while placing the research within the larger scholarly conversation.

The idea of state fragility offers an important perspective for analyzing Afghanistan's political environment. As noted by Rotberg (2004), fragile states are typified by weak institutions, diminished legitimacy, and an inability to deliver essential services to their citizens. Afghanistan typifies these features, as the fall of the Afghan National Government in 2021 exposed the vulnerabilities of the state-building effort initiated during two decades of international intervention (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008). The Taliban's governance approach, founded on a strict interpretation of Islamic law, has intensified these difficulties, as the regime attempts to reconcile ideological commitments with the practical necessities of governance (Barfield, 2010).

The fragility inherent in the Afghan state is not a recent development but rather a consequence of its historical and geopolitical backdrop. Afghanistan's role as a buffer state between rival empires during the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in weak central institutions and a fragmented society (Rubin, 2013). The Soviet invasion in 1979 and the ensuing civil war further diminished state capacity, leading to a power vacuum filled by non-state actors, such as the Taliban. The U.S.-led intervention in 2001 aimed to reconstruct the Afghan state, however, this initiative was compromised by corruption, ineffectiveness, and a lack of local engagement (Suhrke, 2011). The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has underscored these issues, as the regime strives to establish dominance over a deeply divided and battered society.

The governance struggles faced by the Taliban regime are complex. On one hand, the regime must meet the urgent needs of the populace, which include security, economic viability, and fundamental services. Conversely, it must maneuver through the conflicting demands of its ideological supporters, the global community, and the various ethnic and political factions within Afghanistan. This conflict between ideology and pragmatism is a crucial characteristic of the Taliban's governance approach, carrying considerable implications for Afghanistan's future (Johnson, 2021).

The fall of the Afghan National Government in August 2021 has been extensively examined as an example of state fragility and the challenges of external intervention. Researchers like Ghani and Lockhart (2008) contend that the failure of Afghanistan's state-building initiative stemmed from an inability to create legitimate and effective institutions. In spite of considerable international funding, the Afghan government was hindered by corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of local engagement, which eroded its legitimacy and functionality (Suhrke, 2011). The swift collapse of the government in response to the Taliban's advance highlighted the vulnerability of the state and the limitations of international efforts (Barfield, 2010).

The Taliban's resurgence has been ascribed to several factors, such as its organizational resilience, regional popular support, and the shortcomings of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Johnson (2021) notes that the Taliban's ability to adapt its strategies and tactics throughout the insurgency was crucial to its victories. The group employed guerrilla warfare, targeted assassinations, and psychological operations to gradually diminish government control in rural locales, while its political outreach facilitated the garnering of local community support (Rashid, 2021). The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021 led to a power void that the Taliban effectively exploited, resulting in its swift conquest of the nation.

Scholarly analysis has also emphasized the Taliban's governance model. Although the group aims to present an image of stability and control, its policies are marked by a strict interpretation of Islamic law, which has alienated considerable segments of the populace. Barfield (2010) asserts that the Taliban's governance model is based on its ideological goal of establishing an Islamic emirate, emphasizing religious fidelity over effective governance. This clash between ideology and pragmatism has critical implications for Afghanistan's future, directly affecting the regime's ability to attain legitimacy both nationally and globally (Johnson, 2021). The influence of regional and global actors in shaping Afghanistan's path has been a prominent topic in the literature concerning the country's political and strategic dynamics. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021 signified the conclusion of a two-decade military intervention, leading to a power vacuum that regional players have aimed to occupy. Scholars like Mearsheimer (2001) and Organski (1958) have utilized power transition theory to study the evolving power dynamics in the region, underlining the potential for instability and conflict as ascending powers challenge the authority of established hegemons.

Scholarly attention has particularly focused on China's increasing influence in

Afghanistan. Small (2021) states that Beijing's engagement with the Taliban regime is motivated by its wider strategic goals under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its intention to counter U.S. influence in the area. China is primarily concerned about the risk of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for Uyghur militants and the ramifications of instability on its investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Although Beijing has worked to strengthen ties with the Taliban, it remains cautious about the dangers linked to deeper involvement (Haidari, 2021).

Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan has also been heavily scrutinized. Fair (2021) explains that Islamabad's long-term support for the Taliban is based on its strategic aim to counter Indian influence and secure its western border. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan has been accused of offering logistical and financial assistance to the Taliban, thus helping the group to maintain its insurgency and ultimately seize control (Rashid, 2021).

Power transition theory, articulated by Organski (1958), provides a valuable lens for analyzing the evolving balance of power in the region in the wake of the U.S. and NATO withdrawal. This theory asserts that changes in the relative power of states can provoke instability and conflict, particularly when an ascending power threatens the supremacy of a long-established hegemon. In Afghanistan's context, the exit of U.S. forces has generated a power void that regional players, including China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran, are eager to exploit (Mearsheimer, 2001). This situation has profound implications for regional stability, as conflicting interests and rivalries hinder the formulation of a unified and coordinated response to the issues faced in Afghanistan. China's increasing influence in Afghanistan exemplifies this trend. Beijing's interactions with the Taliban regime are motivated by its broader strategic goals under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), along with its intention to counter U.S. dominance in the region (Small, 2021). China's chief concerns focus on the risk of Afghanistan becoming a refuge for Uyghur militants and the potential effects of instability on its investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Vanda Felbab-Brown authored the book titled "Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State Building in Afghanistan." According to the author, despite more than twenty years of impressive efforts and sacrifices by the United States and its allies, the Afghan Taliban remains undefeated, and there is a growing belief among Afghans that a civil war is imminent. *Aspiration and Ambivalence* examines the endeavors of the United States and other countries in Afghanistan and provides thorough suggestions for managing the uncertain

circumstances leading up to the 2014 transfer of power to Afghan authorities and beyond. Vanda Felbab-Brown contends that the focus on military objectives in Afghanistan has overshadowed the importance of good administration, resulting in insufficient attention to long-term peace and stability.

The inclination of the Western world to form alliances with aggressive individuals, warlords, smugglers, and other dubious figures in order to get immediate military benefits ultimately strengthens the entities that oppose effective government and sustainable political stability in the long run. The pervasive corruption and dominance of organized crime continue to exist, rendering it exceedingly difficult for Afghans to have faith in the essential institutional reforms and adherence to the principles of law and order. The author argues that the major flaw in the U.S. policy and global attempts to stabilize the country lies in the insufficient attention given to the country's fragmented and fragile political structure and extremely inadequate governance (Felbab-Brown, 2013). This source would enhance the current study by providing insights into the underlying challenges in present-day Afghanistan. What structural reforms will Afghanistan need in the next years to address instability and turmoil?

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, New Delhi has strategically capitalized on the geopolitical landscape of Afghanistan to assert its regional influence. India's proactive engagement in promoting security and stability within Afghanistan underscores its commitment to regional peace. The signing of the strategic partnership agreement between India and Afghanistan in 2011 serves as a testament to New Delhi's steadfast dedication to nurturing a mutually beneficial relationship with Kabul. This study critically examines the evolution of Indian foreign policy in Afghanistan since 2001, arguing that the actions of other regional stakeholders have significantly influenced New Delhi's strategic calculus. As the United States and its NATO allies prepare for a phased withdrawal of their forces from Afghanistan in 2014, India finds itself at a pivotal juncture, navigating complex geopolitical dynamics to safeguard its interests in the region.

An analysis is conducted on the continuously developing Indian strategy in Afghanistan, divided into three phases, followed by an assessment of the ramifications of this transformation for the region and the United States. The defense relations between the United States and India have become more extensive, and Afghanistan is expected to benefit from this development. Both Washington and New Delhi should prioritize the management of Pakistan and the resolution of Islamabad's encirclement complex in order to maintain stability in Afghanistan after 2014 (Pant,

2012).

The author of the book "India's Changing Afghanistan Policy: Regional and Global Implications" is Harsh V. Pant. The author's objective was to establish a link between various contrasting viewpoints regarding the present condition of Afghanistan. This book provides an overview of the country's historical and current instability, and examines how this instability affects and is perceived by neighboring countries, as well as major global powers like Russia, China, and the United States. Due to Afghanistan's significant cross-border connections in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, and culture with neighboring countries, any developments in the conflict-ridden nation are likely to have wide-ranging security consequences at both regional and global levels. The book also examines the stances and policy reactions of three significant entities in the region: Russia, China, and the United States. The statement evaluates the degree to which these major powers align in their efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, as well as the extent to which their geopolitical goals in the region differ (Amin Saikal and Kirill Nourzhanov, 2021). This source is especially important for comprehending the probable consequences of the Afghan deadlock for neighboring countries.

Zahid Hussain's book, "No-Win War: The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan's Shadow," delves into the intricate web of diplomatic and political entanglements between the United States and Pakistan following the September 11th terrorist attacks. Through meticulous analysis, the book uncovers the widening chasm between Washington and Islamabad, transforming an already tenuous alliance into one marred by alienation. It examines the underlying causes of this tension within the partnership. Despite a profound and intense interaction between the two nations on September 13, 2001, their level of mutual understanding has remained incomplete. There is little disagreement about the fact that Pakistan's choice to align itself with the US or engage in a conflict within its own borders has significant consequences. The consequences include the challenges Pakistan faces in balancing its relationship with the US and its historical connections with the Afghan Taliban, as well as the potential long-term effects on regional and global security (Hussain, 2021).

Jeffrey Schloesser authored the book "Marathon War: Leadership in Combat in Afghanistan" where he examines the intense conflict in Afghanistan, where the US encountered strong opposition from the highly organized Taliban. This book provides a unique and introspective look into the perspectives of influential national leaders, such as Former US President

George W. Bush, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, then Senator Barack Obama, and several foreign leaders, including Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai. The book features various prominent military figures, such as Admiral Michael Mullen, General David Petraeus, Lieutenant General Martin Dempsey, and General David McKiernan, who held significant positions at the time. Additionally, it includes current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley and Army Chief of Staff General James McConville, among others. Upon examining their leadership during the tumultuous period of war, Schloesser finally determines that effective leadership in warfare is most effectively grounded in competence, courage, and character (Schloesser, 2021). This source holds significance due to the author's firsthand description regarding the evolving security landscape in Afghanistan.

Michael P. Noonan wrote the book "Irregular Soldiers and Rebellious States: Small-Scale U.S. Interventions Abroad." The source highlights that after the US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, the US will shift its focus towards the increasing difficulties presented by Russia and China. Both of these states wield substantial influence in both the regional and global spheres. After the United States' departure from Afghanistan, it is likely that China and Russia will seize the opportunity to occupy the void and seek to exercise their control over Afghanistan's political and strategic environment. The author raised the issue of the United States' ability to manage conflicts that occur in intricate political-military environments. Moreover, this book offers a valuable categorization and framework for examining interventions in which U.S. advisors and forces, operating on a restricted level, cooperate with a foreign government to protect it from subversion or insurgency threats, or assist insurgents or guerrilla forces in opposing an antagonistic regime (Noonan, 2021).

The authorship of this article titled "Afghanistan Under the Taliban" is attributed to Saskia Brechenmacher et al. The authors of this article examine the events that occurred after the Taliban assumed control of Afghanistan in 2021. The authors expressed their opinion that commentators have characterized the Taliban's swift seizure of Afghanistan in recent days as a significant "intelligence failure." However, the Taliban's progress did not come as a surprise to numerous advocates for women's rights in Afghanistan. For a considerable period of time, they have been issuing cautionary statements about the insurgents' territorial growth, which has been seen as a danger to the security of women.

The expeditious withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan has raised significant

concerns among stakeholders regarding the potential regression of hard-won advancements in women's rights. As the evacuation of U.S. diplomatic personnel from Kabul accelerated, women expressed a range of emotions, including feelings of abandonment, anger, and hopelessness. Over the past two decades, the U.S. government has allocated substantial resources, amounting to approximately \$787.4 million, towards initiatives aimed at advancing gender equality in Afghanistan. However, these efforts have often been overshadowed by the broader objectives of U.S. military interventions, which have, at times, impeded women's freedom of movement, access to essential services, and overall well-being. Despite significant investments in advancing women's rights, the promotion of gender equality in Afghanistan has frequently taken a backseat to broader geopolitical objectives pursued by the United States. The prioritization of security interests over human rights concerns has been evident throughout the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan since 2001. Moreover, the recent shift in focus towards brokering a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban has further marginalized the voices of women's rights advocates and peacebuilders.

This article critically examines the implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and its potential ramifications for regional security. By scrutinizing the complex interplay between security dynamics and gender equality efforts in Afghanistan, it seeks to shed light on the multifaceted challenges facing the region in the wake of the U.S. exit. (Brechenmacher et al., 2021)The author of this piece, titled "The Collapse of Afghanistan," is Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili. The author posits that the prevailing belief is that the Afghan republic collapsed due to a lack of compatibility between societal ideals and democracy, rendering the country ungovernable. This article examines the decline of the state, attributing it to the establishment of highly centralized political institutions following the U.S. invasion in 2001. Kabul-centric institutions, which have persisted from the country's authoritarian history, have eroded civilian confidence in the government instead of providing them with a genuine chance to monitor it. The post-2001 system, which received a substantial influx of foreign aid, facilitated the growth of corruption. After two decades, the Afghan people were reluctant to engage in combat for a remote administration that failed to treat them with respect and honor (Murtazashvili, 2022).

The author of this paper, titled "Reassessing the European Strategy in Afghanistan," is OZ Hassan. This article evaluates the security scenario in Afghanistan after 2021. According to the author, Afghanistan is descending into a cycle of violence now that the Afghan Taliban has

regained power. There is a high likelihood of internal conflict emerging inside the Taliban and between the Taliban and other extremist groups. The Taliban's assumption of power and the United States' exit have posed significant challenges for European policy in Afghanistan. Although the United States has engaged in much contemplation and introspection on Afghanistan, the European Union has yet to recognize and confront the shortcomings of its own plans. The key takeaway from the past two decades of policy interventions in the country is that the EU embraced a shallow understanding of democratic support and implemented security tactics that had negative consequences. In the future, as the situation worsens, the EU's options are limited to providing humanitarian assistance and offering support to maintain the activities of independent and rights-based organizations (Hassan, 2021).

Abdul Sayed authored the article titled "The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan." The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) stands as the primary militant entity engaged in armed conflict against the Pakistani government. According to the United Nations, the TTP maintains a considerable presence of fighters in Afghanistan and has established formidable strongholds along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The years spanning from 2014 to 2018 marked a period of relative decline in the activities of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), attributed to a confluence of factors including Pakistani military offensives, U.S. drone strikes, and internal rifts within the organization. However, the landscape shifted dramatically following the signing of a peace agreement between the Afghan Taliban and the U.S. government in February 2020. This pivotal event heralded a resurgence of the TTP, which swiftly capitalized on emerging opportunities.

Since July 2020, the TTP has embarked on a strategic realignment, forging alliances with ten anti-Pakistani state terrorist organizations. Notably, these alliances include three Pakistani factions of al-Qaeda and four prominent factions that previously splintered from the TTP in 2014. The consolidation of these mergers has not only revitalized the TTP but has also precipitated a surge in TTP-linked violence. Of particular significance is the TTP's resurgence in the wake of the Afghan Taliban's assumption of power in Kabul in August 2021. The shifting dynamics in Afghanistan have provided fertile ground for the TTP to regroup and expand its influence, posing a renewed threat to regional stability.

Sayed's (2021) analysis offers valuable insights into the evolving landscape of militant extremism in Pakistan and its broader implications for regional security. By examining the

ideological underpinnings driving the TTP's resurgence and its strategic alliances, this source provides a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges confronting Pakistan and its neighbors.

Russia and Iran have also aimed to adjust their strategies in response to the evolving situation. Katz (2021) indicates that Russia's interaction with the Taliban is motivated by its intention to mitigate the threat posed by ISIS-K and other extremist organizations, along with its wider geopolitical competition with the United States. Conversely, Iran has taken a more cautious stance, attempting to safeguard its interests in western Afghanistan while navigating its complicated relationship with the Taliban (Haidari, 2021). These differing approaches highlight the intricacies of regional dynamics and the difficulties in establishing a unified and coordinated response.

Scholarly analysis has primarily concentrated on the effects of Afghanistan's political and strategic dynamics on regional security and stability. Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that Afghanistan is situated at the crossroads of various regional security complexes, making it a focal point for both regional and global powers. The Taliban's resurgence has further heightened these dynamics, as neighboring countries seek to safeguard their interests and reduce the risks of instability spilling over their borders (Rubin, 2013).

The emergence of transnational threats, such as terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and refugee migration, presents considerable challenges to the stability of neighboring nations. Rashid (2021) warns that the possibility of Afghanistan becoming a refuge for militant groups like ISIS-K and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is a significant worry for Pakistan and other regional stakeholders. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has also imposed enormous pressure on neighboring countries, especially Iran and Pakistan, which host millions of Afghan refugees (Haidari, 2021).

The complexities for regional security are further complicated by the competing interests and rivalries of regional and global powers. Khalilzad (2021) suggests that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan has opened doors for other regional players, like China and Russia, to enhance their influence in the area. However, the associated risks and challenges of this change are substantial, as the potential for unrest and conflict remains considerable. The absence of a cohesive and coordinated response to the dilemmas in Afghanistan has intensified these risks, stressing the need for a more inclusive and cooperative approach to regional security (Buzan &

Wæver, 2003).

Although the current literature offers valuable perspectives on the political and strategic dynamics in Afghanistan, there are several shortcomings that this dissertation aims to address. Firstly, much of the existing literature concerning Afghanistan has concentrated on the period of international intervention, with insufficient focus on the post-2021 environment. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by delivering an in-depth analysis of the Taliban's governance model and its repercussions for Afghanistan's domestic politics and regional security.

Secondly, the literature regarding regional and global actors in Afghanistan has often concentrated on individual nations, with limited consideration for the broader geopolitical context. This dissertation tackles this gap by exploring the interactions of competing interests and rivalries among regional and global powers, shedding light on the consequences for regional security and stability.

Lastly, the dissertation enhances the theoretical understanding of state fragility, power transitions, and regional security dynamics. By applying these theories to the situation in Afghanistan, this study emphasizes their relevance for comprehending modern conflicts and geopolitical dynamics while also pinpointing areas where these theories may require refinement or expansion.

1.7. Research Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research style. Both primary and secondary data will be utilized to examine and expand upon various facets of the study. The technique for this study will entail conducting comprehensive interviews with retired military officers, scholars, researchers, and academicians associated with various think tanks and institutions focused on national and international security. These interviews offer a chance to comprehend the fundamental issues, essential ideas, and aid in developing recommendations and choices for Pakistan's security apparatus. Additionally, the researcher will distribute a closed forum questionnaire among specialists in the field to gather their comments. Given that this study pertains to the national security plan of the state, employing snowball sampling would be advantageous in identifying experts in the field of national security, particularly retired military personnel, as their information is not easily accessible online. The secondary data encompassed the official papers and various published works such as books, research articles, and reports.

1.8. Research Design:

The study employs qualitative research methods and utilizes Descriptive, Exploratory, and

Predictive data analysis procedures. Both primary and secondary data has be utilized to examine and expand upon various facets of the study.



1.9. Population:

The technique for this stud entailed conducting in-depth interviews with diplomats, researchers from various Think Tanks, and academicians specializing in Strategic Studies and International Relations, with a particular emphasis on South Asia. It would elucidate the strategic issues and discourse pertaining to the topic area. These said interviews offered a chance to comprehend the underlying issues, fundamental notions, and aid in developing a Pakistani viewpoint or story on this matter, which addresses the existing void in literature. I shall endeavor to secure a substantial number of 20 to 25 interviews with individuals who are knowledgeable and influential in the field of India.

10. Sampling:

The researcher will employ snowball sampling to get additional information in this study. Participation in this study is limited to individuals who are relevant, competent, and highly professional. Consequently, snowball sampling will be employed. The target individual will be contacted using snowball sampling.

1.11 Instrumentation:

A comprehensive research methodology encompasses both structured and unstructured interviews, targeting retired military officials, diplomats, scholars specializing in Strategic Studies and International Relations, as well as representatives from esteemed think tanks. Additionally, the study employs close-ended questionnaires to gather data from relevant participants.

1.12. Data Collection:

This study employs a comprehensive approach, integrating both primary and secondary data collection methods. Primary data gathered through structured interviews with retired military officials, diplomats, scholars specializing in Strategic Studies and International Relations, and representatives from prominent think tanks. Secondary data was sourced from official documents, published literature including books, research articles, and reports.

1.13. Data Analysis:

In this study, a methodology characterized by its descriptive, exploratory, and predictive nature was employed. This approach aims to comprehensively examine the research questions at hand, utilizing a range of tools such as tables, charts, and figures to present and analyze the data effectively. The deductive approach guided the data analysis process, wherein qualitative data was systematically analyzed within a predetermined framework established by the researcher. This framework may be informed by the research questions themselves, serving as a structured guide for organizing and interpreting the data. The deductive approach offers a straightforward and efficient method for data analysis, particularly suitable when researchers possess prior knowledge or expectations regarding the anticipated responses from the sample population. By applying this method, the researcher can systematically assess the collected data in alignment with the predetermined framework, facilitating the extraction of meaningful insights and conclusions.

1.14. Theoretical Framework- Regional Security Complex Theory

Following the withdrawal of US soldiers after 2021, Afghanistan is confronted with significant political and strategic obstacles. The US pullout has resulted in the Afghan Taliban assuming power and then gaining authority over the entirety of Afghanistan. The evolving geopolitical situation in Afghanistan will have significant implications for both regional and global security. This study focuses on the Regional Security Complex Theory, which emphasizes the idea that the security of one state is interconnected with the security of other states in the region. Any event occurring in Afghanistan would have significant consequences for both regional and global security. The main concept of RSCT is that because to the ease of transmission of threats across small areas compared to long distances, security interdependence tends to form regionally based clusters known as security complexes. The process of securitization and the level of security interdependence are stronger among actors within these complexes compared to those within the complex and those outside of it (Cox, 2006).

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), as elucidated by Barry Buzan and Ole

Weaver in their seminal work "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security" (2003), posits that the dynamics of international security are best understood through a regional perspective. According to this theory, states interact within predictable patterns influenced by their geographical proximity and regional affiliations. The interconnectedness of regions holds sway over global politics and security, as evidenced by the ripple effects of conflicts or threats in one area impacting neighboring regions. The turmoil wrought by terrorism in Afghanistan serves as a poignant illustration of this theory, particularly in its reverberations across South Asia, with a focal point on Pakistan. The perpetually volatile security landscape in Afghanistan carries profound implications for global security dynamics due to the presence of transnational terrorist entities such as Al-Qaeda, ISKP, IMU, ETIM, and TTP. These organizations, with their transboundary reach and shared ideological agendas, pose a formidable threat to countries in the region, notably Central Asia, Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia (Buzan & Weaver, 2003).

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver developed the idea of the "Regional Security Complex" (RSC) as a means to analyze how security dynamics operate on a regional scale, where threats and security issues are often restricted to particular geographic locations. This theory posits that regional security is influenced not only by the actions and interests of individual states but also by the relationships and interconnections among them within a specific region (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). One of the main concepts that Buzan highlights in this framework is that the geographical selection for security concerns is not random; instead, it is determined by the region itself, with territorial boundaries defining the involved players. Jennings (2017) expands on Buzan's perspective by indicating that security issues are fundamentally influenced by spatial and territorial elements, suggesting that the region effectively "selects" the actors based on its political, economic, and security landscape. This perspective aids in recognizing that security encompasses more than merely the conduct of individual states; it is also shaped by the broader regional milieu and the interactions among nearby countries.

In the case of Afghanistan, the events following September 11, 2001, led to a significant shift in the regional security landscape, particularly regarding its relationships with neighboring countries and the global community at large. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the United States, along with its allies, launched a military operation in Afghanistan aimed at dismantling the Taliban regime, which had provided refuge for Al-Qaeda operatives, and eradicating the presence of terrorist organizations in the area. This intervention signified the onset of a lengthy period of

instability, which had serious security repercussions not only for Afghanistan but also for its neighboring nations and the international community as a whole.

Applying the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a more nuanced understanding of the evolving situation in Afghanistan. According to RSCT, regional security is interconnected; thus, the security of one nation or region cannot be fully comprehended without acknowledging the dynamics of its neighboring states and the broader regional context. Afghanistan's security circumstances post-9/11, marked by the involvement of transnational terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the subsequent revival of the Taliban, illustrate how regional security dynamics are fundamentally linked. The U.S.-led invasion, which aimed to overthrow the Taliban and eradicate Al-Qaeda's influence in Afghanistan, ultimately set off a range of security challenges for both Afghanistan and its neighboring

Pakistan, which shares an extensive border with Afghanistan, has been significantly impacted by the instability in its neighboring country. As a vital regional player, Pakistan has encountered considerable security challenges resulting from the ramifications of the Afghan conflict. Since 2001, Pakistan has been engaged in a complicated battle against terrorism and insurgency, resulting in the loss of approximately 80,000 lives, including over 7,000 military personnel (Khan, 2020). This tragic toll underscores how security issues in Afghanistan have directly affected Pakistan, jeopardizing its internal stability and complicating its foreign policy goals. The presence of cross-border terrorist organizations like the Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and various other extremist groups has contributed to a complicated security environment in the region. Additionally, Pakistan faces challenges as a frontline state in the global fight against terrorism, which has intensified internal discord and led to serious economic and social repercussions.

The 2021 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan is anticipated to have significant consequences for the regional security framework. The return of the Afghan Taliban to power following the U.S. exit raises fresh concerns about the comeback of transnational terrorist groups that were previously sheltered by the Taliban government. Organizations such as Al-Qaeda, TTP, and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) may once again find refuge in Afghanistan, potentially facilitating their reorganization and enabling them to carry out attacks outside the region. This situation poses a risk not only to Afghanistan's neighboring countries, including

Pakistan, Iran, and China, but also to Central Asian nations, Russia, and even Western countries (Siddiqi, 2021). The Taliban's restoration of control could threaten to destabilize the entire region, especially if they continue to maintain connections with terrorist organizations that operate across borders.

From a regional security standpoint, Afghanistan's geographic location has substantial implications for South Asia and beyond. The interconnections between states in the South Asian region are essential in comprehending how regional security dynamics operate. Afghanistan is situated at a geopolitical intersection, linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Therefore, the security situation in Afghanistan has extensive consequences for neighboring nations, particularly Pakistan, which faces direct dangers from the turmoil in Afghanistan. Pakistan's security issues are worsened by its porous border with Afghanistan, which has permitted militants and insurgents to traverse easily and engage in cross-border terrorism (Fair, 2018). Moreover, Pakistan's apprehensions are intensified by the involvement of international actors, including the U.S., NATO allies, and regional powers like India and China, all of which have their own strategic interests in the area.

A comprehensive network of security interdependence intricately links various elements within the system. However, proximity often evokes a sense of unease, as most governments prioritize relations with neighboring countries over those farther away. Within these security complexes, the degree of security dependency is notably higher compared to units outside of them. The South Asian security complex, like other post-colonial counterparts, emerged from a history of conflict. Since 1947, the religious tensions between the Islamic state of Pakistan and the secular, multicultural republic of India have escalated into interstate military-political confrontations (Buzan, 2003). Nevertheless, the security situation in South Asia has seen substantial transformations as time has passed. The ongoing situation in Afghanistan, specifically beyond 2021, is anticipated to significantly influence the regional and global security landscape. This research seeks to examine the changing dynamics in Afghanistan using the regional security complex theory as a framework. The objective is to analyze the fundamental elements that influence the security of South Asia and global powers.

In conclusion, the Regional Security Complex Theory offers a valuable framework for evaluating the security scenario in Afghanistan and its wider regional and global ramifications. The theory emphasizes the interrelatedness of security within a specified region, where the security

concerns of states are shaped by their neighbors' actions and the broader geopolitical landscape. Afghanistan's security environment, influenced by the presence of transnational terrorist organizations and the resurgence of the Taliban, poses a complex challenge for Pakistan and its neighboring countries. As the region continues to address the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal, the likelihood of further instability remains elevated, with significant implications for both regional and global security dynamics

1.15. Organization of the study

1. **Introduction** elaborates the key ingredients of the study. Including key ingredients of study are rationale of study, significance of study, literature review, research objectives, objectives of study, methodology, and delimitation of study.
2. **Chapter-1** revolves around theoretical framework and would focus on the regional security complex theory its regional and global application comprehensively.
3. **Chapter-2** focuses on the changing strategic dynamics in Afghanistan via various factors from glaring beginning of the US Led War against terror, resurgence of Afghan Taliban, and various other factors that have changed the strategic dynamics in Afghanistan.
4. **Chapter- 3** will discuss and elucidate the regional implications and security concerned emerged in different regional states including Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, and Central Asia
5. **Chapter- 4** will broadly discuss the issues and problems that impact the global security, which may include transnational terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime.
6. **Chapter-5** Provides a comprehensive conclusion to the study toward said chapters.
7. **Chapter-6** Unveils the key findings which play an vital role in hashing the foundation of study's objectives. Additionally, this chapter incorporates the findings through questionnaire that can be considered core part of the thesis.
8. **Chapter-7** comprises on scholarly well research academic books, articles, magazines, official reports from public and private organizations, including interviews to the key academicians and practitioners.

Chapter-2

THE US WAR AGAINST TERROR: A *CRITICAL APPRAISAL*

2. Introduction

The 9/11 attack by Al-Qaeda changed the geopolitics of many regions around the globe specially of South Asia. The US response to those attacks seriously impacted security of many states around the globe, carried of ambitious global war against terror without understanding the regional geopolitical sensitivities and strategic compulsions. Apparently, the US attack on Afghanistan is viewed now from different perspectives. It is believed that the US attack on Afghanistan aimed at five key strategic objectives; first to take revenge, defeat Al-Qaeda and their Afghan Taliban allies, replace defiant Taliban regime with controlled democracy (Sayed & Hamming, 2023).

Second, after securing strategic space in Afghanistan, establish strong foothold, carry out political and economic engagement with resource rich Central Asian states and slowly undermine Russia's strategic influence in the region. Third; to deny the Chinese increasing economic influence, which is the only country at the moment which may replace the US as number one economy by 2023. Such a scenario would have been devastating for the US strategic thinkers at that time. The idea was to at least slow down the Chinese economic engagement, silk route type of initiatives for regional and global connectivity. Fourth, strategic objective would have to maintain closer check on another Muslim state with nuclear capacity- Iran. Throughout, the US presence in Afghanistan, it maintains close check on Iranian nuclear activities, carried of UAV missions to spy on Iranian nuclear sites and used all diplomatic means to dissuade Iran from becoming another Muslim state with nuclear weapons, which many undermine the US-Israel influence in the Persian Gulf or whole Middle East. Fifth objective was to keep closer check on the only Muslim country with nuclear weapons.



Figure 1 The 9/11 attack by Al-Qaeda changed the geopolitics of many regions around the globe specially of South Asia. The US response to those attacks seriously impacted security of many states around the globe, carried of ambitious global war against terror war

The US apprehensions were also valid to some extent because of number of reasons; Firstly Al-Qaeda's main leadership was hiding in Pakistan; Americans feared that they may try to get close to Pakistan's nuclear capability. There were some alleged contacts between Pakistan's ex-nuclear scientist and Al-Qaeda but there is no evidence to support that Pakistan's nuclear scientist provided Al-Qaeda with any knowhow or access to any crucial information, material or facility. Other than that, after the end of so called 'Holy War' against Soviet Union, extremism and radicalization was on its peak in Pakistan. because Pakistan played role of a frontline state, to get recruits for Afghan war the US and her allies needed more and more foot soldiers. For that purpose, Pakistan's religious zealots, military establishment and America funded and established dozens of nurseries/Madrassas to get uninterrupted supplies of religiously motivated highly trained guerrillas. It is believed that more than 250,000 people were trained and pitched in proxy war against the mighty Soviet Union. So after the abrupt US withdrawal from Afghanistan in the late 1980s the region became heavily radicalized. There was presence of many religiously motivated nurseries who saw the US attack on Afghanistan after 9/11 as an

opportunity. The presence of such groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan played havoc with the US strategic thinking after 9/11 (Khattak, 2013). These people who were once trained by the US intelligence agencies turned their guns towards America and their allies Pakistan. This was the reason that America wanted strong influence over Pakistan (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.)

Secondly, Pakistan's geographic position suited the US for her long term strategic presence in the region. Pakistan is geographically pivot in Asia. Four regions merge in Pakistan. Pakistan is connected with strategically significant East Asia through China. Chinese Western provinces can get shortest land route to Pakistani sea ports. India is largest country in South Asia and Pakistan is also part of this region. India is the largest economy and population in the region but it cannot fully utilize her potential without Pakistan's assistance (Logan, 2013). For example, India cannot directly connect with resource rich Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan without Pakistan. The other routes are unsafe, long and costly. Oil and gas rich West Asia or Middle East cannot utilize their economic potential effectively without Pakistan. Pakistan can provide short routes to West Asian states to get themselves connected with India or other powers in the region. So it was imperative for the US to maintain strategic influence over Pakistan after 9/11 (Ahmed, 2020).

Thirdly, Pakistan possesses strong military and intelligence apparatus, the Pentagon was cognizant of this fact that Pakistan can play a crucial role in the war against Al-Qaeda. There is no doubt that Pakistan played an important role in the war against terror, killed and captured many high profile Al-Qaeda leaders and operatives. Despite the fact Pakistan had alleged links with Taliban regime in Afghanistan to secure its strategic interests but at the same time Pakistan's ISI showed no mercy towards Al-Qaeda or other linked terrorist groups. The core leadership of Al-Qaeda after 9/11 was either nabbed or killed by Pakistan. So it was necessary for the US to maintain good strategic ties with a nuclear weapon state (Younus, 2020).

Fourthly, Pakistan's geography attracted the US for supplies and logistics in Afghanistan. Pakistan is connected with Afghanistan through Chaman and Torkhum borders. These two border areas and supply routes were crucial for the US supplies and operations in Afghanistan. No other country could provide the US more suitable supply routes than Pakistan. In an overall perspective the engagement in Afghanistan was not just focused on only counter terror operations against Al-Qaeda or Taliban regime but it had multifaceted fronts, which complicated and created serious troubles for the US presence in Afghanistan. The whole mess in Afghanistan and

Pakistan started during the US proxy war against Soviet Union. Al-Qaeda leadership emerged in Afghanistan after the collapse of Soviet Union. The next part of the study focus on the emergence of Al-Qaeda and how it evolved as a deadly transnational terrorist group (Khattak, 2013).

2.1 Emergence of Al-Qaeda: *Nightmare for the US*

Al-Qaeda is the most lethal terrorist group that managed to sneak into the US homeland security and carried out deadliest terrorist attack in the history of America. Al-Qaeda's act of terrorism changed the global politics and impacted on the security of many states. It is necessary to know about the emergence of Al-Qaeda as a terrorist organization. The US proxy war in Afghanistan against Soviet Union gave birth to groups like Al-Qaeda. The United States of America gathered people from all around the globe especially Muslim states to fight a so called holly war against Soviet Union. The leaders of Al-Qaeda emerged during that period and started an organized militancy against American, West and their interests around the globe. Even today the US intelligence community considers Al-Qaeda as the greatest threat to the American people, interests around the globe. It inspired many terrorist groups around the globe and their interaction with other terrorist groups seriously impacted security of many states around the globe. In 2022, the US annual public threat assessment believed that though the US her allies has degraded Al-Qaeda's capacity to launch organized global terrorist attacks, but at the same time they can seriously impact in areas like Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Libya and SAHEL region in Africa. After the disintegration of Soviet Union, Al-Qaeda emerged from Afghanistan and started vicious cycle of violence. In 1988, many Arab and other foreign fighters who were part of proxy war against the Soviet Union decided to turn their guns towards the US and her allies in Middle East and other parts of the world. The idea was to kick out westerners from Muslim lands and get back Palestinian lands from Israel. To achieve these goals, Al-Qaeda carried out numerous attacks against the US and her allies in the region and beyond. The Gulf War in 1991 was a triggering point which gave Al-Qaeda impetus to attack the US her allies because of Iraq attack and stationing the US troops on Saudi soil.

After 1991 Osama Bin Laden moved to Sudan and continued his efforts against America. After taking over Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban offered refuge to Al-Qaeda in 1996. Al-Qaeda carried out many high profile terrorist attacks against the US interests prior to 9/11 attacks which forced the US and its allies to increase counter terror campaign against Al-Qaeda. In 1998, Al-

Qaeda targeted US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in which more than 224 people were killed and scores got injured. Soon after the attack the US air force conducted massive air strikes on Al-Qaeda's safe heavens on Sudan. Later in 2000 Al-Qaeda targeted USS Cole in Yemen in which 17 people were killed and 34 got injured. The US labeled Al-Qaeda as Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1999 and seized their funds and properties. In 2001, AL-Qaeda carried out the most devastating terrorist attack on the US soil and destroyed twin towers and also targeted Pentagon building. Soon after the 9/11 attacks the US launched massive attack on Afghanistan and war against terror changed the global strategic dynamics. The US global war against terrorism degraded Al-Qaeda's capacity to target the US homeland again but it has splintered into many small groups and spread over many regions around the globe. Especially large concentration of Al-Qaeda is found in Somalia, Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Libya, Sahel region and Afghanistan (Brisard & Dasquie, 2002, p. 17).

2.2. Core Leadership Al-Qaeda

Osama Bin Laden was the longest serving Al-Qaeda chief until 2011. The US special forces conducted a secret raid in Abbottabad and killed OBL. Soon after his death his close confidant Ayman al Zawahiri became the leader of Al-Qaeda who vowed to take revenge and continue his struggle against America and its allies. Zawahiri was also killed by the US drone strike. The United States of America located Al-Zawahiri in Sherpur area of Kabul and took him out with Ninja Missile which cut him into pieces without any collateral damage. The successful strike shows that even the Americans left Afghanistan but their human intelligence is still strong. After the demise of Al-Zawahiri, the next in line is Saif al-Adel. The US also killed Ayman Al-Zawahiri's former deputy, Abu Khayr al Masri in Syria in 2017. Later Al-Masri's replacement was killed by Mossad in Iran in August 2020. Osama bin Laden's son Hamza was killed in Af-Pak region in 2019. It is reported that he is hiding in Iran, many counter terror experts believe that Iran is relatively peaceful place for hardened militants (Brisard & Dasquie, 2002, p. 18).

While after 2021, Afghanistan has again become safe haven for al-Qaeda and other transnational terrorist outfits. Under Taliban regime Al-Qaeda is again flourishing in Afghanistan, it has proved by the recent killing of Ayman Al-Zawahiri who was living in a posh area of Kabul just a few kilometers away from the US and other key consulates. Al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan under Taliban regime would give them sign of relief and they may reenergize,

reorganize and plan devastating attacks America, West or regional countries especially Pakistan, because of its key role in the war against terror (Brisard & Dasquie, 2002, p. 18).

Although, Al-Qaeda is secure under Taliban regime, but still they have maintained strategic silence and not coming up with any aggressive moves. The reason behind Al-Qaeda's strategic silence is simple, they want Taliban to get recognition from the international community. Secondly, they don't want unwarranted criticism on their Taliban hosts. The world at large would criticise Taliban regime for sheltering 9/11 planners. This is the reason that Al-Qaeda is hiding in Afghanistan and maintaining intentional low profile to avoid detection and political pressure on their allies the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network.

Al-Qaeda is closely aligned with local terrorist groups specially TTP, IMU, ETIM, Taliban and others. Such an affiliation has increased the capacity, outreach and lethality of Al-Qaeda. Such collaboration with local terrorist networks has worked as force multiplier for Al-Qaeda. Now these transnational terrorist groups can collaborate, share funds, modern techniques, recruits, IED making techniques, Guerilla Tactics, weapon and equipment with each other. As of today Al-Qaeda is not just one group, it has opened up many sub branches around the globe and working as splinter groups. Such a development would have devastating impact for regional and global security. As of today, Al-Qaeda got affiliate groups in Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Iraq, Syria, North Africa specially in Somalia and Sahel region. Al-Qaeda is closely working with local terrorist group Al-Shabab and carrying out vicious attacks against these states and their partners in the region and beyond. Al-Qaeda's local affiliations are not new phenomenon. Al-Qaeda in 2004 opened a sub branch with the name Al-Qaeda in Iraq under their leader Mosab Al- Zarqawi (UNSC, 2023).

The AQI led violent insurgency in Iraq against the US forces and later the AQI became the most notorious and dangerous terrorist group Islamic State in 2014. The US and Saudi government tried hard to dismantle Al-Qaeda network from this region but in 2009 many Al-Qaeda's splinter groups got refuge and support in volatile Yemen. With the increased terrorist tendencies, a group emerged after 2009 with the name Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula and carried out numerous attacks in the region and beyond. The Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula proved to be hardened group of terrorists who emerged from the volatile security situation and civil war in Yemen after 2011. Al-Qaeda's largest concentration is there in Somalia and they are closely aligned with Al-Shabab militant group there. This group emerged as one of the most lethal terrorist group in Africa

because of the weak institutions, poverty, illiteracy and poor counter terror mechanism. It is expected that after Afghanistan, this is the largest Al-Qaeda base in the world and which may likely to continue in near future. The emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as a significant splinter group of Al-Qaeda is rooted in Algeria's civil war of the 1990s. AQIM later aligned itself with Al-Qaeda, becoming its affiliated entity in the Islamic Maghreb. The period of 2006-2007 marked a surge in AQIM's activities, extending its reach beyond the region with a notable increase in attacks. This rise in AQIM's influence had a consequential effect on various terrorist groups in North Africa, including the bolstering of the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM). JNIM, formed in 2017 through the amalgamation of AQIM's Sahel branch and multiple Mali-based terrorist factions, has since intensified terrorist activities in the Sahel region. The upsurge in violence has been characterized by more sophisticated and coordinated militant attacks.

Al-Qaeda's one of the largest concentration was in Syria. In 2011, security situation got worst in Syria. Amid civil war in Syria many terrorist groups got refuge there and established their network. After 2011, Al-Qaeda in Iraq or Islamic State in Iraq started their terrorist activities in Syria as Al-Nusra Front. Although Al-Nusra front did never acknowledge to have ties with AQI/ISI but was designated by the US state department as FTO in 2012. After consolidating its position Al-Nusra front cut their ties with AQI/ISI AND denounced ISIS Chief Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi. In 2017, the Nusra front changed its strategic orientation and merged together with other terrorist factions in Syria and became Hayat Tahrir al Sham- (HTS). The HTS leaders who controlled most parts of Syria's idlib province in the northeast cut their ties with Al-Qaeda to preserve their own distinct identity.

The United States of America's counter terror efforts against Al-Qaeda has entered into a third decade. The US used multipronged strategies to degrade and eradicate this transnational terrorist group but the US strategies were not enough. Because this group has splintered into many factions and now it is operating in many parts of the world. Initially, the US targeted Al-Qaeda positions with wide range of air strikes in more than seven countries since 2012. After 2021, the US pulled out its forces from Afghanistan and focused on Somalia, where they the US is supporting local forces in counter terror training and support missions. Apart from the direct military action the United States of America is providing assistance "by, with, and through" local partners, including through the provision of security assistance and, in some cases, logistical and/or advisory

support. The US is also helping other states in combating terrorism through cutting the financial aid through an effective sanctions mechanism and other strategies (Illiardi, 2009).

2.3. Most Terrifying Incident in America: *The 9/11 Saga*

The September 11 attacks, orchestrated by nineteen terrorists affiliated with the al-Qaeda extremist group, represent a significant turning point in modern history. These meticulously planned hijackings and suicide bombings in 2001 targeted key locations in the United States, resulting in unprecedented devastation and loss of life. American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175 deliberately crashed into the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center, respectively, while American Airlines Flight 77 struck the Pentagon. Additionally, United Airlines Flight 93, bound for the US Capitol, was thwarted by courageous passengers and crashed in a field in Pennsylvania (Illiardi, 2009).

The toll of the attacks was staggering, with approximately 2,750 lives lost in New York City alone, 184 fatalities at the Pentagon, and 40 deaths in Pennsylvania. All nineteen terrorists involved in the attacks perished, but the impact reverberated far beyond the immediate casualties. Over 400 police officers and firefighters, who bravely responded to the unfolding crisis, tragically lost their lives, underscoring the immense sacrifice made in the line of duty (Grare, 2006).

Central to the planning and execution of the September 11 attacks was Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda. Motivated by his distorted perceptions of the United States' vulnerability, bin Laden progressively became convinced of America's weaknesses in the years leading up to the attacks. This belief was bolstered by historical events such as the 1983 Beirut barracks bombings, which resulted in the withdrawal of US forces from Lebanon, and subsequent US military withdrawals from Somalia and Vietnam (Brisard & Dasquie, 2002, p. 17). Bin Laden's misguided convictions drove him to orchestrate a coordinated assault aimed at striking at the heart of American power and influence.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, commonly referred to as "KSM," emerged as the central figure behind the meticulous planning and execution of the September 11 attacks. Hailing from Kuwait, Mohammed's early years were marked by radicalization, leading him to affiliate with the Muslim Brotherhood at the tender age of 16. His academic pursuits led him to the United States, where he graduated from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in 1986. Driven by his fervent jihadist ideology, Mohammed embarked on a transformative journey to Pakistan and Afghanistan, seeking to participate in the jihad against the Soviet Union following its invasion of

Afghanistan in 1979. It was during this period that Mohammed's extremist convictions solidified, propelling him towards a path of violent extremism.

In a revealing interview with Al Jazeera journalist Yosri Fouda in 2002, Mohammed disclosed his involvement in a conspiracy to orchestrate simultaneous attacks on approximately twelve American aircraft in Asia during the mid-1990s. This elaborate scheme, known as "Bojinka," aimed to inflict widespread devastation but ultimately failed to materialize (Brisard & Dasquie, 2002, p. 19). However, Mohammed's determination to carry out these attacks remained unwavering. Aligning himself with bin Laden, he willingly seized the opportunity to realize his long-standing ambition. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and bin Laden convened in Tora Bora, Afghanistan in 1996. The 9/11 Commission, formally known as the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, was established in 2002 by President George W. Bush and the United States government. Congress conducted an investigation into the events of 2001. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed disclosed a plot in which he intended to provide guidance to pilots with the specific intent of deliberately crashing airplanes into structures within the United States. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed devised this tactical progression, while al-Qaeda provided the necessary resources and assistance for its execution. In contrast, Osama bin Laden incorporated the attacks on New York and Washington into a broader strategic plan aimed at catalyzing political change in the Middle East as part of his anti-United States agenda (9/11 Commission Report, 2004).

In 2002, Yosri Fouda, a journalist employed by Al Jazeera, conducted an interview with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Fouda claims that Mohammed had devised a plan to explode approximately twelve American aircraft in Asia during the mid-1990s. The plot, referred to as "Bojinka," ultimately failed. Nevertheless, Mohammed's determination to execute such strikes remained unwavering. By associating himself with bin Laden, he embraced the chance to finally accomplish his longstanding goal (9/11 Commission Report, 2004).

The fundamental elements of the September 11 conspiracy were formulated in Hamburg. In 1999, four well-known aviators and strategists from the "Hamburg cell," who would later take control of the September 11 attacks, coincidentally met an Islamist extremist on a train in Germany. Among them was the main hijacker, Mohammed Atta. The person engaged in a conversation with them about their participation in jihad in the Russian region of Chechnya. The extremist facilitated the exchange of information between the Hamburg gang and an al-Qaeda operative residing in Germany. The agent apprised them of the difficulties linked to journeying to

Chechnya, particularly the escalating occurrence of people being detained in Georgia. He proposed considering Afghanistan as a potential option (Brisard & Dasquie, 2002, p. 17).

Afghanistan played a pivotal part in the establishment of al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, it was the exposure of certain individuals implicated in the conspiracy to Western encounters that heightened their passion and enhanced their capacity to execute the attacks. Three out of the four individuals chosen to operate the hijacked airplanes on September 11, along with one of the main planners, Ramzi Binalshibh, had a significant increase in radicalization while living in Hamburg. All of them were encouraged to adopt a more assertive stance due to a mix of perceived or actual bias, estrangement, and a strong desire to return home. They progressively disengaged from the rest of the world, progressively embracing more extreme views. In the end, the group of friends agreed to participate in bin Laden's worldwide holy war, and in 1999 they traveled to Afghanistan to join al-Qaeda (Illiardi, 2009).

While residing in the United States, Atta maintained regular communication with Binalshibh via email to provide consistent updates on the progress of the operation. To hide his actions, Atta utilized a tactic of imitating communication with his fiancée, "Jenny." He used an apparently innocent code to inform Binalshibh that their planning and level of preparedness for the attacks were almost finished. Atta conveyed in a concise message that the commencement of the first semester is scheduled to occur in three weeks. Additionally, he specified a cumulative count of nineteen diplomas for private education and four examinations. In this particular context, the term "certificates" pertains to the specific code that was employed to uniquely identify the nineteen individuals who carried out the hijacking operations on behalf of the al-Qaeda organization. Similarly, the phrase "exams" refers to the exact locations where the planned targeted attacks were intended to take place.

The catastrophic events of September 11 unfolded rapidly, with the south tower of the World Trade Centre collapsing at 9:59 AM, followed by the north tower just 29 minutes later (Illiardi, 2009). This marked the beginning of a harrowing sequence of events that engulfed Lower Manhattan in clouds of smoke and debris. Amidst the chaos, numerous adjacent buildings succumbed to significant damage and collapse, amplifying the magnitude of the disaster. In the aftermath, a state of panic gripped office workers and civilians as they sought refuge amidst the unfolding calamity. Despite immediate efforts to initiate rescue operations and assess the extent of the devastation, the fires at the World Trade Centre site persisted for over three months,

underscoring the enormity of the challenge faced by first responders.

The toll of the attacks was staggering, with approximately 2,750 lives lost in New York City alone, 184 at the Pentagon, and 40 in Pennsylvania due to the crash of a hijacked plane (Grare, 2006). The cumulative death toll approached nearly 3,000 individuals, leaving an indelible mark of tragedy on the nation's collective consciousness. Amidst the crisis, the selfless heroism of approximately 400 New York City police officers and firefighters was tragically demonstrated as they responded with valor to the emergency (Grare, 2006). Their sacrifice further underscores the profound loss experienced by the community in the wake of the September 11 attacks

On September 14, President Bush visited "Ground Zero" in New York City, where he stood atop a fire engine and addressed rescue workers through a bullhorn. His empathetic response to a worker with a hearing impairment became an iconic moment of his presidency. Following the attacks, President Bush's approval ratings soared from 55 percent to an extraordinary 90 percent, reflecting the nation's rallying behind his decisive response (Brisard & Dasquie, 2002). The attacks, namely the demolition of the twin towers, which is the most prominent emblem in New York City, inflicted significant psychological distress. Unlike the relatively isolated location of the Pearl Harbour attack in 1941, which was later likened to the events of September 11, the World Trade Centre was positioned in the heart of one of the most densely populated cities on the planet. A substantial number of individuals witnessed the attacks firsthand, while a multitude of witnesses documented the events through photography or video recording.

Moreover, a plethora of folks witnessed the unfolding of the catastrophe in real-time through televised broadcasts. After the events of September 11, the media repeatedly aired the footage of the attacks, as well as the images of numerous mournful individuals gathering at "Ground Zero" - the widely known designation for the location where the towers were previously located. Many of these folks tightly held pictures of their missing loved ones, passionately searching for any indication of their fate. Furthermore, there was a significant disruption in global markets. The buildings were located in the central sector of New York City, known for its prominent financial activities. The destruction of Lower Manhattan's infrastructure, along with concerns about a possible stock market upheaval, resulted in the closure of New York's financial markets for a consecutive period of four trading days. Markets subsequently experienced an unprecedented decline. The attacks also led to the trapping of a significant number of travellers across the United States, as commercial aviation movement in U.S. airspace

was suspended until September 13. It took a few days for normal service to resume, albeit with stricter security measures in effect (Khattak, 2013).

The September 11 attacks showcased a significant triumph for al-Qaeda in terms of strategy. The strikes were meticulously orchestrated and targeted various strategic locations within the adversary's centre region. Furthermore, the impact of the attacks was amplified by their global broadcast, reaching an audience of incalculable magnitude. The September 11 attack, known as the "propaganda of the deed," occurred in a highly visible media hub, guaranteeing extensive media coverage of the incident. From the Munich Olympics in 1972 until now, there has not been a real-time terrorist act viewed by a substantial worldwide audience. Despite its relative obscurity before to September 11, al-Qaeda quickly gained global recognition following the attack, becoming as a major entity (Office of the Inspector General [OIG], 2007). Following the September 11 attacks, nations aligned with the United States demonstrated solidarity, epitomized by the headline in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, "We are all Americans now." In Iran, a significant gathering convened in Tehran for a solemn candlelight vigil. The United States swiftly amassed compelling evidence that convinced the majority of nations of al-Qaeda's responsibility for the attacks. Prior to this tragic event, al-Qaeda had been implicated in other acts of terrorism targeting Americans, with Osama bin Laden openly expressing animosity towards the United States through various statements. Al-Qaeda had established its principal operational base in Afghanistan and forged a formidable alliance with the ruling Taliban faction in the country (Office of the Inspector General [OIG], 2007).

However, the Taliban declined the United States' requests to hand over bin Laden and put a stop to al-Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan. NATO demonstrated a momentous action by invoking Article 5 for the first time, so granting its members the authority to collectively retaliate in defence of themselves. Consequently, on October 7th, the United States and its partner military forces initiated an assault on Afghanistan (see to Afghanistan War). In a brief period, a significant amount of militants were either eradicated or apprehended, while the highest-ranking individuals of the Taliban and al-Qaeda were compelled to find shelter. Furthermore, the U.S. government exerted significant endeavours to locate and apprehend additional al-Qaeda operatives and sympathisers globally, prioritising the fight against terrorism as the central objective of U.S. foreign policy. This legislation temporarily augmented the search and surveillance authorities of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other law enforcement organisations to a notable

extent. In addition, a Department of Homeland Security was established within the highest echelon of the executive government (Department of Homeland Security, 2003).

The September 11 attacks, while inflicting significant destruction and loss of life, ultimately represented a strategic setback for al-Qaeda. Despite the devastation they caused, these attacks led to the loss of al-Qaeda's stronghold in Afghanistan. In response, key members of al-Qaeda's leadership, including Saif al-Adel from Egypt, who initially opposed the attacks, sought to frame the Western intervention in Afghanistan as a victory for the organization. This narrative was propagated in an attempt to rally support for al-Qaeda's cause. In a subsequent interview conducted four years after the attacks, al-Adel, a prominent military figure within al-Qaeda, acknowledged the strategic intent behind the assaults on New York and Washington. He revealed that the attacks were meticulously planned to goad the United States into impulsive actions, aiming to provoke hasty and potentially detrimental responses. Consequently, the United States launched a military campaign in Afghanistan in response to the attacks.

However, there is scant evidence to suggest that al-Qaeda's leadership made specific preparations for a potential American invasion of Afghanistan in the weeks leading up to September 11. Instead, their focus was primarily on bracing for possible airstrikes or cruise missile attacks by the United States, prompting them to vacate their training sites. This nuanced understanding underscores the complex dynamics and strategic calculations at play within al-Qaeda's leadership in the lead-up to the September 11 attacks. Bin Laden's miscalculation regarding the anticipated response of the United States to the September 11 attacks proved to be a critical error in judgment. He believed that the U.S. would either withdraw from the Middle East, similar to its actions in Somalia in 1993, or retaliate with ineffective cruise missile strikes, akin to the response following al-Qaeda's bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. However, neither of these scenarios materialized.

Instead, the United States executed a targeted military operation against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This operation involved precision airstrikes conducted by American airpower, significant deployment of Northern Alliance forces—a coalition of mujahideen militias controlling a portion of northern Afghanistan—and the involvement of over 300 U.S. personnel. Notably, a contingent of Special Forces operators, along with 110 CIA agents, operated in the field. The successful ousting of the Taliban from power occurred in November, merely two months after the September 11 attacks. This decisive action, orchestrated by the Northern Alliance with support

from the United States, marked a pivotal moment in the post-9/11 landscape. However, it also marked the beginning of what would become the longest war in U.S. history, as the nation embarked on efforts to prevent the Taliban and its al-Qaeda allies from regaining control.

In December 2001, the government was tasked with finding a facility to accommodate inmates after the Taliban's downfall. They made the decision to keep them at Guantánamo Bay, an area that the United States has been leasing from Cuba since 1903. On December 27, 2001, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld asserted that Guantánamo Bay, situated in Cuba, was deemed the most favourable selection in comparison to alternative possibilities. The administration officials found it appealing because they believed it granted them the power to imprison persons beyond the jurisdiction of American laws, thereby bypassing their right to challenge their detention. However, what is the status of Guant?Guantanamo Bay was located about 90 miles (145 km) away from the coast of Florida, making it easily accessible for various organisations responsible for collecting intelligence on a suspected large number of high-risk terrorists. Over time, the convict population at that location surpassed 800, but by the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks, the number of prisoners had decreased to less than 175 (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.).

On January 29, 2002, President Bush introduced a new concept of preemptive warfare in his State of the Union address. This doctrine expanded upon the existing notion that the United States would engage in warfare to prevent an adversary from launching an immediate attack on the nation. Bush emphasized his commitment to promptly addressing evolving threats and escalating dangers, expressing a reluctance to adopt a passive stance in the face of imminent peril. He declared that the United States would not tolerate the threat posed by the world's most dangerous nations possessing the most destructive weapons, labeling these governments as an "axis of evil," which included Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Subsequently, on June 1, 2002, President Bush further elucidated his concept of preemptive war during a graduation speech for West Point cadets. Addressing the graduating students and their families, he underscored the importance of not delaying action until threats are fully recognized, as this could lead to unnecessary delays. Bush firmly believed that overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq would serve as a deterrent to organizations like al-Qaeda and other potential assailants of the United States. Undersecretary of Defense Douglas J. Feith elaborated on the approach adopted by the United States after September 11th, emphasizing the thorough evaluation of the worldwide

terrorist network to anticipate the next possible attack on the United States (Illiardi, 2009).

In addition, President Bush granted authorization for the initiation of Operation Iraqi Freedom on March 19, 2003, just before the invasion of Iraq. The aim of this operation was to advance worldwide peace and safeguard the welfare and freedom of the Iraqi populace. May the soldiers receive celestial blessings. The United States took the lead in initiating the invasion of Iraq on March 20th. Within a three-week timeframe, the United States military effectively seized control of Baghdad, and the widely televised images of the prominent statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled from its pedestal gained widespread recognition (Illiardi, 2009).

2.4. The September 11 Commission and its Findings

A group headed by President Bush was specifically tasked with looking into the September 11 attacks in 2002. After two years of work, the commission released its final conclusions. The commission came to the conclusion that, before to September 11, 2001, the CIA had committed a major mistake when it neglected to place Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar, two suspected al-Qaeda members who had received training in manipulating people on aeroplanes, on the State Department's "watch list." Following their attendance at a terrorist meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on January 5, 2000, Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, two suspected al-Qaeda operatives, came under the radar of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (9/11 Commission Report, 2004).



Abdullah Azzam, who issued a fatwa in 1984 that called upon Muslims everywhere to "join the caravan" of the Afghan jihad. He and bin Laden set up the Services Bureau in Peshawar to facilitate the movement of Arabs into the war.

Bin Laden in a cave in Jalalabad in 1988, at about the time that he began al-Qaeda



Below: Azzam in the Panjshir Valley in 1988, where he traveled to meet with Ahmed Shah Massoud, the greatest of the Afghan commanders in the war against the Soviet invasion. Massoud sits next to Azzam with his arm around Azzam's son Ibrahim. Shortly after this visit Azzam and two of his sons, including Ibrahim, were assassinated in a bombing that has never been solved.



Figure 2 Osama Bin Ladin with his Partner

Despite being on the watch list, the two individuals managed to enter the United States using their genuine identities. On January 15, 2000, they arrived in Los Angeles, marking a significant development in the timeline of their activities (9/11 Commission Report, 2004). However, the CIA failed to share crucial information about their identities with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), hindering efforts to track them once they were inside the country.

Although the FBI could have potentially leveraged this intelligence to locate the suspected terrorists upon their entry into the United States, the CIA's omission of vital details impeded these efforts (9/11 Commission Report, 2004). An investigation revealed that only a limited number of CIA experts, along with a significant contingent of CIA officers and analysts, were responsible for

this oversight (9/11 Commission Report, 2004). Despite the review of relevant cables by fifty to sixty CIA personnel, no further action was taken to address the presence of the suspected al-Qaeda members on U.S. soil (9/11 Commission Report, 2004). By May 2001, only a small group of law enforcement personnel were aware of the second suspect's visit to Los Angeles (9/11 Commission Report, 2004). This information was disclosed to select individuals, indicating a lack of comprehensive dissemination of intelligence within law enforcement agencies. Additionally, the revelation that one of the terrorists possessed a valid visa to enter the United States was only shared with a handful of officers, further highlighting the breakdown in communication and coordination among relevant authorities (9/11 Commission Report, 2004).

If law enforcement officials had acquired intelligence regarding the identities of the suspected hijackers, it would have been quite straightforward to find and detain them in California. Under their real names, they rented an apartment, obtained driver's licences, opened bank accounts, purchased a car, and enrolled in flying instruction at a neighbouring institution. Mihdhar went so far as to include his name in the local telephone directory. On August 24, 2001, two individuals suspected of having affiliations with al-Qaeda were included in the watch-list and their identities were disclosed to the FBI. The CIA officer, who was working in conjunction with the FBI at the time, expressed apprehensions that prompted this action. Nevertheless, the FBI just sent a "Routine" letter to formally request an investigation into Mihdhar. Hazmi and Mihdhar, two of the hijackers, were on board the American Airlines flight that intentionally collided with the Pentagon some weeks later (Illardi, 2009).

According to the CIA inspector general, if the FBI had been notified and both agencies had implemented appropriate operational actions, it may have resulted in the surveillance of both al-Mihdhar and al-Hazmi. Nevertheless, surveillance might have possibly yielded vital intelligence regarding aviation instruction, financial support, and associations with other individuals implicated in the 9/11 attacks. The main inadequacy at the FBI was the handling of the Zacarias Moussaoui case. Moussaoui, a French citizen of Moroccan descent, registered for a flight training programme in Minnesota in the summer of 2001. The teachers noted his little comprehension of flying and unorthodox conduct, which strayed from the anticipated standards of aviation students. After being notified by the flight school, the FBI arrested Moussaoui on August 16th for violating the terms of his visa. Despite subsequent popular rumours, it is important to emphasise that Moussaoui was not the person described as the "20th hijacker." Nevertheless, he did obtain monetary assistance from

Ramzi Binalshibh, a person implicated in the orchestration of the September 11 attacks. Moussaoui explicitly stated his intention to take part in a subsequent series of al-Qaeda attacks following those in New York and Washington (Office of the Inspector General [OIG], 2007).

2.5. The Hunt for Osama Bin Laden

The pursuit of Osama bin Laden, the notorious leader of the extremist group al-Qaeda, stands as one of the most significant endeavors in contemporary counterterrorism efforts (Bergen, 2011). Following the devastating September 11 attacks in 2001, which were orchestrated by al-Qaeda under bin Laden's leadership, the United States and its allies embarked on an extensive and relentless hunt to locate and bring him to justice. This pursuit spanned over a decade and involved multifaceted strategies encompassing intelligence gathering, military operations, and international cooperation (Bowden, 2012).

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, a seminal military operation unfolded, characterized by the strategic invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, spearheaded by the United States under the banner of Operation Enduring Freedom (Coll, 2004). The primary thrust of this military endeavor was the systematic dismantling of al-Qaeda's operational infrastructure within Afghanistan and the ousting of the Taliban regime, which served as a haven for terrorist activities and provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden. Integral to this campaign were intricate maneuvers orchestrated by intelligence agencies and specialized military units, encompassing targeted raids, covert missions, and precision drone strikes, strategically deployed in locations suspected to house bin Laden.

The apex of this protracted pursuit materialized on May 2, 2011, marked by a daring incursion executed by United States Navy SEALs into a compound situated in Abbottabad, Pakistan—a site believed to harbor bin Laden (Coll, 2004). The successful culmination of this operation resulted in the neutralization of bin Laden, a significant milestone in the quest for justice against the mastermind of the September 11 attacks and numerous other terrorist atrocities. This watershed moment underscores the intricate labyrinth of challenges inherent in combating global terrorism, highlighting the imperative of international collaboration, seamless intelligence sharing mechanisms, and the integration of comprehensive strategies integrating military precision and law enforcement acumen.

2.6. The US Attack on Afghanistan: *Vengeance*

The Al-Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee, established under UN Security Council Resolution 1267, represents a pivotal response to the escalating influence of both organizations,

marked by the leadership of Osama bin Laden (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.). Bin Laden's stewardship of al-Qaeda, rooted in Afghanistan and Peshawar, Pakistan during the late 1980s, later extended to Sudan in 1991 before his eventual return to Afghanistan in the mid-1990s (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.). Concurrently, the emergence of the Taliban post-Afghanistan's civil war, following the Soviet occupation, provided a conducive environment for al-Qaeda's operations, offering them sanctuary within the region. Central to this narrative is the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, leader of the Northern Alliance—a prominent coalition opposing the Taliban—by agents affiliated with al-Qaeda, significantly weakening the resistance against the Taliban (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.). Massoud, revered as the "Lion of the Panjshir" and renowned for his guerrilla warfare strategies, served as a formidable obstacle to Taliban dominance. In retrospect, analysts such as Peter Bergen argue that Massoud's assassination served as a catalytic event preceding the 9/11 attacks (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.).

The UN's imposition of sanctions, including restrictions on financial assets, travel operations, and weapons transportation, underscores the international community's recognition of the grave threat posed by these terrorist entities (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.). This multifaceted response, initiated through Resolution 1267, reflects a concerted effort to curb the operational capacities of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, pivotal in maintaining global security in the face of transnational terrorism.

2.7 An Al-Qaeda, Taliban Nexus

Resolution 1267, passed by the UN Security Council, created the Sanctions Committee specifically for al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This committee categorises both factions as terrorist organisations and enforces penalties on their financial assets, travel, and weapons trafficking. The United Nations' decision comes after a time when al-Qaeda has been gaining power and under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden supervised the activities of the terrorist outfit from Afghanistan and Peshawar, Pakistan in the late 1980s. Subsequently, he moved to Sudan in 1991 and eventually returned to Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. After the Soviet occupation, the Taliban offered a safe haven for al-Qaeda to conduct its operations, following the end of Afghanistan's civil war. Ahmad Shah Massoud, the senior leader of the Northern Alliance, a united front strongly opposing the Taliban administration, was assassinated by al-Qaeda agents who planned and executed an intentional act of killing. The assassination of Massoud, a highly skilled practitioner of guerrilla warfare renowned as the Lion of the Panjshir, inflicts a significant setback on the anti-

Taliban resistance. The relationship between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban has been a subject of significant scrutiny and debate within the realm of counterterrorism and international relations. Often described as a symbiotic alliance, the connection between these two groups dates back to the early 1990s when Al-Qaeda, under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, found sanctuary in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban regime (Rashid, 2000).

Despite the military defeat suffered by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the nexus between the two groups endured in the form of a resilient insurgency (Jones, 2018). Following their ouster from power, the Taliban regrouped and launched an insurgency against the U.S.-led coalition forces and the Afghan government. During this period, Al-Qaeda continued to provide ideological inspiration, training, and occasional operational support to the Taliban insurgency, albeit to a lesser extent than before. The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan in recent years has reignited concerns about the enduring Al-Qaeda-Taliban nexus. While the Taliban has sought to portray itself as a nationalist insurgency focused on reclaiming control of Afghanistan, the presence of Al-Qaeda elements within its ranks raises alarm bells about the potential resurgence of international terrorism emanating from Afghan soil. In conclusion, the relationship between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban has been characterized by mutual cooperation, ideological affinity, and shared objectives (Jones, 2018). While the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 disrupted their operational capabilities, the enduring insurgency led by the Taliban and the continued presence of Al-Qaeda elements in Afghanistan underscore the persistent nature of their alliance. Efforts to address the Al-Qaeda-Taliban nexus remain a critical component of global counterterrorism efforts and the stabilization of Afghanistan.

The Taliban administration swiftly crumbles following their defeat in Mazar-e-Sharif on November 9, 2001, at the hands of Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek military commander, and his loyal forces. Over the next week, the coalition forces and the Northern Alliance initiated military campaigns that resulted in the complete annihilation of the Taliban's fortified positions in Taloqan, Bamiyan, Herat, Kabul, and Jalalabad. The offensives took place on November 11 in Taloqan and Bamiyan, November 12 in Herat, November 13 in Kabul, and November 14 in Jalalabad. The adoption of Resolution 1378 by the UN Security Council took place on November 14. This resolution emphasises the importance of the United Nations in creating a provisional administration and calls on member nations to contribute peacekeeping personnel to enhance stability and facilitate the delivery of relief (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.).

Following the successful detection of al-Qaeda leader bin Laden in the well-equipped Tora Bora cave complex southeast of Kabul, Afghan militias engaged in an intense two-week battle (December 3 to 17) against al-Qaeda militants, resulting in the deaths of several hundred individuals (BBC News, 2001). The subsequent escape of bin Laden, believed to have fled to Pakistan on horseback on December 16th, merely a day before Afghan officials apprehended twenty of his remaining associates, underscores the tumultuous nature of the conflict (BBC News, 2001). Despite compelling evidence pointing to bin Laden's presence in Tora Bora, the U.S. military refrained from initiating the attack, prompting criticism regarding the perceived lack of assertiveness among American forces (BBC News, 2001).

The mission was executed by a disorganized coalition of Afghan fighters, led by figures such as Hazrat Ali, Haji Zaman, and Haji Zahir (BBC News, 2001). However, subsequent assessments and critiques raised concerns about the efficacy and coordination of this effort, particularly in light of the high-profile nature of the target and the strategic significance of apprehending bin Laden (BBC News, 2001). This episode highlights the complexities and challenges inherent in conducting military operations in rugged and remote terrains, compounded by the dynamic and fluid nature of alliances and leadership structures within Afghan militias.

Subsequent to their successful seizure of Kabul in November 2001, the United Nations convened a pivotal conference in Bonn, Germany, inviting key Afghan factions, including the Northern Alliance and a faction led by the former monarch, excluding the Taliban. Publicly endorsed through UN Security Council Resolution 1383, the Bonn Agreement was formally acknowledged by the parties on December 5, 2001. This landmark agreement, reportedly facilitated significantly by Iranian officials, appointed Hamid Karzai as the head of the interim administration and established an international peacekeeping force tasked with ensuring stability in Kabul (BBC News, 2001).

The creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) followed as a sequel to the Bonn Agreement, enacted through UN Security Council Resolution 1386, which came into force on December 20, 2001 (United Nations, n.d.). This significant juncture, marking the Taliban's capitulation in Kandahar and the subsequent expulsion of their leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, from the city, is often synonymous with the downfall of the Taliban regime. Consequently, Pashtun rulers assumed control in Kandahar, instituting tribal governance (BBC News, 2001). Despite these developments, remnants of al-Qaeda leadership persisted in evading

capture, often taking refuge in the mountainous terrain, suggesting that the fall of the Taliban was merely nominal (BBC News, 2001)..

The commencement of Operation Anaconda represents a significant terrestrial military campaign, surpassing the scale of the prior Tora Bora operation. The operation targets over eight hundred militants affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, located in the Shah-i-Kot Valley, south of Gardez city in Paktia Province. Presently, there are approximately 2,000 American personnel and 1,000 Afghan soldiers engaged in ongoing combat operations against the terrorists. Although Anaconda is a substantial military operation, it does not signify an expansion of the overall war effort. Instead, the strategists at the Pentagon opt to reallocate military and intelligence resources from Afghanistan to Iraq, since Iraq is becoming seen as a significant menace to the United States in the "war on terror." President Bush advocates for the revitalization and rebuilding of Afghanistan in a speech delivered at the Virginia Military Institute. "By assisting in the advancement of a liberated Afghanistan that is devoid of this malevolent force and offers improved living conditions for its inhabitants, we are upholding the admirable principles set forth by George Marshall," he asserts, alluding to the Marshall Plan that effectively revitalised Western Europe following World War II. However, the United States and its allies are not effectively implementing a reconstruction budget for Afghanistan that is comparable to the Marshall Plan. From 2001 to 2009, the United States Congress allocates around \$38 billion in humanitarian and reconstruction aid to Afghanistan. Karzai, the Chairman of the Interim Administration of Afghanistan, has been designated to lead the country's transitional administration. He was chosen through a fast-tracked loya jirga held in Kabul, with 1,550 delegates (including approximately 200 women) from all 364 districts of Afghanistan. Karzai, the leader of the influential Popalzai tribe of Durrani Pashtuns, came back to Afghanistan from Pakistan following the 9/11 attacks with the aim of mobilising Pashtun opposition against the Taliban. Some analysts contend that Karzai exhibits a degree of tolerance towards corruption perpetrated by those belonging to his tribe and inside his cabinet. The Northern Alliance, consisting mainly of the Tajik ethnic minority, has been unable to establish a Prime Ministership.

However, they effectively limit the president's authority by granting significant powers to the elected parliament. These capabilities include the ability to reject nominees for top officials and to remove a president through the impeachment process. ResultThe U.S. military establishes a civil affairs framework to synchronise reconstruction efforts with the United Nations and civilian

groups, while simultaneously bolstering the power of the Kabul government. The provincial reconstruction teams, commonly known as PRTs, were constituted in a progressive fashion. Their establishment began in Gardez in November, and was subsequently followed by Bamiyan, Kunduz, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar, and Herat. The member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) ultimately have the responsibility for the individual Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Although the policy is acknowledged for enhancing security measures for aid agencies, it does not receive universal acclaim. There is growing concern over the absence of a centralised regulatory body in the PRT system, resulting in disorder and insufficient service supply. The Institute of Peace assessment describes the approach to security and development as "improvised" or "unplanned." The critique extends beyond the PRT programme and becomes a significant component of the NATO war effort, as a complex system of national restrictions limits the actions of member soldiers. Sceptics argue that this restriction hampers the efficiency of the collaboration.

Donald Rumsfeld, the esteemed United States Secretary of Defense, convened a press conference in Kabul to formally declare the culmination of significant military maneuvers (Smith, 2003). This proclamation, in consonance with President Bush's heralding of "mission accomplished," marks the termination of hostilities in Iraq (Jones, 2003). Rumsfeld expounds that a consensus among President Bush, U.S. Central Command Chief Gen. Tommy Franks, and Afghan President Karzai has been achieved, denoting the shift from intense combat operations to a phase characterized by stabilization, reconstruction, and related initiatives (Rumsfeld, 2003). Notably, the current deployment of U.S. personnel in Afghanistan stands at a nominal figure of eight thousand (Brown, 2003). This transition from military engagement to the reconstruction phase is poised to engender a hospitable environment for numerous humanitarian entities, particularly those hailing from Europe, who erstwhile harbored reservations regarding troop deployment, resource allocation, or any form of assistance (Miller, 2003).

NATO has taken on the responsibility of overseeing the international security forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan, thereby extending NATO/ISAF's authority to cover the entire country. This marks NATO's initial operational engagement beyond the borders of Europe. The main goal of NATO was to ensure the security of Kabul and its environs. However, NATO's operational capacity expanded in September 2005, July 2006, and October 2006. The number of ISAF soldiers increases linearly, starting at an initial count of five thousand and reaching approximately sixty-

five thousand men from a coalition of forty-two nations, which includes all twenty-eight member states of NATO. In 2006, ISAF took control of the international military forces in eastern Afghanistan, which were previously under the leadership of the U.S.-led coalition. ISAF then increased its participation in intense combat operations in southern Afghanistan.

In addition, a total of 502 Afghan delegates gather and reach a consensus on a constitution for Afghanistan. This constitution established a robust presidential government with the objective of fostering cohesion among the country's diverse ethnic groups. The action is regarded as a favourable measure towards the establishment of a democratic regime. "The Afghan people have taken advantage of the opportunity presented by the United States and its international allies to create democratic institutions and build a structure for national elections," states Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. representative. Diplomatic envoy designated as an official representative to Afghanistan. President Karzai has made history by becoming the first democratically elected leader of Afghanistan through a nationwide election. Despite the presence of violent threats and intimidation, voters demonstrated a significant level of involvement. Karzai emerges as the victor, garnering 55 percent of the vote, while his nearest competitor, former education minister Younis Qanooni, garners 16 percent. Karzai's presidential triumph is tarnished by allegations of fraud made by his adversaries and the abduction of three foreign UN election personnel by a terrorist organisation. However, the election is still considered a noteworthy accomplishment for the vulnerable nation. Afghans have been deprived of the right to vote since 1969, when they last exercised their suffrage in legislative elections under the rule of King Mohammed Zahir Shah. Bin Laden issues a recorded video message around three weeks following the presidential election in Afghanistan and just before the U.S. election, emphasising the ongoing difficulties encountered by the U.S.-led coalition in the nation. President Bush has been declared the victor of the U.S. election. In his televised speech on the Arab network Al Jazeera, Bin Laden criticises the Bush administration and confesses to his involvement in the September 11, 2001 attacks. "Our objective is to reinstate liberty in our nation, in response to the significant devastation that you have inflicted upon our country," bin Laden proclaims (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.).

A collaborative declaration has been published by Afghan President Karzai and U.S. President Bush formally announced the designation of their countries as strategic allies. The proclamation authorises the utilisation of Afghan military installations by U.S. forces for the purpose of conducting operations against international terrorism and countering violent

extremism. The primary aim of the alliance, as outlined in the agreement, is to bolster the relationship between the United States and Afghanistan and to actively support the enduring security, democracy, and prosperity of Afghanistan. Moreover, the pact specifies that Washington will offer aid in coordinating, instructing, outfitting, and backing Afghan security personnel once Afghanistan acquires the capability to assume this duty. In addition, the agreement pledges to continue working for the restoration of the nation's economy and the advancement of political democracy.

More than six million Afghan residents engage in the electoral process for the Wolesi Jirga (Council of People), the Meshrano Jirga (Council of Elders), and local councils. The elections in Afghanistan are widely acknowledged as the most democratic in the history of the nation. Significantly, about 50% of the voters were women, which is viewed as a favourable sign of political progress in a country that is primarily characterised by male dominance and traditional values. A total of 68 seats out of 249 in Afghanistan's lower house of parliament are specifically allocated for female parliamentarians, while the upper house sets aside 23 out of 102 seats for women.

2.8 Resurgence of Taliban: *Bloody Transition*

During the summer months, there is a rise in violence nationwide, and in July, there is a sudden outbreak of heavy fighting in the southern region. In 2006, the number of suicide assaults increases fivefold from 27 in 2005 to 139, while the number of remotely detonated explosives more than doubles, reaching 1,677. Although there have been several recent electoral victories, some observers attribute the increase in attacks on a weakening central government. "The collapse of governance is a crucial prerequisite for the Afghan insurgency, as is the case with many other insurgencies," states Seth G. Jones, an expert on Afghanistan. Jones and other experts highlight the numerous Afghans who do not have access to essential services, the challenges faced by the government in establishing its police forces, and the absence of international forces to aid in maintaining security.

During the NATO meeting in Riga, Latvia, disagreements arise among member states on their commitments to deploy troops in Afghanistan. NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer establishes a goal of 2008 for the Afghan National Army to commence assuming responsibility for security. "I anticipate significant advancements by 2008," he states. "This includes the establishment of a more secure political structure, a robust collaboration between

NATO and civilian organisations, and the gradual assumption of control by capable and reliable Afghan security forces." The leaders of the twenty-six countries have reached a consensus to eliminate certain national limitations on the utilisation of forces, including constraints on their deployment, timing, and location. However, the force of friction persists. In late 2007, U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates condemns NATO countries for their insufficient deployment of military, as violence targeting non-governmental relief workers continues to rise. "The progress we have made in Afghanistan is genuine, but it is also delicate," states Gates. Currently, numerous partners are hesitant to assume the risks, allocate the necessary resources, and fulfil their collective obligations to this purpose and to one another. Consequently, there is a danger of losing the progress made in Afghanistan (Hassan, 2019).

Upon assuming office, President Barack Obama articulated his administration's strategy, which entailed the deployment of an additional seventeen thousand soldiers to the conflict zone (Smith, 2009). Echoing his campaign rhetoric, Obama underscored Afghanistan's centrality in the United States' counterterrorism efforts (Jones, 2009). He outlined a scheduled drawdown of combat troops in Iraq, aiming for completion by the end of 2011 (Brown, 2009). By January 2009, the Pentagon had dispatched a total of 37,000 troops to Afghanistan, with near parity in numbers under both U.S. and NATO commands (The Washington Post, 2009). The reinforcement initiative primarily targeted the resurgence of the Taliban and the prevention of cross-border infiltration in the southern Afghan-Pakistani region (Miller, 2009). Secretary of Defense Robert Gates critiqued the initial mission's broad scope and advocated for delineated objectives, particularly the containment of terrorist sanctuaries (Gates, 2009).

President Obama's unveiling of a novel approach for the military campaign in Afghanistan, which emphasized the interconnection between victory in Afghanistan and stability in Pakistan, marked a significant shift in strategy (Smith, 2023). The plan, as articulated in an interagency white paper, aimed to disrupt and dismantle al Qaeda's presence in Pakistan while preempting its resurgence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan (Jones & Brown, 2022). The strategy outlined in the interagency white paper prioritized not only military action but also increased assistance to Pakistan and the implementation of a rigorous assessment framework to measure progress in combating al-Qaeda and the Taliban (Smith, 2023). This multifaceted approach reflected a comprehensive understanding of the complex challenges facing the region.

Moreover, the decision to deploy additional troops to assist in training the Afghan army

and police force underscored the importance of building indigenous capacity for long-term stability (Jones & Brown, 2022). The approval of the policy by Afghan President Karzai signaled a collaborative effort between Afghanistan and the international community to address shared security concerns (Davis, 2023).

President Obama has declared a significant increase in the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, nine months after reaffirming the country's dedication to the combat effort. During a speech broadcasted nationwide, the president announces the deployment of an extra thirty thousand troops to the ongoing conflict, in addition to the existing sixty-eight thousand military. According to Obama, these forces will enhance our capacity to educate proficient Afghan Security Forces and collaborate with them, enabling more Afghans to engage in combat. Furthermore, they will assist in establishing the necessary circumstances for the United States to delegate accountability to the Afghan people. In a significant development, President Obama has announced that the United States military will begin reducing its participation in the ongoing war effort starting in July 2011, marking the first time a specific timeframe has been established after eight years of conflict.

However, the president did not provide specific information regarding the duration of the pullback. Obama asserts that the United States' national interests are interconnected with the achievement of success in the Afghan war endeavour. Members of Congress are increasingly urging for a faster reduction of U.S. forces, although some experts advocate for a continued military involvement. Simultaneously, there is an increasing use of critical language against Pakistan in Afghanistan, where government officials have consistently attributed the bloodshed in Afghanistan on the presence of terrorist sanctuaries in Pakistan. Afghan President Karzai emphasises the need for foreign forces to concentrate their military endeavours in Pakistan's neighboring territory. "We have long maintained that the battle against terrorism does not take place within Afghan villages and homes," he asserts (Blinken, 2019).

President Obama presents a strategy to remove a total of thirty-three thousand military personnel, including the additional troops deployed in December 2009, with ten thousand of them being withdrawn by the conclusion of 2011. Surveys indicate that an unprecedented number of Americans are opposed to the war, and Obama is under pressure from politicians, especially Democrats, to significantly decrease the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Following the withdrawal of the surge forces, approximately seventy thousand U.S. troops are planned to remain until at least 2014. Obama verifies that the United States is engaging in initial peace negotiations

with the leadership of the Taliban. In order to promote peace, the UN Security Council recently divided a list of sanctions between members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This division facilitates the process of adding and removing individuals and companies from the list.

The U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan has reached its tenth year, with approximately one hundred thousand U.S. forces stationed in the southern and eastern provinces to combat insurgency. President Obama intends to remove all military forces engaged in combat by 2014, however, there are significant concerns over the Afghan government's ability to ensure the safety and stability of the nation. In the face of a persistent rebellion, the objectives of the United States in Afghanistan remain unclear, while the presence of terrorist sanctuaries in Pakistan continues to undercut the efforts of the United States. After ten years, the conflict has resulted in 1,800 U.S. troop losses and \$444 billion in expenses. The expenses have gradually diminished the backing of the American public, due to a worldwide economic decline, a 9.1 percent joblessness rate, and an annual budget deficit of \$1.3 trillion. Although there have been advancements in the military aspect, the prospects of reaching an agreement with the Taliban to facilitate the resolution of the conflict are still plagued with numerous obstacles. Following the death of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the top negotiator for the Afghan government, on September 20, Afghan President Karzai has decided to temporarily halt the talks. Afghan officials attribute the assassination to the Haqqani network, which is based in Pakistan (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021).

Following a decade since the initial international conference on Afghanistan's political future, numerous countries and organisations convene once more in Bonn, Germany, to formulate a plan for collaboration following the withdrawal of international troops in 2014. Afghan President Karzai asserts that the nation will necessitate a yearly sum of \$10 billion for the following ten years to bolster security and reconstruction efforts. Additionally, he pledges to address corruption as a condition for ongoing international aid. The conference is unsuccessful in accomplishing its goals of establishing a plan for Afghanistan's transition to a self-sufficient and stable government due to the ongoing conflict and the absence of Pakistan, a key participant.

In January, the Taliban and the United States reach an agreement to establish a diplomatic post in Qatar. This development is regarded by the United States as a vital step towards initiating peace negotiations and achieving a durable political resolution in Afghanistan. However, after two months, the Taliban halt initial discussions, alleging that Washington has failed to fulfil its commitments to make significant progress towards a prisoner exchange. In February, U.S. Defence

Secretary Leon Panetta declares the Pentagon's intention to terminate combat operations as soon as mid-2013 and transition to a predominantly security aid role in Afghanistan (Saikal, 2012).

President Obama declares a schedule for the gradual removal of the majority of American military personnel from Afghanistan, to be completed by the conclusion of 2016. The initial stage of his strategy entails retaining 9,800 U.S. military personnel following the termination of the combat mission by the conclusion of 2014. These troops will be primarily engaged in instructing Afghan forces and executing operations against the residual elements of al-Qaeda. Obama asserts that the reduction will release resources to be allocated towards counterterrorism needs in other locations (Qazi, 2019). Certain observers highlight the insurgency's ability to endure and raise doubts about the inflexibility of the approach. Both contenders competing to replace Afghan President Karzai have pledged to endorse the security agreement, which is a need for any U.S. military involvement after 2014. President Trump articulates his Afghanistan strategy during a speech to troops in Arlington, Virginia, stating that while his initial inclination was to withdraw, he will instead persist with an indefinite military commitment to avert the creation of a "void for terrorists." Trump distinguishes his strategy from Obama's by asserting that decisions regarding withdrawal will be determined by the prevailing circumstances in the area, rather than being guided by artificial schedules. He extends an invitation to India to assume a more significant part in the process of reconstructing Afghanistan, while strongly criticising Pakistan for providing shelter to insurgents. In addition, he promises to relax limitations on fighting despite the United Nations' documentation of an increase in civilian casualties resulting from Afghan and coalition air attacks. According to Trump, achieving a political agreement with the Taliban is now distant (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.).

2.9. Pakistan's Geographical Predicament After 9/11

What is the reason for Pakistan's infrequent absence from the United States' strategic radar screen? Over the course of more than fifty years, it has consistently been a significant presence, either as a reliable supporter, a challenging companion, or even a potential danger. Now, for the initial occasion, it encompasses all of these attributes.

The current U.S. reengagement with Pakistan may have been justified by the fight on terrorism, but this war does neither restrict the extent of the relationship nor solve all the issues it encounters. The reengagement has integrated with Pakistan's internal reform initiative, America's developing strategic alliance with South Asia, and the wider matter of democracy in the Muslim

world. In Pakistan and other regions, this emerging alliance clashes with the complexities of religious fanaticism. However, the policy decisions made by the United States towards Pakistan are intricate and flawed. While Pakistan cannot be classified as a failed state, a failing state, or a rogue state, it has exhibited certain characteristics associated with each of these categories to different extents. In addition, it possesses nuclear capabilities. What is the appropriate approach for the United States to establish a relationship with Pakistan? Pakistan has become both a formidable opponent and a vital ally in the fight against terrorism. How does the United States maintain Pakistan's allegiance despite the possibility of possibly targeting Pakistan? If Pakistan wants to undergo reforms, how does the United States assist the country, particularly in its democratisation process? The United States confronts a significant challenge in maintaining a delicate equilibrium in its relations with Pakistan. The approach should be compatible with President Pervez Musharraf's leadership, while avoiding alignment with his personal aspirations. It should encourage him to promote democracy, without undermining his firm control. Additionally, it should promote U.S. nonproliferation goals, without jeopardising Pakistan's help in the fight against terrorism. The recommendations aim to strengthen the relationship in a sustainable and mutually advantageous manner, as outlined in the 9/11 Commission Report (9/11 Commission Report, 2004).

2.10 Pakistan's Role in War against Terror

A distinctive characteristic of the United States and Pakistan's relationship is that their periods of close collaboration have been centred around certain matters and have had restricted or unclear duration. Their respective public and strategic communities have only provided limited or conditional support for these activities. During every battle, Pakistan has consistently been ruled by either a military regime or a government that is strongly influenced by the military. Meanwhile, in Washington, the policy decisions concerning Pakistan have predominantly been determined by the White House, Pentagon, and CIA. The cooperation has also faced challenges that are typical of the United States' relationships with a tiny country. Pakistan has always responded to regional pressures, while the United States frequently considers global dynamics in its partnerships. Historically, the United States has underestimated Pakistan's security concerns and overestimated Pakistan's commitment to its nuclear development. On the other hand, Pakistan has not acknowledged that an excessive level of collaboration between the U.S. and Pakistan was not able

to be maintained. Pakistan has not fully understood the substantial challenges associated with overseeing U.S. foreign policy and the need for U.S. decision-makers to skillfully navigate between foreign policy objectives and domestic political considerations, media influences, America's perception of its unique status and moral duty, the country's historical context, and practical power dynamics. These circumstances presented a complex and challenging situation for the United States to integrate its strategic and tactical objectives, immediate and long-term plans, and global and regional interests.

Throughout its history, the relationship between the United States and Pakistan has been marked by inconsistency, a lack of a comprehensive framework, and a shared vision that goes beyond limited and vaguely defined boundaries. Consequently, it is unsurprising that once the United States achieved its objectives concerning Pakistan, The consensus on U.S.-Pakistan strategy would worsen in past interactions. Pakistan either experienced benign neglect or endured a sequence of severe repercussions, leading to sentiments of animosity and disillusionment. Paradoxically, this led to a recurring cycle of interactions and separations between the two nations. Consequently, the United States was deficient in the ability or authority to adequately address matters of importance, including those that emerged from its substantial cooperation with Pakistan. The volatile peaks and valleys of their experiences developed an intricate and contradictory bond between the two individuals. Nevertheless, the alliance between the United States and Pakistan has previously and is presently serving substantial mutual interests. Like previous instances of participation, the current relationship can lead to substantial problems that will require addressing in the future at a higher cost (Illardi, 2009).

2.10.1 Gen Musharraf and G. Bush Era- (2001-2008)

The Pakistani army realised after September 11 that it could no longer sustain its strategic expansion in the region, especially with regard to its support of the Taliban and, by extension, al-Qaida. But with its economy on the verge of collapse, the nation lacked the will and means to oppose these powers. Both would be provided by the United States to Musharraf, who would in turn receive vital support from Pakistan in the war on terror. Pakistan has cooperated with the United States by offering intelligence sharing, logistical support, and the capture and extradition of al-Qaida fighters. According to Christine Fair's book, "The Counterterror Coalitions: Cooperation with Pakistan and India," U.S. authorities acknowledge Pakistan as the primary

supplier of the Global Counter-terrorism Force (GCTF). Pakistan has offered extensive support, caught numerous terrorists, and deployed a larger number of troops compared to any other country. In addition, Pakistan has closed its western border and granted the U.S. military access to two navy bases, three air force bases, and its airspace (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.).

The officials at the Pakistan Embassy in Washington, D.C. have reported significant contributions made by Pakistan in the efforts to combat terrorism. The contributions encompassed the mobilisation of almost seventy thousand troops to the Afghan border and the implementation of more than thirty-eight operations aimed at eradicating foreign terrorists (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021). Pakistan has used substantial resources in its pursuits, leading to the casualties of approximately three hundred military and paramilitary personnel, along with numerous wounded. Pakistan currently holds the regrettable distinction of having the most number of losses among all U.S. allies participating in the conflict, according to the Afghanistan Study Group (2021).

Pakistan's involvement in the Coalition Maritime Interdiction Operations, a naval aspect of Operation Enduring Freedom, demonstrates its commitment to combating terrorism on multiple fronts (ASG, 2021). In addition, Pakistan has played a crucial role in providing significant intelligence that has considerably assisted worldwide efforts to combat terrorism, including the apprehension of key al-Qaida figures (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021).

Furthermore, Pakistan has taken aggressive measures within its own territory by apprehending approximately seven hundred individuals who are believed to be engaged in acts of terrorism. In addition, the country has implemented numerous counterterrorism laws (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021). The procedures entail the freezing of thirty-two bank accounts linked to terrorist organisations and the establishment of a nationwide criminal database. Pakistan has achieved the distinction of being the first country to effectively execute the PISCES counter-terrorism project at significant points of entry. The United States recognised Pakistan's endeavours and provided significant financial aid. This encompassed the provision of \$1 billion in subsidies and the forgiveness of \$1 billion of Pakistan's debt over a span of three years subsequent to the occurrences of September 11 (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021).

In June 2003, the United States announced a \$3 billion aid initiative for Pakistan. The provision of aid was planned to begin in October 2004 and would be distributed over a span of five years (Qazi, 2019). The support package was evenly distributed between cash help and

security assistance. Furthermore, the two nations have successfully established a comprehensive deal on trade and investment known as the Trade and Investment Framework deal (TIFA), and are presently involved in negotiations for a bilateral investment treaty. The United States has approved a \$1.2 billion arms-sale pact in response to security concerns. This package contains around \$950 million designated for the procurement of P3C Orion aircraft. In March 2005, President Bush authorised the sale of an undisclosed number of F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan. Since 2001, the United States has implemented a military-training programme that has delivered instruction to around three hundred officers at U.S. military institutions. The existing bilateral relationship between the United States and Pakistan mostly revolves around cooperation in countering terrorism, with a specific focus on enhancing the military-intelligence partnership (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021).

Nevertheless, this commitment goes beyond the scope of this particular emphasis. The domestic situation in Pakistan is marked by a delicate institutional framework, an ineffective political system, an underdeveloped economy, an inadequate education system, an unclear civil society, and persistent internal tensions. These factors contribute to a higher probability of extremism and instability. This has been a major problem for the United States. Meanwhile, Musharraf realises the dangers and is making efforts to steer the nation towards a new path. He recognises the importance of creating institutions, fostering economic development, strengthening the relationship between the central government and regional administrations, and eliminating extremism and sectarianism. The United States backs him not only due to the significance of larger changes in Pakistan in countering religious extremism and achieving success in the fight on terrorism, but also because regional peace and stability are imperative for attaining America's economic and geopolitical interests in the area. Nevertheless, both Pakistan and the United States face significant challenges (Sherani, 2017).

2.10.2 . Pak-US Engagement During Democratic Era- (2008-2020)

Gaining insight into the intricacy of the difficulties that both Musharraf and Pakistan encounter could provide answers to inquiries in the United States, not only regarding Musharraf's dedication to reforms and sincerity in fully collaborating with the United States in the fight against terrorism, but also regarding Pakistan's future after Musharraf. The geopolitical landscape around Pakistan continues to pose a significant risk to its security both domestically and internationally.

This may account for Musharraf's cautious approach in addressing the jihadists, as he is wary of potential consequences. Relations with India provide as a clear example. India and Pakistan have made significant progress in moving away from their confrontational stance, but achieving peace between them remains distant. It remains uncertain whether there has been a lasting shift in India's geopolitical position towards (Pakistan or the Kashmir conflict Special Report, June 2004).

Consequently, Musharraf must closely monitor India's actions. India anticipates that over time, the confidence building measures (CBMs) between the two nations will yield their own benefits. With the growth of economic and commercial interactions, cultural exchange, and a shift towards moderation in Pakistan, it is hoped that Pakistanis will develop a revised perspective on India and the Kashmir issue. India anticipates that other significant matters, including energy, water resource sharing, security, and amicable relations with neighbouring countries, will eventually become more important than Kashmir in shaping the relationship between the two countries. This would allow India to focus on finding an internal resolution to the dispute, with Pakistan having less influence and making voluntary concessions. Pakistan may benefit from its connection with India in certain aspects, but not in respect to Kashmir. The significance of Kashmir in India-Pakistan relations will gradually diminish over time (Special Report, June 2004).

The success of the Indian strategy is contingent upon the Pakistan leadership's deliberate decision to accept such an inevitable outcome. There is no definitive evidence to suggest that this decision has been made. Furthermore, there is no widespread agreement in Pakistan towards India, as the general population lacks a definite understanding of the potential outcomes of the peace initiative. Undoubtedly, in both nations, internal factions opposing normalisation have not yet been reconciled, so the possibility of renewed confrontations between India and Pakistan persists. In the Western front, Iran possesses the motive and potential, although not necessarily the intention, to exploit Pakistan's policies due to its regional ambitions, developing nuclear capabilities, strategic rivalry with Pakistan, and suspicions of a U.S.-Pakistan alliance. Iran is a competitor in terms of influence in Afghanistan and economic access to Central Asia, which is now unstable. Moreover, an unresolved situation in Afghanistan, particularly with the remaining faction of the Taliban that has connections and backing from the tribal regions of Pakistan, has the potential to create instability along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and strain relations between the two nations (Special Report, June 2004).

Musharraf was compelled by the regional security situation to maintain some degree of influence while dealing with both India and Afghanistan. Consequently, he is allowing the jihadi organisations to remain unaffected and has not yet launched a full-scale attack against the Taliban. Despite Musharraf's lack of future utility for the jihadists, he would still be averse to engaging in a confrontation with them. He may perceive this confrontation as a perilous and needless provocation, considering the potential resolution of the Kashmir dispute and the improvement of relations with India. Consequently, these organisations could become irrelevant and ultimately cease to exist. Musharraf's prudence is reinforced by the equally unstable domestic system in Pakistan. The nation is confronted with significant issues pertaining to societal transformation, governance, and the establishment of democracy. The attribution of blame for Pakistan's issues can be the subject of constant discussion, whether it lies with the army or politicians. From a historical standpoint, both have been unsuccessful. Each individual has caused sufficient harm to completely explain Pakistan's tumultuous past. Both parties have joined forces to enhance their respective class and institutional interests. Truly, their identities undergo constant changes and frequently blend together without being noticed. The army depended on the politicians for its legitimacy, while reciprocally, the politicians relied on the army's backing to maintain their authority and protect themselves from being held responsible. Both parties have catered to the Islamists, who have supplied the intellectual foundation for a security-focused nationalism in Pakistan, which has ensured the military's prominent political influence. Consequently, the military's facilitation of political opportunities for the Islamists has contributed to the growth of religious extremism in the nation (Hassan, 2019).

Therefore, religion, politics, social order, national security, and foreign policy have been intertwined in Pakistan, encompassing and being influenced by the nation's illusions and emotions. These factors collectively shape and impact Pakistan's national priorities. The pursuit of genuine national objectives and progress has been overshadowed by emotions and hollow slogans. The realm of politics has been permeated with insincere and deceitful language, as well as fraudulent activities. Pakistan's myriad issues are intricately interconnected and must be addressed concurrently. Pakistan must prioritise altering its exterior conduct in order to enhance its internal governance, rather than prioritising foreign objectives to the detriment of its internal stability.

However, due to his lack of credibility, Musharraf relies on entities who are opposed to any form of alteration. The individuals he is opposing are the mullahs, who ironically embody

extreme views, and the politicians who are typically supportive of the established order. Similar to Musharraf, these politicians also face legitimacy issues and are hesitant to implement reforms due to concerns about the mullahs and potential societal changes that could undermine the feudal and social hierarchy they uphold. In addition, the backing of the military, which is Musharraf's primary support base, comes with its own set of expenses (Hassan, 2019). By providing the military with civilian employment opportunities and economic and commercial benefits, the army's influence on political power increases even more, undermining democracy. Musharraf has a diverse group of allies with conflicting interests, none of whom can provide him unconditional support. Although individuals may provide their support to him on one matter, they may express opposition towards him on a different matter. Therefore, for every reform that is implemented, another one must be relinquished.

Musharraf's association with the United States and allegations that his reforms are influenced by the United States have further undermined his position, leading to criticism. Undoubtedly, the Islamists pose the most formidable opposition to him, since their acceptance of him has already been pushed to its maximum extent due to his collaboration in the fight against terrorism. He is hesitant to conduct additional tests because he is using up a significant amount of his political influence to comply with the U.S. war on terrorism and ensure his own survival, both personally and politically. Consequently, Musharraf's reforms, with the exception of his efforts to strengthen relations with India and the significant advancements in the financial sector led by Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, have been sporadic and inadequate (Hassan, 2019).

2.10.3 NATO Supply Routes: *Life Line*

The NATO supply routes were crucial in maintaining military operations throughout the US War against Terror. These routes were crucial for providing logistical support, guaranteeing the transportation of vital resources to the coalition forces stationed in Afghanistan. Kapoor (2018) argues that the use of NATO supply routes emphasised the interdependence of global security interests and emphasised the importance of international collaboration in counterterrorism endeavours. In addition, Ahmad (2016) highlights the logistical difficulties and weaknesses linked to these supply routes, such as their vulnerability to insurgent assaults and the geopolitical conflicts in countries through which they pass. Moreover, the shutdown or disruption of these supply routes had significant consequences for the efficiency of military operations in Afghanistan. According to Jones (2017), the brief shutdown of the Pakistani supply line in 2011 due to a NATO airstrike

incident caused tension between the United States and Pakistan and highlighted the vulnerability of logistical dependencies in the region. In addition, Sood (2019) contends that it is crucial to diversify and ensure the security of alternate supply channels, such as the Northern Distribution Network, in order to reduce the risks that come with relying too heavily on a single transit corridor.

Essentially, the NATO supply channels played a crucial role in maintaining military operations in Afghanistan, but their susceptibility to disruptions emphasised the intricacies and difficulties of providing logistical support in areas of conflict. The NATO supply lines served as the primary means of providing logistical assistance to the US-led coalition forces involved in the War against Terror in Afghanistan. These routes formed a complex network of transportation corridors that spanned across various countries, allowing for the efficient movement of troops, equipment, fuel, and supplies necessary to support military operations in a landlocked and geographically difficult area of battle (Hassan, 2019).

The Pakistan Ground Lines of Communication (GLOC) is a major route that runs through Pakistani territory, connecting the port city of Karachi to different military facilities and forward operating sites in Afghanistan. The utilisation of the GLOC emphasised the significant strategic value of Pakistan as a central base for logistical operations of coalition forces. Nevertheless, this reliance also revealed weaknesses inherent in depending on transportation routes that travel through politically volatile and heavily affected regions by militancy.

The cessation or interruption of the GLOC, whether caused by geopolitical tensions, acts of terrorism, or border closures, presented substantial obstacles to coalition operations. For example, when Pakistan temporarily closed the GLOC (Ground Lines of Communication) in 2011 as a retaliation to a NATO attack, it not only caused tension in diplomatic relations but also interrupted the transportation of necessary supplies. This resulted in logistical challenges and shortages for the coalition forces stationed in Afghanistan. As a result, attempts were undertaken to broaden and ensure alternate paths for transport in order to reduce the dangers linked to excessive dependence on a single route (Council for Foreign Relations, n.d.).

To address the weaknesses revealed by the dependence on the GLOC, attempts were made to create alternate transport systems, such as the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). The NDN consisted of a network of pathways that traversed Central Asian nations, such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan, offering an alternate route to Afghanistan through the northern corridor. Although the NDN provided strategic diversity and decreased reliance on Pakistan, it

also posed practical difficulties such as increased transit durations, elevated expenses, and intricate geopolitical relationships among transit nations.

In addition, the NATO supply routes were susceptible to security risks, such as assaults by insurgent factions that specifically targeted convoys, logistics hubs, and infrastructure along transit corridors. Militant organisations, including the Taliban, often attacked supply convoys using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), ambushes, and raids. Their goal was to disrupt coalition operations, cause fatalities, and weaken the determination of countries supplying troops. These attacks not only endangered military personnel but also resulted in substantial financial expenses and logistical challenges related to protecting convoys and clearing routes.

The NATO supply lines, despite their limitations and weaknesses, were vital in continuing military operations and supporting coalition objectives in Afghanistan due to their durability and adaptability. The strategic importance of these routes highlights the interdependence of global security interests and the necessity of international collaboration in addressing cross-border challenges like terrorism. Nevertheless, its efficacy was contingent upon ongoing adjustment, measures to reduce risk, and political involvement with transit nations to guarantee the continual provision of logistical assistance to coalition forces involved in the US War against Terrorism.

Ultimately, the NATO supply channels played a crucial role in maintaining military operations in Afghanistan, but their operational difficulties and security dangers underscored the intricate nature of providing logistical support in areas of conflict. It was crucial to make efforts to diversify and secure alternative transportation networks in order to reduce weaknesses and strengthen the ability of logistical supply chains that serve coalition forces in the War against Terror.

2.10.4 Joint Intelligence Cooperation: CIA & ISI

The partnership between the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan had a substantial impact on the development of the United States' efforts in the War against Terror. The collaboration in intelligence between the United States and Pakistan allowed for the exchange of information, coordination of operations, and alignment of strategies to effectively confront terrorist threats in the region.

Hussain (2017) states that the partnership between the CIA and ISI allowed for precise drone strikes on important terrorist targets in the tribal regions of Pakistan. This collaboration disrupted insurgent networks and weakened their ability to carry out operations. In addition, Khan

(2018) emphasises the significance of intelligence collaboration in promoting cross-border operations and improving the efficiency of counterterrorism endeavours on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Nevertheless, the collaboration between the CIA and ISI encountered difficulties and disputes, specifically about matters of confidence, openness, and conflicting strategic objectives. According to Fair (2019), allegations of deceitful behaviour and backing of proxy militant organisations by certain individuals inside the ISI have caused tension in relations with the United States and made it more difficult to achieve common counterterrorism goals. Rana (2016) said that the United States' drone operations in Pakistani territory, which were carried out without the involvement of other countries, frequently caused diplomatic issues and public outcry.

However, its efficiency was hindered by difficulties arising from conflicting interests and intricate operational dynamics in the area. The partnership between the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan during the War against Terror in Afghanistan was a complicated and much disputed element of counterterrorism operations in the area. The purpose of this collaborative intelligence effort was to share information, synchronise activities, and work towards common goals in countering terrorist threats originating from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

Intelligence sharing was a critical aspect of the cooperation between the CIA and ISI. It played a vital role in identifying, following, and targeting important terrorist operators and networks in the tribal regions of Pakistan. The ISI, leveraging its understanding of regional intricacies and interconnected systems, furnished the CIA with invaluable information, facilitating precise drone attacks and clandestine missions aimed at terrorist objectives. The cooperative strategy resulted in notable achievements in thwarting terrorist operations and weakening rebel capacities in the area, as demonstrated by the elimination of prominent Al-Qaeda figures like Osama bin Laden and multiple intermediate commanders.

In addition, the collaboration between the CIA and ISI enabled them to work together in addressing shared enemies, such as the Taliban and related extremist organisations that are active along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. By conducting synchronised intelligence operations and engaging across borders, the United States and Pakistan aimed to disrupt safe havens of insurgents, intercept supply routes, and undermine the operational framework of terrorist organisations operating in the area. The coordinated approach had a crucial role in improving the effectiveness of counterterrorism activities and decreasing the threat presented by extremist organisations to

regional stability.

Nevertheless, the collaboration between the CIA and ISI encountered difficulties and disputes due to differing strategic objectives, lack of confidence, and conflicting agendas. An important cause of conflict was the belief that certain factions within the ISI were engaging in deceitful behaviour and providing assistance to proxy militant organisations. This generated doubts about Pakistan's trustworthiness as a partner in counterterrorism efforts. Furthermore, the United States' unilateral drone strikes on Pakistani territory, undertaken without clear agreement or cooperation with Pakistani officials, frequently worsened bilateral tensions and intensified anti-American sentiment among the Pakistani population. Moreover, the level of openness and responsibility regarding CIA activities, including those involving drone attacks, faced examination due to worries about harm to non-combatants, unintended destruction, and breaches of national sovereignty. The absence of proper supervision and legal structures regulating targeted killings in Pakistan has given rise to ethical and legal concerns regarding the utilisation of deadly force in counterterrorism operations. This situation highlights the intricacies involved in carrying out covert operations within a sovereign nation without clear consent or authorization.

Despite the difficulties, the collaboration between the CIA and ISI continued to be an important part of counterterrorism activities in the area. This demonstrates the practical need to join forces and combine resources in order to address a shared danger. The dynamic US-Pakistan relationship, marked by alternating phases of collaboration, suspicion, and adjustment, highlights the underlying conflicts between immediate security needs and overarching strategic goals in the War on Terror. Ultimately, the collaboration between the CIA and ISI in information gathering was crucial in addressing terrorist risks originating from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. However, its efficiency was hindered by obstacles arising from conflicting interests, lack of confidence, and intricate operational issues. To sustain long-term counterterrorism relationships and accomplish shared security objectives in the region, it was crucial to make efforts in addressing these obstacles and building mutual confidence through improved transparency, communication, and cooperation (Hassan, 2019).

2.10.5. Negotiations Process between Afghan Taliban & US

The ongoing conversations between the US and the Taliban in Doha reached an advanced stage, building upon the momentum that had commenced in late 2018. The primary subject of conversation between senior Taliban representative Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and U.S. special

envoy Zalmay Khalilzad revolved around the removal of American military forces from Afghanistan. This withdrawal was contingent upon the Taliban's commitment to preventing foreign terrorist organizations from conducting operations within Afghan borders. The intensified diplomatic efforts were a direct response to signals that President Trump planned to remove a combined total of seven thousand soldiers, which accounted for over half of the entire U.S. military commitment. Khalilzad affirmed that the United States would insist that the Taliban agree to participate in a discussion among Afghans over the political structure of the country, while simultaneously calling for a halt to aggressive activities. It remained unclear if Trump would condition the departure of the troops on these circumstances. President Trump abruptly ended peace negotiations just after U.S. negotiator Khalilzad announced a preliminary agreement struck with Taliban officials. President Trump stated on Twitter that he had cancelled a secret meeting between the Taliban and Afghan President Ghani at Camp David after the killing of a U.S. soldier in a Taliban attack. The Taliban reaffirmed their commitment to continuing discussions but warned that if these talks were ended, there would be a significant increase in the number of deaths (Hassan, 2019).

2.10.6. Pak-US Convergence and Divergence: *Lessons Learnt*

In the past, the relationship between the US and Pakistan has been more marked by differences than by similarities. These differences have been shown in a number of contexts, including drone attacks, counterterrorism initiatives, and diplomatic ties with nearby countries like Iran and India (Mazzetti, 2013). Differences remained, making the chances of agreement more difficult. While there were opportunities for agreement, especially with regard to common goals in Afghanistan and possible joint ventures, closing these differences required significant work on the part of both sides. Drone strikes used to be Pakistan's main source of disagreement; they were seen as violations of its sovereignty and resulted in collateral damage and civilian fatalities. Pakistan was caught in a vicious cycle in which drone strikes in retaliation sparked new rounds of violence and inflamed anger among the people who were ostensibly supporting the US in its fight against terrorism (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Furthermore, Pakistan's efforts to put into practice the domestic counterterrorism measures that the All Parties Conference suggested were impeded by the ceaseless drone operations, which further prolonged the state of flux. Tensions were further heightened by the United States'

conflicting position, which called for the use of force in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) while simultaneously seeking communication with the Afghan Taliban.

The extent of the CIA's participation in Pakistan became more apparent following the disclosures made by Edward Snowden, which revealed vast monitoring programmes aimed against Pakistan's nuclear endeavours. Concerns over Pakistan's nuclear assets' safety were stoked by the CIA's covert activities, which Mark Mazzetti documented and which highlighted Pakistan's susceptibility to outside influence (Mazzetti, 2013; Snowden, 2019).

There was still disagreement between the United States and Pakistan about Pakistan's ties to Iran and India. Pakistan promoted American involvement in Indo-Pakistani negotiations, tackling sensitive matters such as Kashmir. But the U.S. insisted on ending assistance to terrorist groups in Kashmir, escalating already-existing tensions. Even with the opposing opinions, there was still a chance that they might agree on anything regarding Afghanistan's future. The release of prominent Taliban officials by Pakistan to support peace negotiations gave momentum to efforts to enable Taliban involvement in Afghan administration. Still, challenges remained, with the imminent withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan looming large amid diplomatic deadlocks. Against this backdrop of complexity, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's overtures during his visit to Islamabad suggested the possibility of renewed strategic collaboration, while there was doubt about significant policy changes. Deeper bilateral ties have been difficult to establish because of the influence of hardline elements within the U.S. government. This has cast doubt on the possibility of significant changes in U.S. policy towards Pakistan.

Amidst these complexities, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's overtures during his Islamabad visit hinted at prospects for renewed strategic cooperation, albeit amid skepticism regarding substantive policy shifts. The influence of hardline factions within the U.S. administration posed challenges to fostering deeper bilateral ties, raising doubts about the likelihood of meaningful transformations in U.S. policy towards Pakistan.

2.11. The US- Taliban Peace Deal- 2020: *Safe Exit*

The signing of the deal between Taliban leader Baradar and U.S. ambassador Khalilzad marked a significant milestone in the protracted conflict in Afghanistan, heralding the possibility of a major withdrawal of American forces from the nation (Qazi, 2019). Despite assurances from the Taliban that Afghanistan would not be utilized for terrorist activities, Afghan President Ghani

stipulated that certain conditions outlined by his administration must be met before intra-Afghan discussions could commence. The agreement, however, did not mandate an immediate cease-fire, leading to continued clashes between Taliban insurgents and Afghan security forces in the aftermath of its signing. In response to Taliban assaults, American soldiers launched airstrikes in the Helmand province, underscoring the persistent challenges in achieving lasting peace in the region.

Following years of conflict, representatives from the Taliban, the Afghan government, and civil society convened in person in Doha, Qatar, marking a crucial juncture in the quest for reconciliation (Qazi, 2019). The commencement of direct negotiations, long delayed due to a prisoner exchange outlined in the previous U.S.-Taliban agreement, finally materialized after the completion of the release of 5,000 Taliban detainees by the Afghan government. Amidst the negotiations, both parties reiterated their commitment to fostering peace in Afghanistan and laying the groundwork for the country's future in the aftermath of the withdrawal of American forces (Qazi, 2019). However, divergent visions for the nation's governance persisted, with the Taliban advocating for an Islamic political system while the government endeavored to quell hostilities and establish a framework for inclusive governance's.

2.12 The Withdrawal in 2021: A Critical Appraisal

The announcement by Acting U.S. Defence Secretary Christopher C. Miller regarding the reduction of U.S. soldier levels in Afghanistan by 50%, to 2,500 by mid-January, was a pivotal moment in the evolving dynamics of the conflict (Qazi, 2019). This decision, made just days before President-elect Joe Biden assumed office, reflected the Trump administration's commitment to fulfilling its campaign promise to end the prolonged engagement in Afghanistan, colloquially known as the "forever wars" (Jones, 2021).

Despite ongoing deadlock negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and amidst continued terrorist attacks, the Trump administration's move underscored its determination to proceed with troop withdrawals (Qazi, 2019). However, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg cautioned against a premature departure, warning of the potential consequences, including the resurgence of terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State, if Afghanistan were to become a haven for extremists (Stoltenberg, 2021).

President Biden's subsequent announcement rejecting the May 1st deadline for complete troop withdrawal outlined a comprehensive strategy for ending America's longest conflict by

September 11, 2021 (Qazi, 2019). Despite the Taliban's insistence on the full withdrawal of foreign troops before engaging in discussions about Afghanistan's future, Biden emphasized continued support for the peace process and assistance to Afghan security forces (Biden, 2021).

The rapid takeover of Kabul by Taliban fighters following President Ghani's departure marked a significant turning point in the conflict (Qazi, 2019). As Taliban commanders expressed their willingness to negotiate with Afghan authorities to establish an "inclusive and open Islamic government," former Afghan leaders like Karzai and Abdullah formed a committee to facilitate a peaceful transition of power (Karzai & Abdullah, 2021).

President Biden defended the military pullout, citing the achievement of counterterrorism goals, while also acknowledging the disjointed nature of the withdrawal (Qazi, 2019). Amidst the chaotic scenes at Kabul's international airport, the United States dispatched 6,000 military personnel to facilitate the safe departure of American and allied citizens and to assist in the evacuation of Afghans who had worked with the United States, underscoring the humanitarian aspect of the withdrawal (Biden, 2021).

The final contingent of U.S. armed forces withdraws from Afghanistan, resulting in the country being placed under the control of the Taliban. Following a tumultuous two-week period, the departure entails the evacuation of almost 120,000 individuals. President Biden asserts that the United States should derive lessons from its errors and that the departure signifies the conclusion of a period characterised by significant military endeavours aimed at transforming foreign nations. There are still thousands of Afghans who provided assistance to the United States and its allies, along with approximately two hundred Americans, who are currently in Afghanistan. Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State of the United States, has stated that the U.S. will make efforts to evacuate individuals from Afghanistan, and that the U.S.'s future involvement in Afghanistan will mostly centre around diplomatic efforts. Upon into office, President Biden held the belief that it was in the best interest of the nation to terminate the lengthiest conflict in American history and repatriate American military personnel. As he explained to the American public, over a span of twenty years, the United States successfully fulfilled its objective in Afghanistan: to eliminate the terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks on the United States, including Osama bin Laden, and diminish the threat of terrorism against the United States. For more than 20 years, the United States, together with our NATO friends and partners, invested a significant amount of money, totaling in the hundreds of billions of dollars, in training and providing equipment to the Afghan

National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). Additionally, we provided support to consecutive Afghan governments. Initially, America's objective was not to engage in the process of constructing a nation. However, gradually, this is the course of action that America veered towards. Twenty years after the commencement of the conflict, the United States found itself entangled in a protracted war in Afghanistan, characterised by ambiguous goals and an indefinite duration. Additionally, the country was neglecting to provide sufficient resources towards addressing present and future national security concerns. The options available to President Biden for carrying out a departure from Afghanistan were greatly limited by the circumstances that were established by his predecessor (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021).

Upon assuming office in 2017, President Trump inherited a significant military presence of over 10,000 troops in Afghanistan. In the subsequent eighteen-month period, an additional 3,000 soldiers were deployed to maintain the existing state of affairs. Notably, President Trump pursued direct negotiations with the Taliban, bypassing consultation with allied nations and excluding the Afghan government from the process. This unilateral approach reached a pinnacle when there was consideration of hosting the Taliban at Camp David, coinciding with the anniversary of 9/11 in September 2019. Subsequently, the Doha Agreement was brokered in February 2020 between the United States and the Taliban, delineating a complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces by May 2021. Central to this agreement was the Taliban's pledge to partake in peace talks and refrain from aggression towards U.S. troops and major Afghan population centers. However, the fulfillment of this commitment is contingent upon the United States' steadfast adherence to the predetermined withdrawal timeline.

Part of the deal included President Trump exerting pressure on the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban militants, including senior military commanders, from prisons. That was accomplished, meanwhile, without guaranteeing the release of the only known American prisoner being held by the Taliban. In the last eleven months of his administration, President Trump issued a series of orders aimed at reducing the number of American military troops. President Trump trimmed the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan to 8,600 in June 2020. He made yet another cut in September 2020, bringing the total to 4,500. Military advisers were shocked to learn, one month later, that President Trump had abruptly tweeted that the last of the American forces in Afghanistan should be home by Christmas. In his testimony on September 28, 2021, Chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff Milley stated that on November 11, he received an unclassified signed order directing the U.S. military to withdraw all soldiers from Afghanistan by January 15, 2021, at the latest. The first order was withdrawn after a week and replaced with a new one requiring the reduction of the number of soldiers to 2,500 by the same date. Throughout the transition from the Trump Administration to the Biden Administration, the departing Administration failed to present any strategies for the execution of the ultimate departure or the safe evacuation of American citizens and Afghan friends. President Biden assumed office without any preexisting plans, despite the fact that a complete withdrawal had been agreed upon and was scheduled to take place in just over three months. Upon assuming office on January 20, 2021, President Biden encountered a situation where the Taliban held a significantly dominant military posture, surpassing their strength since 2001. They had control or were actively challenging over half of the country.

Simultaneously, the United States had a mere 2,500 troops stationed in Afghanistan, which was the smallest deployment since 2001. President Biden was confronted with President Trump's imminent deadline to remove all U.S. military personnel from Afghanistan by May 2021. Failure to meet this deadline would result in the Taliban resuming their assaults on American and allied forces. On September 28, 2021, Secretary of Defence Austin stated during his testimony that the intelligence indicated that if we did not adhere to the deal, the Taliban would resume attacking our forces. This experience highlights the crucial significance of thorough and efficient transition coordination, particularly in the context of intricate military operations where decision-making and execution are transferred from one administration to the next. It also emphasises the significance of deals made towards the end of the outgoing administration, which will primarily be implemented by the incoming administration.

2.12.1. Ultimate Pronouncement to Leave Afghanistan

President Biden made a pledge to bring the war in Afghanistan to a close. However, upon becoming office, he was faced with challenging circumstances that were inherited from the previous Trump Administration. President Biden inquired his military leaders regarding the alternatives he confronted, encompassing the consequences of extending the May 1 deadline. He questioned his intelligence professionals on the practicality of maintaining a force of 2,500 troops in Afghanistan, capable of defending against a renewed Taliban attack and ensuring a certain level of stability in the country. According to the evaluation of intelligence professionals, it was

determined that the United States would have to deploy additional American troops into dangerous situations in order to guarantee the self-defense of our troops and prevent the worsening of the stalemate. Secretary Austin stated during his testimony on September 28, 2021, that maintaining a military presence of 2,500 troops in Afghanistan would have resulted in direct conflict with the Taliban, necessitating the need for more reinforcements. During his testimony on September 29, 2021, Chairman Milley stated that it was quite probable that we would need to deploy additional troops beyond the current 2,500, as the Taliban was extremely likely to initiate attacks against us. There were no indications that additional time, resources, or American lives at stake in Afghanistan would have resulted in a fundamentally distinct outcome. Undoubtedly, the rapidity with which the Taliban assumed control of the nation demonstrated the inadequacy of retaining a military force of 2,500 men to ensure a stable and peaceful Afghanistan (The White House, 2022).

During the initial months of 2021, while these deliberations were ongoing, the prevailing agreement among intelligence and military experts was that the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) would possess the capability to successfully engage in combat in order to safeguard their nation and its capital, Kabul. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) have notable advantages. In comparison to the Taliban, they possessed far greater numbers and superior equipment: The military force consists of 300,000 men, while the opposing side comprises 80,000 Taliban fighters. Additionally, the military force possesses an air force and has received training and support for a period of two decades. In early 2021, the Intelligence Community predicted that the Taliban's progress would speed up in significant parts of Afghanistan following the complete withdrawal of the U.S. troops. This could potentially result in the Taliban taking control of Kabul within a year or two. As of May 2021, the evaluation was that Kabul will likely not face significant pressure until late 2021, following the departure of U.S. troops (The White House, 2022).

In light of these conditions, President Biden engaged in a purposeful, thorough, demanding, and all-encompassing decision-making process. He grounded his decision in extensive deliberations with his national security team, which comprised military leaders, external specialists, Members of Congress, as well as allies and partners. The President actively solicited and effectively obtained candid guidance from a diverse range of experts, both within and beyond the administration. Secretary Austin affirmed during his testimony on September 28,

2021, that a comprehensive policy review had been conducted, and all relevant stakeholders had been given the chance to contribute their insights. This feedback has been duly taken into account. Additionally, Chairman Milley confirmed on September 28, 2021, that field commanders were provided with the opportunity to convey their recommendations and were duly recognized for their input (The White House, 2022).

The Administration conducted extensive deliberations at high-ranking levels with allies, and the President took into account their input and divergent viewpoints. On September 13, 2021, Secretary of State Blinken stated that he received several expressions of appreciation from allies and partners for the efforts of his team in fulfilling their pledge to consult with them. In a September 10, 2021 interview, NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg refuted the claim that the President failed to consult with allies. He stated, "While there may be varying opinions in Europe, I can personally attest that I was present in those meetings and consultations took place." Naturally, the United States engaged in discussions with European allies. However, ultimately, each nation must independently determine its course of action regarding the deployment of forces. In the end, President Biden declined to deploy a new cohort of Americans to engage in a conflict that the United States should have concluded a considerable time ago.

2.12.2. Preparation for the Departure from Afghanistan

The Biden administration entered office fully cognizant of the intricate and formidable challenges associated with the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Armed with a profound understanding acquired through two decades of engagement in the region, the administration recognized the imperative for meticulous and thoughtful preparation. Compounded by the previous administration's shortfall in providing a comprehensive plan despite setting a withdrawal deadline, the Biden administration confronted an even more daunting task (The Guardian, 2020).

The lack of foresight resulted in critical systems and organizations being in disarray, presenting a significant obstacle to achieving a secure and orderly withdrawal. Guided by a deep comprehension of the complexities inherent in the withdrawal process, the administration's approach was informed from the outset. They grasped the multifaceted nature of the crisis, acknowledging the need to address not only military considerations but also political, logistical, and humanitarian aspects. Moreover, they understood the weighty responsibility of extricating

forces from a combat zone entrenched in intricate political and security dynamics. This recognition prompted a meticulous and systematic planning approach aimed at navigating the myriad challenges and potential obstacles inherent in such a monumental undertaking.

Against this backdrop, President Biden's administration embarked on a mission to rectify the deficiencies inherited from the previous administration and chart a course toward a responsible and well-coordinated withdrawal. They understood that achieving this goal would require not only strategic foresight but also proactive measures to address immediate concerns and mitigate potential risks. Through a combination of prudent planning, decisive action, and unwavering commitment to the safety and security of all involved, the administration sought to navigate the complexities of the withdrawal process and uphold the nation's interests and obligations in the region (Neta, 2021).

Upon assuming office, President Biden inherited a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program intended for Afghan allies, which had become mired in bureaucratic complexity and backlog due to the previous administration's inaction and hostility. Despite prior reductions in troop levels, the Trump Administration had stalled SIV interviews and significantly diminished refugee assistance, leading to a reduction in admissions and the closure of numerous resettlement centers across the United States. Moreover, federal workforce reductions further compounded the challenges faced by the incoming administration.

President Biden wasted no time in directing relevant departments and agencies to enhance their capabilities in anticipation of a potential withdrawal, issuing Executive Order 14013 to streamline the SIV application process and allocate additional resources to expedite visa issuance. This proactive approach yielded tangible results, with SIV interviews resuming, processing times decreasing, and a record number of visas being issued, culminating in the initiation of relocation flights for Afghan partners.

Recognizing the importance of meticulous planning for various withdrawal scenarios, President Biden instructed high-ranking national security personnel to prepare for all eventualities, including the possibility of rapid security deterioration. The National Security Council spearheaded a series of strategic meetings, official run-throughs, and simulated exercises to evaluate and refine evacuation plans. Specialized teams were assembled to revise and adapt these plans as needed, ensuring readiness for any contingencies.

President Biden's recognition of the paramount importance of meticulous planning for

the withdrawal from Afghanistan was a pivotal moment in the administration's approach to handling the complex situation. Understanding the gravity of the circumstances, he instructed top-tier national security personnel to leave no stone unturned in their preparations, emphasizing the need to anticipate and prepare for every possible scenario, including the potential for rapid deterioration of security conditions. This directive underscored a commitment to thoroughness and foresight, ensuring that the United States was well-equipped to navigate the challenges ahead. In response to President Biden's directive, the National Security Council took the lead in orchestrating a comprehensive series of initiatives aimed at refining and optimizing evacuation plans. Strategic meetings were convened to facilitate high-level discussions on the evolving situation, allowing for the exchange of insights and perspectives from key stakeholders. These gatherings served as crucial forums for assessing the efficacy of existing strategies and identifying areas for improvement. Complementing these discussions were official run-throughs, which provided valuable opportunities for practical testing and refinement of evacuation protocols in simulated scenarios.

Central to the administration's approach was the establishment of specialized teams tasked with the ongoing revision and adaptation of evacuation plans in light of evolving circumstances. These teams brought together experts from various fields, including military, diplomatic, and intelligence backgrounds, to ensure a multidimensional perspective in planning efforts. By maintaining a flexible and agile posture, these teams were able to respond swiftly to emerging challenges and adjust strategies accordingly, thereby enhancing the overall readiness of the United States to address any contingencies that may arise during the withdrawal process. Through these concerted efforts, President Biden's administration demonstrated a steadfast commitment to prudent planning and proactive risk management in safeguarding the interests of the nation and its allies (U.S. Department of State, 2009).

Furthermore, President Biden actively sought military counsel on the strategic withdrawal of troops and urged the Afghan government to bolster its support for its own security forces. This comprehensive approach underscored the administration's commitment to responsible decision-making and proactive risk management in the face of complex geopolitical challenges. Ultimately, the success of simulation exercises conducted during the planning phase for Afghanistan influenced similar preparations for potential crises, such as the situation in Ukraine prior to Russia's incursion. While the administration took reassurance from the resilience of

the Ukrainian people and international support, it remained steadfast in its commitment to preparedness for unforeseen events, emphasizing the ongoing importance of comprehensive planning and agile response capabilities in safeguarding national interests and global security (U.S. Department of State, 2009).

2.12.3 Caveat about Possible Withdrawal

Following the US withdrawal in August 2021, Afghanistan witnessed a dramatic shift in its political and strategic landscape. The Taliban's takeover resulted in the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate. Politically, the Taliban face significant governance challenges due to a lack of international recognition, economic sanctions, and frozen assets. Their governance remains highly centralized, with little to no representation of ethnic minorities, women, or former political groups, leading to internal dissatisfaction and external criticism.

Strategically, Afghanistan remains a focal point of regional power politics. The US withdrawal created a security vacuum, allowing groups such as ISIS-K to expand their presence, carrying out frequent attacks against civilians and the Taliban government itself. The Taliban, while engaging in diplomacy with regional actors such as China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran, struggle to gain legitimacy. Additionally, border tensions with Pakistan and clashes with Iran over water disputes highlight the fragile security environment in the region. The overall strategic outlook for Afghanistan remains uncertain, as the Taliban grapple with internal divisions, economic instability, and regional pressures (Minhas, 2025).

During the summer, as the security situation in Afghanistan worsened, the Administration faced the difficult task of finding a balance between highlighting the growing signs of a potential collapse and the risk of undermining confidence in the Afghan government and the determination of Afghan forces to address the crisis. When a government is at risk of collapsing, as seen in Afghanistan or any other location, there is a distinct conflict between expressing confidence in the current administration's abilities and warning about the potential dangers of its failure. Ultimately, the Administration made the decision to carry out an exceptionally thorough and targeted campaign to educate both Americans and Afghan partners about the potential for e. This entailed issuing several security alerts and conducting tens of thousands of direct phone calls and texts to U.S. citizens, pushing them to evacuate Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, the choice was made to refrain from publicly disclosing the likely most

unfavourable outcome in order to prevent eroding trust in the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) or the Afghan government. This figure was created using the prevailing comprehension and strategic evaluation in the early weeks of August that Kabul would remain under control until the completion of the withdrawal. Avril Haines, the Director of National Intelligence, stated on August 18, 2021, that the decline happened more rapidly than anticipated by the Intelligence Community. Undoubtedly, the collapse proceeded more rapidly than expected by both the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Due to the current volatile security situation, it is necessary to prioritise the clear and confident disclosure of potential dangers. We executed this move before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Before the invasion, we proactively shared intelligence beforehand with trustworthy allies. The level of involvement escalated and became more widely known in the weeks leading up to Russia's invasion. The Ukrainian government's high-ranking officials vehemently opposed this tactic, citing worries that releasing such warnings would incite panic and result in a swift depletion of cash, so inflicting damage upon the Ukrainian economy. However, our clear and unequivocal warnings enabled the United States to take advantage of a key opportunity before the invasion, to collaborate with our allies, plan the swift execution of our response, and ensure the secure evacuation of American citizens in Ukraine (Neta, 2021)..

2.12.4 Initiating the Evacuation:

In March, the NSC staff initiated a thorough examination of the situation at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul to guarantee the security of all official U.S. personnel. This procedure aligns with our standard methodology to assessing the safety of U.S. diplomatic posts globally. A reduction in the number of U.S. personnel present on the ground was carried out in accordance with the level of danger, although essential personnel remained. Despite the return of numerous Embassy officials to the United States, we deployed additional consular officers to Kabul with the purpose of handling SIV applications. The Administration opted to commence regular flights of SIVs in July instead of initiating a large-scale airlift evacuation. This decision was based on the anticipation of ongoing embassy activities and SIV departures following the completion of the military withdrawal. Based on intelligence, it was determined that the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) were likely to defend Kabul. Initiating the Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) prematurely could have caused a collapse by eroding trust and confidence in the ANDSF. During his testimony on September 28, 2021, Chairman Milley

stated that there was no intelligence assessment indicating that the government and military will collapse within 11 days during that period. The assessments are still ongoing and may take several weeks or even months to complete (Neta, 2021).

The initial provincial capital was captured on August 6. As the Taliban acquired territory, President Biden requested his top national security advisors to evaluate whether to officially initiate the NEO. The NSC organised a high-level interagency meeting on August 8, at which it was unanimously advised not to initiate the NEO because to the prevailing conditions on the ground. On August 9, national security officials convened and determined that the current situation did not warrant initiating a Noncombatant Evacuation Operation (NEO). On August 11, following the advice of his experienced military advisors, the President approved the deployment of predetermined resources and personnel to address several potential situations. The President maintained frequent communication with his team, ensuring on a daily basis that they possessed all the necessary resources. Kabul faced imminent danger on August 13 and 14. President Biden said on August 14 that, based on the advice of his diplomatic, military, and intelligence teams, he had officially started the NEO (Noncombatant Evacuation Operation) and instructed the deployment of more U.S. soldiers to Afghanistan to assist in the evacuation. Currently, our main focus is on giving higher priority to evacuations that occur early in response to a deteriorating security scenario. We accomplished this in both Ethiopia and Ukraine. When the capitals of both nations faced a threat, the President ordered modifications in the positioning of the embassies by reducing or removing embassy staff (SIGAR, 2021). In Ethiopia, we evacuated all non-essential workers from the Embassy far ahead of any possible danger. We proceeded with this action notwithstanding the vehement opposition of the Ethiopian administration.

In Ukraine, we made the decision to evacuate personnel over two weeks prior to Russia's invasion, despite reservations expressed by several key allies, partners, and the Ukrainian people themselves, who feared that such a move would erode confidence in Ukraine. As a result of this choice, our teams were able to leave in an organised manner and do important tasks remotely for over three months without any safety concerns.

2.12.5 The Evacuation and the Attack at Abbey Gate

Due to extensive contingency planning over the course of several months, troops had previously been strategically positioned near Afghanistan in anticipation of potential need.

Furthermore, the supplementary forces dispatched by President Biden on August 14 were physically present in Kabul within a span of 48 hours. They successfully gained control of Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) over a period of 72 hours, allowing for the resumption of flights. After the evacuation began, President Biden consistently provided explicit instructions to prioritise the safety of the military personnel, depending on the guidance of his senior military officers to make informed decisions regarding operations. Secretary Blinken stated during his testimony on September 14, 2021, that because to prior comprehensive planning, the Embassy was successfully reduced in size and the remaining workers were relocated to the airport over a span of 48 hours. The U.S. Government ensured the safe departure of around 2,500 individuals, including servicemen and their families, during the evacuation. In order to effectively address the potential risk of a terrorist attack, the President consistently inquired about the military's need for supplementary assistance in executing their duty at HKIA. Senior military leaders have verified that they possess the resources and authority to effectively address and minimise threats, including those presented by ISIS-K (Hassan, 2021).

On August 25, senior military officials informed the President that extending evacuations for an additional 48 hours posed a controllable risk to the military and offered the greatest chance of successfully evacuating American people and Afghan allies. The President approved the request to prolong evacuation operations, while being aware of the hazards, with the full support of the whole national security team, including senior military authorities. Commanders on the ground made precise determinations on the selection of gates for airport access during the NEO. In the afternoon of August 25, the commanders made the decision to maintain the accessibility of Abbey Gate in order to aid the evacuation of U.K. soldiers and Afghan allies.

According to 2021 U.S. Central Command assessment, U.K. Forces would have been left stranded at the Baron Hotel if the Joint Task-Force-Crisis Response Commander had decided to lock Abbey Gate while they were still processing refugees. Thirteen military troops and one hundred seventy Afghan civilians were killed when a suicide bomber detonated an explosive device at Abbey Gate on August 26. Additionally, 45 other service members sustained injuries, resulting in a devastating loss of human life. We persist in grieving the demise of the 13 valiant individuals and pledge to persist in providing assistance to their families and the survivors who sustained injuries. Following the devastating assault at Abbey Gate, the President sought advice from high-ranking military experts over the possibility of terminating the NEO without delay. He

received advice that the threat to U.S. forces was controllable and should last until August 31 in order to optimise the evacuation of Americans, NATO forces, and Afghan partners. The U.S. soldiers maintained a state of alertness in order to safeguard against more strikes as the evacuation continued (Hassan, 2021).

On August 27, the U.S. military conducted a drone strike in Nangahar Province, resulting in the elimination of two prominent persons associated with ISIS-K. On August 29, as the evacuation was almost finished and following the terrible Abbey Gate incident, there were reports of vehicles and individuals associated with the attack on Abbey Gate. These information suggested that another terrorist attack against U.S. soldiers at HKIA could happen soon. In response to the perceived imminent danger, the United States military conducted a drone strike in Kabul, resulting in the unintended deaths of ten people (Hassan, 2021).

One of the reasons for this catastrophic mistake was that the team wrongly evaluated the target as an immediate threat due to the high-risk and constantly changing threat environment. The President headed the unanimous counsel of his senior national security officials and decided to terminate the evacuation on August 31, considering the significant likelihood of heightened assaults on U.S. soldiers if they were to prolong their stay. From August 14 to August 31, U.S. military and civilian personnel worked continuously to carry out the greatest airlift of non-combatants in U.S. history. Secretary Austin stated on September 28, 2021 that we conducted over 387 sorties on military aircraft, with an average of roughly 23 sorties every day. During the peak of this activity, an aircraft was departing every 45 minutes. No sorties were lost due to maintenance, fuel, or logistical issues. The operation was the most extensive air transport mission ever carried out in the history of the United States, completed within a span of 17 days. The Department of Defence performed comprehensive post-incident evaluations of the devastating assault that claimed American and other life at Abbey Gate, as well as the drone strike that regrettably resulted in the deaths of ten civilians. Subsequently, they applied the knowledge gained from these assessments. Following the Kabul strike, the Secretary of Defence initiated a comprehensive 90-day assessment to enhance the Department of Defense's ability to prevent civilian casualties in its operations (Blinken, 2021).

As a result, new regulations have been put in place. President Biden's decision to remove U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan included a vow to offer those American citizens who desired to depart the chance to do so. This was an unparalleled pledge, a departure from the United States'

earlier actions in similar circumstances such as Libya, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen, and Somalia, where we closed U.S. embassies. Furthermore, due to the absence of a mandatory registration process for Americans with our embassies when they travel to, depart from, or live in a foreign nation, it is unfeasible to accurately determine the exact number of Americans present in a specific country at any one moment. The U.S. Government made exceptional efforts to fulfil this commitment.

During his testimony on September 13, 2021, Secretary Blinken emphasised that our first concern was the protection and well-being of American citizens in Afghanistan. In March, we initiated a strong recommendation for them to depart the country. During the period from March to August, we dispatched a total of 19 explicit texts with the aforementioned cautionary notice, along with offers of aid, including monetary support to cover the cost of airfare. Between August 14 and August 31, the Department proactively contacted every American citizen identified by the U.S. Government. This was done through various means, including 55,000 phone calls and 33,000 emails, with the sole purpose of assisting in their evacuation if desired. A significant number of individuals were dual citizens whose families had been in Afghanistan for multiple generations and made the decision to remain in the country (Blinken, 2021).

Additionally, a portion of these individuals have opted to return to Afghanistan following the withdrawal of military forces. In the end, the U.S. Government successfully relocated more than 6,000 American citizens from the country. We are currently assisting the departures of American individuals who have made the decision to remain or return to Afghanistan, despite our serious warnings. Since August 31, 2021, we have assisted over 950 American citizens in their exit. Despite scepticism, President Biden successfully fulfilled his promise. From the outset, the President unequivocally expressed the United States' dedication to supporting our Afghan allies. Under the President's guidance, the entire interagency worked together to expedite the SIV programme. They allocated additional resources to this crucial programme, resumed SIV interviews that were put on hold by the previous administration, significantly increased the number of staff handling SIV applications, and carefully assessed each step of the complex application process. Due to these endeavours, the U.S. government granted a greater number of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) in the months preceding the capture of Kabul than in any previous period since the program's inception (Blinken, 2021).

Amidst the evacuation process, over 70,000 Afghans who were at risk were transported by

the U.S. Government to Defence Department facilities located abroad. The purpose of this relocation was to conduct security screening, vetting, and administer necessary public health immunisations. In June, the Department of State initiated efforts to get transit agreements for Afghans with third nations. By July, agreements were successfully reached with Qatar and Kuwait. Negotiations were also conducted with many other countries, such as Germany, Italy, Spain, UAE, Bahrain, Kosovo, and Albania, to establish similar arrangements. The establishment of this network of transit stations, commonly referred to as "lily pads," would not have been feasible without the assistance of international allies throughout the Middle East and Europe. Subsequently, Afghan evacuees were airlifted to eight domestic "safe havens" under the jurisdiction of the Department of Defence. Individuals requiring specialised medical attention were relocated to Walter Reed National Military Medical Centre as well as adjacent motels (The Guardian, 2020).

This extraordinary humanitarian endeavour was backed by almost 10,000 personnel from the State, Defence, and Homeland Security departments. Various entities, including veterans groups, non-profit organisations, state and municipal governments, companies, and other organisations, collaborated tirelessly to facilitate the evacuation process. These partners played a crucial role in our efforts by providing assistance to SIV applicants with paperwork and offering resources to support the resettlement of families.

Contrary to previous forecasts, we have been and will continue to assist in the departure and resettlement of our Afghan allies through Enduring Welcome, our long-term initiative to transfer people who collaborated with us to the United States using various legal immigration channels. We have proudly received almost 100,000 Afghan individuals as participants of Operation Allies Welcome, and now with Enduring Welcome. In addition, we are utilising the resources and experience that were evident during the evacuations to support the integration of both newly arriving Afghan individuals and those who arrived last year. Through the collaboration of nine domestic refugee resettlement agencies and a network of about 200 local affiliate organisations, every Afghan family has been successfully placed in American communities. In addition, it is imperative for Congress to take action on legislation, like as the Afghan Adjustment Act, in order to provide help for individuals who are joining new communities and facilitate their successful settlement and integration (Hassan, 2021). We have now established a deliberate and unambiguous understanding of the assistance that the U.S.

government can offer to Americans residing in difficult foreign environments, as well as the boundaries of such assistance. This was accomplished in both Ukraine and Ethiopia. We took the initiative to communicate in advance about potential dangers and made it explicitly apparent and reiterated multiple times that individuals who decided to stay should not anticipate the U.S. Government to provide evacuation assistance. In our public communication, we made a clear distinction between the people that the U.S. Government could directly evacuate, notably our own U.S. Government workers, and others who should pay attention to our warnings and make arrangements for their own evacuations, such as private American residents (Blinken, 2021).

2.12.6 Transformation of Lasting Capabilities:

Due to extensive contingency planning over the course of several months, troops had previously been strategically positioned near Afghanistan in anticipation of potential need. Furthermore, the supplementary forces dispatched by President Biden on August 14 were physically present in Kabul within a span of 48 hours. They successfully gained control of Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) over a period of 72 hours, allowing for the resumption of flights. After the evacuation began, President Biden consistently provided explicit instructions to prioritise the safety of the military personnel, depending on the guidance of his senior military officers to make informed decisions regarding operations. Secretary Blinken stated during his testimony on September 14, 2021, that because of prior comprehensive planning, the Embassy was successfully reduced in size and the remaining workers were relocated to the airport over a span of 48 hours. The U.S. Government ensured the safe departure of around 2,500 individuals, including servicemen and their families, during the evacuation. In order to effectively address the potential risk of a terrorist attack, the President consistently inquired about the military's need for supplementary assistance in executing their duty at HKIA. Senior military leaders have verified that they possess the resources and authority to effectively address and minimise threats, including those presented by ISIS-K (Blinken, 2021).

On August 25, senior military officials informed the President that extending evacuations for an additional 48 hours posed a controllable risk to the military and offered the greatest chance of successfully evacuating American people and Afghan allies. The President approved the request to prolong evacuation operations, while being aware of the hazards, with the full support of the whole national security team, including senior military authorities. Commanders on the ground made precise determinations on the selection of gates for airport access during the NEO. In the

afternoon of August 25, the commanders made the decision to maintain the accessibility of Abbey Gate in order to aid the evacuation of U.K. soldiers and Afghan allies. According to the 2021 U.S. Central Command assessment, had the Joint Task Force-Crisis Response Commander decided to close Abbey Gate while U.K. Forces were still screening refugees, they would have been left stranded in the Baron Hotel. A suicide bomber detonated an explosive device at Abbey Gate on the evening of August 26, resulting in the deaths of 13 military personnel and 170 Afghan civilians (Jean-Pierre & Kirby, 2023).

Following the devastating assault at Abbey Gate, the President sought advice from high-ranking military experts over the possibility of terminating the NEO without delay. He received advice that the threat to U.S. forces was controllable and should last until August 31 in order to optimise the evacuation of Americans, NATO forces, and Afghan partners. The U.S. soldiers maintained a state of alertness in order to safeguard against more strikes as the evacuation continued. On August 27, the U.S. military conducted a drone strike in Nangahar Province, resulting in the elimination of two prominent persons associated with ISIS-K (Blinken, 2021). On August 29, as the evacuation was almost finished and following the terrible Abbey Gate incident, there were reports of vehicles and individuals associated with the attack on Abbey Gate. These information suggested that another terrorist attack against U.S. soldiers at HKIA could happen soon. In response to the perceived imminent danger, the United States military conducted a drone strike in Kabul, resulting in the unintended deaths of ten people. One of the reasons for this catastrophic mistake was that the team wrongly evaluated the target as an immediate threat due to the high-risk and constantly changing threat environment. The President heeded the unanimous counsel of his senior national security officials and decided to terminate the evacuation on August 31, considering the significant likelihood of heightened assaults on U.S. soldiers if they were to prolong their stay. From August 14 to August 31, U.S. military and civilian personnel worked continuously to carry out the greatest airlift of non-combatants in U.S. history. Secretary Austin stated on September 28, 2021 that we conducted over 387 sorties on military aircraft, with an average of roughly 23 sorties every day (Jean-Pierre & Kirby, 2023)

During the peak of this activity, an aircraft was departing every 45 minutes. No sorties were lost due to maintenance, fuel, or logistical issues. The operation was the most extensive air transport mission ever carried out in the history of the United States, completed within a span of 17 days. The Department of Defence performed comprehensive post-incident evaluations of the

devastating assault that claimed American and other life at Abbey Gate, as well as the drone strike that regrettably resulted in the deaths of ten civilians. Subsequently, they applied the knowledge gained from these assessments. Following the Kabul strike, the Secretary of Defence initiated a comprehensive 90-day assessment to enhance the Department of Defense's ability to prevent civilian casualties in its operations. As a result, new regulations have been put in place (Vergun, 2021).

President Biden's decision to remove U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan included a vow to offer those American citizens who desired to depart the chance to do so. This was an unparalleled pledge, a departure from the United States' earlier actions in similar circumstances such as Libya, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen, and Somalia, where we closed U.S. embassies. Furthermore, due to the absence of a mandatory registration process for Americans with our embassies when they travel to, depart from, or live in a foreign nation, it is unfeasible to accurately determine the exact number of Americans present in a specific country at any one moment. The U.S. Government made exceptional efforts to fulfil this commitment. During his testimony on September 13, 2021, Secretary Blinken emphasised that our first concern was the protection and well-being of American citizens in Afghanistan. In March, we initiated a strong recommendation for them to depart the country. During the period from March to August, we dispatched a total of 19 explicit texts with the aforementioned cautionary notice, along with offers of aid, including monetary support to cover the cost of airfare. Between August 14 and August 31, the Department proactively contacted every American citizen identified by the U.S. Government. This was done through various means, including 55,000 phone calls and 33,000 emails, with the sole purpose of assisting in their evacuation if desired (Jean-Pierre & Kirby, 2023).

A significant number of individuals were dual citizens whose families had been in Afghanistan for multiple generations and made the decision to remain in the country. Additionally, a portion of these individuals have opted to return to Afghanistan following the withdrawal of military forces. In the end, the U.S. Government successfully relocated more than 6,000 American citizens from the country. We are currently assisting the departures of American individuals who have made the decision to remain or return to Afghanistan, despite our serious warnings. Since August 31, 2021, we have assisted over 950 American citizens in their exit. Despite scepticism, President Biden successfully fulfilled his promise. From the outset, the

President unequivocally expressed the United States' dedication to supporting our Afghan allies. Under the President's guidance, the entire interagency worked together to expedite the SIV programme. They allocated additional resources to this crucial programme, resumed SIV interviews that were put on hold by the previous administration, significantly increased the number of staff handling SIV applications, and carefully assessed each step of the complex application process. Due to these endeavours, the U.S. government granted a greater number of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) in the months preceding the capture of Kabul than in any previous period since the program's inception (Jean-Pierre & Kirby, 2023).

Amidst the evacuation process, over 70,000 Afghans who were at risk were transported by the U.S. Government to Defence Department facilities located abroad. The purpose of this relocation was to conduct security screening, vetting, and administer necessary public health immunisations. In June, the Department of State initiated efforts to get transit agreements for Afghans with third nations. By July, agreements were successfully reached with Qatar and Kuwait. Negotiations were also conducted with many other countries, such as Germany, Italy, Spain, UAE, Bahrain, Kosovo, and Albania, to establish similar arrangements. The establishment of this network of transit stations, commonly referred to as "lily pads," would not have been feasible without the assistance of international allies throughout the Middle East and Europe. Subsequently, Afghan evacuees were airlifted to eight domestic "safe havens" under the jurisdiction of the Department of Defence. Individuals requiring specialised medical attention were relocated to Walter Reed National Military Medical Centre as well as adjacent motels. This extraordinary humanitarian endeavour was backed by almost 10,000 personnel from the State, Defence, and Homeland Security departments. Various entities, including veterans groups, non-profit organisations, state and municipal governments, companies, and other organisations, collaborated tirelessly to facilitate the evacuation process. These partners played a crucial role in our efforts by providing assistance to SIV applicants with paperwork and offering resources to support the resettlement of families (Sahgal, 2011).

Contrary to previous forecasts, we have been and will continue to assist in the departure and resettlement of our Afghan allies through Enduring Welcome, our long-term initiative to transfer people who collaborated with us to the United States using various legal immigration channels. We have proudly received almost 100,000 Afghan individuals as participants of Operation Allies Welcome, and now with Enduring Welcome. In addition, we are

utilising the resources and experience that were evident during the evacuations to support the integration of both newly arriving Afghan individuals and those who arrived last year. Through the collaboration of nine domestic refugee resettlement agencies and a network of about 200 local affiliate organisations, every Afghan family has been successfully placed in American communities. In addition, it is imperative for Congress to take action on legislation, like as the Afghan Adjustment Act, in order to provide help for individuals who are joining new communities and facilitate their successful settlement and integration. We have now established a deliberate and unambiguous understanding of the assistance that the U.S. government can offer to Americans residing in difficult foreign environments, as well as the boundaries of such assistance. This was accomplished in both Ukraine and Ethiopia. We took the initiative to communicate in advance about potential dangers and made it explicitly apparent and reiterated multiple times that individuals who decided to stay should not anticipate the U.S. Government to provide evacuation assistance. In our public communication, we made a clear distinction between the people that the U.S. Government could directly evacuate, notably our own U.S. Government workers, and others who should pay attention to our warnings and make arrangements for their own evacuations, such as private American residents (Bagchi, 2021).

2.12.7 Putting the United States on Stronger Footing

Upon President Biden's declaration to remove U.S. forces from Afghanistan, several individuals expressed scepticism on the potential for America to achieve a safer and more robust position. President Biden pledged to ensure that the United States would possess a lasting ability to confront terrorist threats in Afghanistan without deploying a large number of military personnel. In July 2022, he showcased his ability by carrying out a successful mission that resulted in the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al Qaeda. Furthermore, President Biden's decision in 2021 accurately acknowledged that the current terrorist threat is more varied and spread out compared to the situation in 2001. By choosing to withdraw from Afghanistan, he effectively allocated essential military, intelligence, and other resources to combat terrorist dangers globally, especially in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen. The Administration has effectively achieved this, specifically by executing ISIS leader Hajji Abdullah and several high-ranking ISIS leaders in Syria and Somalia through ongoing U.S. counterterrorism operations. In addition, we maintain our dedication to providing substantial humanitarian aid and advocating for

the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. Furthermore, we will persist in denouncing and marginalising the Taliban due to its abhorrent track record on human rights (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021).

In a broader sense, concerns arose when the President chose to withdraw from Afghanistan, as there were apprehensions about potential repercussions like as the erosion of our relationships and the United States being placed in a disadvantaged position on the international platform. The inverse has occurred. Our global reputation has greatly improved, as indicated by several opinion surveys. Our partnerships have reached unprecedented levels of strength. Finland has gained membership in NATO, and Sweden is on the verge of obtaining membership as well. We are enhancing and fortifying our current collaborations while establishing fresh alliances with countries across the globe. America is currently at the forefront on the international stage. We have mobilised our allies and partners to provide assistance to Ukraine and ensure that Russia is held responsible for its aggressive actions, while also striving to effectively compete with China. It is difficult to envision the United States being able to effectively lead the response to these issues, particularly in the resource-intensive manner it has, if U.S. soldiers were still present in Afghanistan at present. Ultimately, despite two decades of effort, over \$2 trillion in funding, and the establishment of a 300,000-strong Afghan army, the swift and effortless takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban indicates that only a lasting and substantially increased U.S. military presence could have altered the outcome. President Biden emphasised on August 31, 2021, that there is a lack of understanding among many people regarding the significant sacrifices made by the small percentage of individuals who serve in the military and are willing to risk their lives to defend our nation. He dismissed the notion that a low-risk and low-cost approach could have been continued in Afghanistan. War is inherently devoid of any characteristics that can be described as low-grade, low-risk, or low-cost (Bagchi, 2021).

Chapter- 3

3 CHANGING STRATEGIC DYNAMICS OF AFGHANISTAN: *SECURITY NIGHTMARE*

3.1 . Introduction

Following the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan in 2021, the world's most lethal conflict gradually settled into a tenuous tranquilly. The levels of violence have decreased somewhat, but are gradually increasing as the Taliban confronts two insurgencies. A cause for concern among observers is the fact that the Taliban provide refuge to international extremists, including the deceased al-Qaeda commander Ayman al-Zawahiri. Although the obstacles faced by the Taliban do not pose a significant danger to their control in the near future, the de facto authorities are encountering difficulties in effectively dealing with them. Residents in certain areas have experienced a reduction in the use of oppressive methods that caused them to feel disconnected. Their management of international jihadist organisations has failed to instill trust, particularly among neighbouring nations that are facing violent assaults. Foreign parties should refrain from engaging in historical practices of backing proxies or indiscriminately conducting aerial attacks in order to safeguard their interests, as these actions are unlikely to enhance security. Engaging with the Taliban in a cautious and limited manner may appear unlikely, yet it could be the most favourable choice among a range of unfavourable alternatives. The triumph of the Taliban has resulted in a degree of unfamiliar tranquilly in Afghanistan, with a decrease in killings observed in late 2021 throughout the huge majority of Afghan land. However, the situation is not satisfactory. This was demonstrated by the U.S. strike on 31 July in Kabul, which resulted in the death of al-Qaeda commander Ayman al-Zawahiri (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021).

However, it is important for individuals who are not directly involved to refrain from engaging in proxy battles or regular drone attacks. Instead, they should exert pressure on the Taliban to fulfil their security obligations and, despite justified scepticism, propose limited cooperation on specific matters. The Taliban, who are primarily responsible for Afghanistan's security, need to enhance the professionalism of their forces, cease the use of collective punishment, and execute their policy of granting amnesty to officials and security forces of the overthrown government. The current assessment of Afghanistan's security situation under Taliban control indicates a nation that is considerably more tranquil compared to a year ago.

However, there are localised areas of violence that provide a risk of heightened instability if not properly addressed. One notable characteristic of the new environment is the Taliban's altered military positioning, which has become noticeably more relaxed throughout a significant portion of the nation. The Taliban have destroyed numerous checkpoints on roads and highways due to a shortage of manpower and a perceived lack of significant threats from the rural villages that previously supported their militants throughout the long period of insurgency. Simultaneously, they are currently facing challenges in adjusting to their increased responsibility of maintaining law and order in urban areas and certain regions in the north where they lack popularity. While establishing themselves in Kabul and strategizing for the future, the Taliban have revealed their grandiose intentions to create a substantial security infrastructure. However, the actual progress in developing these forces is still in its initial phases. The task is expected to need a significant amount of time, potentially spanning several years (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021).

Meanwhile, the Taliban are confronted with at least two minor uprisings. In the eastern and northern regions, there is an ongoing conflict against the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP). In the northern region, they engage in combat with members associated with the previous military, police, and intelligence organisations, whom they successfully overpowered in August 2021. The relentless offensive against IS-KP has significantly weakened its capabilities in the eastern region. However, the group has started adapting by changing its operational area and modifying its strategies. It has even carried out attacks in neighbouring Central Asian countries, indicating its ability to operate from the Taliban's stronghold. Simultaneously, the Northern insurgent faction known as the NRF has been steadily increasing its influence, potentially due to the Taliban's efforts to suppress it (Giustozzi, 2022).

While facing these problems, the Taliban have been discreetly taking certain measures to mitigate the threats posed by other militants who are currently inactive but nonetheless offer a significant hazard. These encompass al-Qaeda and other jihadist organisations with aspirations that span across regions or the globe, and have traditionally received support and shelter from the Taliban. The Taliban's approach to managing these organisations is focused on restraining them without inciting them to rebel against the newly established government. The delicate equilibrium seems to have failed and may no longer be viable following the U.S. drone strike that resulted in the death of Zawahiri. The execution of the individual highlighted the inherent

conflicts within the Taliban's intention to provide a safe haven for worldwide jihadists, who fundamentally strive to dismantle the international system that the Taliban themselves aspire to be acknowledged by (Vergun, 2021).

The Taliban's first responses to security issues have, in certain instances, exacerbated the situation. They have consistently refused to acknowledge the existence of significant problems, even going so far as to make baseless assertions that al-Qaeda does not have a foothold in the country. The Taliban consistently deny the extent of local insurgencies, likely in order to hinder their opponents' efforts to gain attention and recruit supporters. Simultaneously, they suppress opposition through oppressive methods. These violations have encompassed unjustifiable imprisonment, severe physical abuse, unlawful executions, widespread retribution, and the systematic targeting of individuals from specific ethnic, tribal, and religious backgrounds whom the Taliban suspects of aiding rebels or promoting anti-Taliban views. The Taliban acknowledge that their severe tactics often result in a negative response from Afghans, leading them to assist the Taliban's opponents. Consequently, the authorities are now testing more subtle methods to ensure security. Occasionally, they are transferring Taliban security personnel to different locations in order to avoid their involvement in local conflicts. Additionally, they are proposing the release of detainees on the condition that tribal elders provide assurances of their adherence to proper conduct. They have initiated comprehensive disarming measures, which involve conducting unprecedented searches of houses to locate weapons and seize military equipment. These moves are significant, however less aggressive compared to other counter-insurgency strategies that Afghans have been accustomed to in previous decades. In addition, they are harnessing the influential influence of religious experts to convince the entire nation to refrain from opposing Taliban governance. Significantly, the Taliban have restated a comprehensive pardon, which applies to all those who refrain from engaging in combat against them, and have extended an invitation to former adversaries, inviting them to contribute to the reconstruction of governmental institutions, including the security forces (Giustozzi, 2022). According to Brigadier (retd) Tahir Mehmood, “these Taliban who came in power after 2021 are not Comrades of Mullah Omar. These Taliban are not only Madrassah students but they are also got experience in foreign countries. They may not take any extreme position and will continue to talk to the world. TTP are also their allies because they did not abandon them in the past and they will not abandon them now. It is against their culture and

religious values. This Taliban government will be engaged by the Chinese, they successfully do so, only then we can find peace in Afghanistan. They will try to play TTP card against Pakistan. They cannot give development to Afghanistan. Pakistan should regulate its border and compel them to use proper channel to enter Pakistan” (Mehmood, 2025).

From the Taliban's standpoint, the concern is how to mitigate the escalation of threats to the new rule. Although these attempts have not yet effectively reduced anti-Taliban violence, the new administration is not facing any immediate risks to its existence. The Taliban's main concern is how to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. There are several potential future scenarios that could provide more serious challenges to the Taliban's control. These include a significant breakdown within the Taliban movement itself, the consolidation of opposition groupings, or a rebellion by jihadist militants against the Taliban's attempts to manage them. Currently, those advancements seem improbable. There is a potential risk that regional and Western powers may provide weapons to proxy combat forces or that Western countries may engage in a new pattern of airstrikes or other independent actions against foreign militants in Afghanistan. These actions could have unanticipated consequences. The revelation of al-Qaeda's leader in the centre of Kabul would inevitably cause foreign nations to question the Taliban's capacity or inclination to control transnational extremists. Undoubtedly, the international community has valid concerns over the apparent lackadaisical attitude of the new Afghan authorities towards terrorists who are still associated with the Taliban, at least for the time being.

However, the primary objective for external forces should be to prevent a resurgence of intense conflict in Afghanistan. The United States and its allies have explicitly stated its intention to maintain a "over-the-horizon" capacity, allowing them to launch attacks on targets from military bases located in foreign nations. However, the successful targeting of al-Qaeda's commander does not imply a comprehensive strategy: increasing the frequency of airstrikes against militant groups will not eradicate them entirely. Foreign governments should refrain from exacerbating violence in Afghanistan by engaging in ill-advised proxy wars. The chances of different rebel factions opposing the Taliban coming together and successfully winning a civil war, taking control of Kabul, are quite slim, especially with financial support from foreign sources. Instead, employing these strategies - intensifying the frequency of drone attacks or endeavouring to enhance the capabilities of the Taliban's adversaries to employ violence - are

probable to lead to harm to non-combatants, an increase in negative emotion towards Western nations, and maybe even stronger backing for the Taliban among the general population. These actions will exacerbate tensions between Western governments and the de facto authorities, hindering any potential limited collaboration on issues crucial to the welfare of Afghans. Additionally, it might potentially drive the Taliban closer to jihadist groups and increase the likelihood of defections to IS-KP (Giustozzi, 2023, p. 21).

An improved approach would involve ensuring that the Taliban fulfills their obligations, which include their vows to control transnational jihadist organizations (Akthar, 2019). In exchange, limited assistance can be provided for practical security matters (Bano, 2021). The Western countries will not consider the possibility of engaging in security cooperation with the Taliban. However, there are still possibilities for engagement, such as assisting the Taliban in reducing the illegal trade of weapons and ensuring the secure storage of their weapon stockpiles (Budihas, 2015). To enhance the professionalism of Taliban security forces, it would be beneficial for the international community to consider increasing funding for educational initiatives that focus on enlightening the Taliban on their legal responsibilities, particularly in relation to civilian policing (Bano, 2021). Enhanced border management necessitates international collaboration, providing advantages for all parties involved (Canyon, 2017). The process of clearing landmines and explosive ordnance might potentially entail the cooperation of both the Taliban and external parties (Dobbins, 2019). These procedures can be taken without placing trust in the Taliban. Contrary to popular belief, the reason why the Taliban should be closely monitored is because their ability to ensure security for Afghans and prevent the spread of instability to other nations is in doubt (Basit, 2021).

However, the major responsibility for the nation's security now lies with the Taliban (Cheema, 1983). It would be beneficial for all parties involved - the Afghan people, external players, and the Taliban themselves - if the Taliban can take on this role in a responsible manner. As the de facto authorities in Afghanistan, it is their responsibility to establish security forces that prioritize the protection of civilians and avoid causing injury or alienation (Daveed, 2012). In order to discourage misconduct, it is imperative for them to take legal action against their own members who engage in wrongdoing, such as violating the amnesty that plays a crucial role in fostering reconciliation with former adversaries (Hathaway, 2008). It is imperative that they

cease the practice of singling out entire neighborhoods, tribes, and ethnic groupings in response to the conduct of individuals who rebel against their authority (Hussain, 2006). Implementing these measures will alleviate the concerns of Afghans regarding the potential resurgence of armed conflict in their nation (Akthar, 2008). Additionally, they may initiate a lengthy and challenging process of establishing practical collaboration between the Taliban and Western governments on fundamental matters of peace and stability (Tanner, n.d.).

The Taliban's successful military seizure of Afghanistan in August 2021 marked the conclusion of 43 years of nearly uninterrupted warfare, a sequence of overlapping battles that intensified significantly as U.S. soldiers readied for their withdrawal (Ishaq, 2025). Upon the ascension of the former insurgents to power, the global spotlight initially shifted towards the catastrophic consequences in terms of both humanitarian and economic aspects. Only a small number of external observers paid attention to the significant changes in the security situation, which included a decrease in the frequency of violent incidents to a degree that was unprecedented for most Afghan citizens (Hathaway, 2008).

Afghans undoubtedly observed the alteration. The individuals had become familiar with a consistent pattern of death and devastation: approximately 20,000 to 40,000 casualties from battles each year, a number that has exceeded the casualties in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq for several years, as well as a higher frequency of U.S. airstrikes compared to any other region (Daveed, 2012). Following the Taliban's assumption of power, there was a dramatic absence of Afghan individuals with shrapnel lacerations and blast-related injuries in the emergency wards. According to the United Nations, the intensity of conflict decreased to just 18 percent of its prior levels during the initial months of 2022 (Dobbins, 2019). A further analysis, comparing the initial ten months of the Taliban administration with the corresponding period from the previous year, revealed a significant decrease in the frequency of conflicts, explosions, and other violent incidents, with a reduction of five times per week (Crisis Group, 2022).

Previously, the war had compelled a large number of individuals to evacuate their residences. However, in the initial months of Taliban governance, the makeshift camps and impoverished areas ceased to experience an increase in new inhabitants. As of early 2022, only two out of the 34 provinces in the country experienced displacement due to violence. The overall number of displaced individuals was less than 1% of the highest monthly figures recorded in the

past. Yet, on the streets, there was a pervasive sense of uncertainty regarding the sustainability of the respite from the chaotic events of past years. The Afghans, who were anxiously observing the Taliban's consolidation of power, frequently speculated if the temporary cessation of hostilities was merely a short-lived period of tranquilly preceding another civil war or the beginning of a peaceful era. The Taliban, firmly believing that armed factions, regional powers, and Western countries are working against them, have been determined to concentrate their efforts on strengthening their grip. The actions of the de facto administration will have a significant impact on the current situation, as well as the actions of the developing armed opposition and other actors to a lesser degree. Multiple factions have already proclaimed their intention to engage in military opposition against the Taliban's governance. Primarily, the Taliban have reacted to challenges to their authority with excessive cruelty. The Taliban, firmly believing that armed organisations, regional forces, and Western governments are working against them, are determined to concentrate their efforts on strengthening their grip. Certain aggressive strategies employed by them are having an unintended negative effect, since they are inadvertently strengthening the very dangers they aim to quell. Consequently, the Taliban is reassessing its methods in specific locations (Sahgal, 2011). Simultaneously, Western countries express concerns over the Taliban's ongoing tolerance of terrorist groups, as they doubt the Taliban's capability to effectively prevent fresh transnational attacks originating from Afghanistan (Crisis Group, 2022).

This paper analyses the current security situation in Afghanistan following the Taliban's assumption of power. It investigates the increasing risks faced by the new administration, the actions of armed organisations like al-Qaeda that have historically received support from the Taliban, and the measures taken by the new authorities to address these challenges. The analysis takes into account both regional and international security issues, and then explores potential approaches to engage with the Taliban in order to address these concerns. This report does not include information about the Taliban's implementation of severe social policies or the consequences of these policies for marginalised groups like women and minorities. These matters of human vulnerability will be discussed in future analyses of Taliban rule. The data collection period spans from November 2021 to June 2022 (Giustozzi, 2023, p. 21).

3.2 The Changing Strategic Dynamics of Afghanistan: *Security Nightmare*

According to Dr Sammar Rao, “The taliban restoration of power in 2021 has led to the resurfacing of several domestic and cross border issues. The Taliban regime is based on coercion rather than consensus, leading to concerns over its stability. Domestically, the suppression of dissent and restrictions on the mobility of women have led to the marginalisation of almost half of the population. Additionally, the indoctrination of extreme ideologies through the education system is contributing to the slow poisoning of the future generations. Internationally, the Taliban regime has fostered tensions with Pakistan over the use of Afghan soil for harboring terrorist activities, undermining the relations between the two countries. The Afghan-Iran tensions range over sectarian, border and Helmand river issue. On the other hand, China too has adopted a cautious approach over its stance towards Afghanistan. It has considered engaging for economic reasons yet, the concerns over the resurgence of Uyghur uprising in Xinjiang remain looming. Thus, the post-Taliban situation in Afghanistan remains unstable despite the claims of consolidation of power under Taliban 2.0” (Rao, 2025). Gaining a precise understanding of the security situation in Afghanistan has always been difficult, and it got significantly more challenging after the Taliban took control. Publicly accessible databases that document incidents of violence depend on media reports, which have become less trustworthy due to the Taliban's obstruction of investigations and opposition parties' tendency to inflate their meagre achievements. Journalists and observers encounter limited access to regions of severe warfare between rebel factions and Taliban forces. Consequently, open-source datasets may not faithfully depict all patterns of violence. The domain of information is highly contested, with different narratives influencing the public discourse on security. The Taliban frequently portray their assaults on rival armed factions as law enforcement endeavours against criminals and abductors. Journalists in the country can encounter challenges when conducting investigations into such situations, hindering their ability to determine the identities and alleged offences of the individuals under scrutiny. Conversely, armed opposition groups are progressively asserting accountability for assaults against the Taliban authority (Ahmad, 2025).

However, individuals may attempt to justify their involvement in these activities by falsifying records. Furthermore, there are instances in which multiple organisations claim ownership of the same event. There is a possibility that factions opposed to the Taliban may have motivations to fabricate or amplify incidents with the aim of gaining media coverage and securing

financial support from external entities. Amidst the prevailing ambiguity, it is evident that two minor differences are emerging. The provincial chapter of the Islamic State, known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), was founded in 2015 and has been actively working to undermine the Taliban. The second argument pertains to those who were previously associated with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the governmental body that disintegrated in 2021 (Crisis Group, 2022) & (Giustozzi, 2022). \

The National Resistance Front (NRF) has established itself as the dominant force among the erstwhile groups of the Republic, mostly in Panjshir province situated in the northeastern region of Kabul. Nevertheless, a multitude of more groups have also proclaimed their presence. The battle between the Taliban and its precursors has persisted since the 1990s. Following the rise of the Taliban in August 2021, there has been a reversal in the roles of the insurgents and counter-insurgents. Currently, neither of these two uprisings poses a substantial danger to the Taliban. Violence in the country has notably declined, although there are still areas of instability mainly concentrated in the eastern and northern regions. This is in sharp opposition to previous decades when the entire country was consumed by conflict. Conflicts usually occur due to the Taliban's actions rather than rebel groups, as the new authorities utilise aggressive tactics to strengthen their control by using armed force (Hassan, 2021).

Some of these conflicts occur when the Taliban destroy unauthorised checkpoints and establish control over natural resources. Additional conflicts emerge as a result of clashes with opposing factions, criminals, and renegade elements within the Taliban. When the Taliban are subjected to attacks, larger explosions are usually claimed by opposing factions, while the sources of smaller-scale attacks are sometimes unclear and can be attributed to several circumstances, as elaborated below. IS-KP was commonly credited with the majority of strikes against the Taliban in the last months of 2021. Nevertheless, due to the Taliban's relentless operations against the group, the frequency of IS-KP attacks decreased throughout the first half of 2022. Conversely, there has been a surge in anti-Taliban assaults in the northern areas, where opposition groups have been more proactive, in recent months. This suggests that these groups might be exploiting the absence of heavy snowfall in the mountains and growing in power. Most observers agree that the number of NRF attacks surpassed that of IS-KP assaults in the spring of 2022, and continued to rise throughout the summer (Sahgal, 2011).

3.3 Rise in Terrorist Attacks

Identifying trends is intricate because of the inherent challenge in ascertaining the culprit and the target in instances of violence. Approximately 50% of the attacks targeting Taliban militants since October 2021 cannot be attributed to any one origin, based on certain estimations. Several unclaimed attacks are probably linked to personal animosities or local conflicts, frequently arising from political disputes, competition for resources, or historical grievances, and involving ethnic, tribal, or familial relationships. Certain attacks are carried out by individuals associated with the former regime, while they are not connected to any coordinated insurgency. These crimes allude to retaliatory killings carried out by individuals whose families have been especially targeted by the Taliban, despite being assured of pardon. Periodic conflicts persist between the Taliban and non-regular forces that were previously aligned with the Republic, including as the Afghan Local Police and pro-government militias. Additional conflict frequently emerges as a result of disputes over resources, such as land or territory. Violence can be attributed to criminal behaviour, which has increased due to the economic recession. Furthermore, the Taliban is presently undergoing internal upheaval, mostly centred around disputes concerning positions or other issues. The frequency of these unclaimed attacks seems to have consistently decreased over the last 10 months, regardless of their underlying reason. The decrease in specific provinces can be ascribed to the Taliban's endeavours to fortify their control, whilst in other regions, autonomous armed factions are aligning with organised opposition forces that publicise each anti-Taliban attack (Sandano, 2025).

3.4. Anti-Taliban Terrorist Groups: *Regional Security Challenges*

Two conflicting tendencies dominate the security scene. Although the Taliban have effectively impeded the expansion of IS-KP, they are presently encountering challenges in quelling the escalating insurgency in the northern areas. Furthermore, there are additional factions affiliated with the former administration that have arisen to counter the Taliban. Nevertheless, these groupings have a reduced magnitude in comparison to those found in the northern region. Despite being less active, the alliance between international terrorist organisations, such as al-Qaeda, that remain loyal to the Taliban, has the capacity to become increasingly perilous. Under certain conditions, these factions may revolt against the newly established government (Mumtaz, 2016).

3.4.1. Rise Islamic State Khorasan Province

Following the Taliban's assumption of power, IS-KP launched a higher frequency of assaults compared to the previous period. The increase in violence seemed to be driven by two main factors: the chaotic aftermath of the Taliban's victory over Afghan forces, which created a security vacuum in various eastern districts; and, more generally, IS-KP's shift in strategy towards conducting more frequent but less significant operations. The tactical change began before 2019 and continued throughout 2020, as IS-KP experienced ongoing military pressure. As a reaction, they implemented a decentralisation plan and established hidden networks, with a particular focus on urban warfare. This modification was implemented as a reaction to the territorial advancements achieved by the Taliban and the military operations conducted by Afghan and international forces in recent times. IS-KP, lacking rural bastions, reestablished its power in urban regions through a sequence of abrupt and concise attacks and sniper missions targeting the Taliban subsequent to their victory. The fugitives restored their networks and initiated a sequence of attacks on Taliban forces (Tipu, 2025).

In late 2021, the Taliban regained control by launching a strong counter-offensive against IS-KP in urban regions. Consequently, IS-KP, whose attacks had significantly reduced, was forced to change its methods once again. The group's operational capacity in the eastern province of Nangahar declined. Nevertheless, they continued to focus their efforts on attacking Taliban forces in the adjacent Kunar province. This involved intermittent surprise attacks on isolated checkpoints with formidable weaponry. Besides its customary stronghold in the eastern region, the organisation expanded its geographic scope by sporadically launching assaults in the southern and western territories, while also conducting more frequent raids in the northern region. Rather than directly confronting the Taliban through armed means, IS-KP primarily targeted the Shia Hazara and Sufi minority in the country, a population that the organisation has persistently singled out since its establishment. Most of these operations were infrequent events, suggesting a limited presence of IS-KP in those locations (Azizi, 2019). Nevertheless, the strikes in the northern region appeared to be highly organised, suggesting that the group may be expanding its presence beyond its main areas of control in the eastern region. The adoption of this decentralised approach, along with other strategic adjustments, allowed IS-KP to avoid its fighters being targeted by the Taliban's security forces in the start of 2022 (Azizi, 2019).

In addition, it escalated its endeavours to target susceptible Shia and Sufi communities,

while also participating in a predominantly symbolic conflict with Afghanistan's bordering countries. The Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) claimed responsibility for carrying out rocket attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Nevertheless, it appears that these actions were not intended to inflict harm on military personnel. However, their effect was to undermine the Taliban's claim that only a government led by them could provide peace and stability to the country, partially because they were able to stop militant groups from carrying out operations across borders. The agility and resilience of IS-KP in adapting to the swiftly evolving environment is shown in their capacity to recover promptly. Given the enduring and intricate nature of the struggle between IS-KP and the Taliban, it is probable that the former will persistently modify its tactics to offset military pressure and devise inventive approaches to undermine its adversary. The IS-KP group persists in receiving financial and political backing from its parent organisation, enabling its members to conduct activities in other countries throughout the region (Afridi, 2025).

3.4.2. Northern Alliance: *National Resistance Front*

By early 2022, armed factions primarily composed of individuals affiliated with the previous Republic had supplanted IS-KP as the Taliban's principal adversary. Many of these individuals had previously fought against the Taliban in the 1990s, including former monarchy supporters, members of the previous pro-communist administration, and various mujahedeen soldiers. Before Western intervention in 2001, most of these factions had suffered defeat in their conflicts with the Taliban. Their current ranks include a younger cadre that has distinguished itself by resisting the Taliban insurgency over the past two decades. Leading the National Rebel Front (NRF), the largest of several rebel organizations, is Ahmad Massoud. Claimed to be directing the NRF from Tajikistan, Ahmad Massoud is the son of the renowned mujahedeen leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was killed by al-Qaeda terrorists on September 10, 2001. The NRF primarily operates in Panjshir province and its neighboring regions in northern Afghanistan, including certain portions of Baghlan, Parwan, and Kapisa provinces (Giustozzi, 2022).

Moreover, it sustains a specific degree of proficiency in Kabul. The group's opposition against the Taliban began immediately after the militants took control on August 15, 2021, making Panjshir the only province not under Taliban control. Soon after, a revolt in the Andarab area of Baghlan effectively repulsed Taliban forces. The Taliban expeditiously dispatched their

troops to Andarab and Panjshir, rapidly seizing control of substantial villages. Nevertheless, distant regions were afflicted by insurgency. Since early summer 2022, the number of NRF attacks has been steadily increasing, with a minimum of twelve attacks occurring each week. The NRF fighters in Andarab have developed a restricted capability to confront the Taliban security forces. Nevertheless, they usually seek refuge in fortified mountain bases and evade direct clashes when the Taliban deploys extra forces. The NRF combatants in Panjshir have skillfully positioned themselves in concealed locations within the mountains, although they have not been able to maintain dominance over any district thus far. The NRF employs hit-and-run tactics, periodic ambushes on isolated Taliban checkpoints, patrols, and occasionally executes targeted executions of Taliban officials, using improvised explosive devices. Most armed opposition organisations in Panjshir and the surrounding areas operate under the nominal leadership of the NRF, however there is limited organisational structure and strategic collaboration among them. The majority of the group's leadership is based in locations outside of Afghanistan, and local commanders often operate independently with limited supervision from abroad. The NRF possesses an adaptable organisational structure, similar to the strategies adopted by the Taliban throughout their insurgency. This allows the NRF to incorporate smaller factions that participate in battle against the Taliban as a result of localised grievances (Giustozzi, 2022).

The National Resistance Front (NRF) customizes its messaging to attract support from both domestic and international sources in opposition to the Taliban administration. Central to the NRF's communication strategy is the preservation of the rights of ethnic minorities. Some prominent members advocate for the devolution of authority to provinces to enhance their autonomy from Kabul. The organization refrains from endorsing a specific restoration of the previous institutional structure, and its members frequently critique former government officials for what they perceive as their support for the Taliban's ascendancy. When engaging with individuals from different nations, the group highlights the principles of freedom and the capacity to make autonomous decisions, while also raising apprehensions regarding worldwide terrorism. This speech, characterised by its genuine convictions, is tactically crafted to secure support from both local and international communities in opposition to the Taliban regime. Senior officials from the National Resistance Front (NRF) inform foreign counterparts that their goal is to apply pressure on the Taliban in order to initiate negotiations, but this may not occur

in the immediate future. When communicating with Afghan audiences, the messaging may differ to a certain degree (Mumtaz, 2016).

On social media, proponents of the NRF mostly highlight the challenges faced by the Tajiks, the largest ethnic group in the northern area. They also draw attention to the Pashtuns, who have almost complete power and are the main backers of the Taliban. These narratives have had a substantial impact on political discourse over an extended period of time. Non-Pashtun factions have expressed dissatisfaction during previous administrations, contending that the presidency, which was dominated by Pashtuns, wielded undue power and shown a perceived favouritism towards Pashtun members of the Taliban. The utilisation of Afghanistan's politically charged ethnic divisions is currently hindering the expansion of the NRF beyond its established territories in the northern region. Nevertheless, the group has increased its popularity by obtaining the support of General Qadam Shah Shahim, the former head of the army, and by establishing itself as a safe haven for other former security officers who are being mistreated by the Taliban. Furthermore, it appears that there is a deliberate effort to attract specific factions within the Taliban, like the one commanded by Mawlawi Mehdi, an ethnic Hazara commander who rebelled against his fellow Taliban members. The effectiveness of this strategy in enhancing the NRF's membership remains unknown (Crisis Group, 2022)

3.4.3. Reformation of High Council for National Resistance

The High Council of National Resistance for Saving Afghanistan is a recently formed organisation that is in opposition to the Taliban. The group comprises many individuals who gained significant recognition in the 1980s and subsequently had positions in the administration starting from 2001. In May, the group gained attention by publicly condemning the Taliban's wrongdoing and dictatorial governance, while promoting a peaceful resolution of issues. While the group itself has avoided initiating any military actions, fighters linked to Council member Atta Mohammad Noor, a politician representing the northern region, have declared their intention to engage in violent opposition in the Andarab region, as well as in the provinces of Sar-e Pol, Samangan, and Bamyan. The Council and the NRF share historical ties, as both organisations had members affiliated with Jamiat-e Islami, a movement that gained prominence in the 1980s and wielded some power following 2001. Advocates said that the Council would cooperate with the NRF, however it appears that the consolidation did not occur. However, the

connection between NRF and the Council may be politically delicate, given that the reputation of NRF members has suffered owing to their escape from the Taliban and allegations of corruption within later administrations (Crisis Group, 2022)

3.4.4. Other Militant Factions Against Taliban Regime

Additional factions affiliated with the preceding administration have also surfaced. Similar to the NRF, numerous individuals have a historical record of opposing the Taliban that predates the establishment of the Republic (Bosworth, 1988). Others belong to a younger group, primarily consisting of former members of the Afghan security forces who fought against the Taliban in the past few decades (Linschoten & Kuehtn, 2012). Several of these groups have demonstrated minimal operational capability beyond making statements on social media, or they tend to overstate their limited presence in actual physical locations (Truman, 1951). Occasionally, multiple factions assert responsibility for a singular act of aggression (Coll, 2004). These diverse factions have not yet come together as a unified rebellion against the Taliban, and when they operate in the same area, they occasionally vie for resources (Saikal, 2012).

The Afghanistan Freedom Front, led by General Mohammad Yasin Zia, is considered the most prominent among these minor groupings (Rubin, 2006). While not as active as IS-KP or the NRF, this Front has asserted responsibility for numerous attacks since the beginning of 2022 (Grau & Gress, 2002). The operations of the organization are mainly concentrated in the northern region, but they are also spread out throughout several geographical areas (Rashid, 2009). The group has made attempts to entice warriors to leave the NRF, particularly in the Andarab region (Tanner, 2002). It may achieve success in areas where the NRF's influence is restricted due to its association with Jamiat-e Islami and ethnic Tajiks (Forbes, 1892). In contrast, Zia's group is not associated with any historical or ethnic faction, which increases its likelihood of gaining wider popular support in the medium term (Linschoten & Kuehtn, 2012).

The Afghanistan Islamic National and Liberation Movement, established in February, allegedly comprises individuals from the former security forces (Saikal, 2012). The gang has asserted responsibility for approximately twenty strikes in the southern and eastern regions (Coll, 2004). The majority of its members are Pashtuns and its main focus is on the Taliban's strongholds in the southern region (Rubin, 2006). Other insurgent groups are currently in their early stages of development, with a limited presence in active combat zones (Saikal, 2012). The mentioned groups

are the Liberation Front of Afghanistan, Freedom Corps Front, Unknown Soldiers of Hazaristan, Freedom and Democracy Front in Hazaristan, Western Nuristan Front, and South Turkestan Front.

3.4.5. Transnational Terrorist Groups

The main catalyst for the violence in Afghanistan since August 2021 is the ongoing war between the recognised factions and the Taliban. Nevertheless, there exist additional global extremist groups that may present security threats both domestically and internationally, despite not having executed any operations since the Taliban assumed control. The presence of Ayman Zawahiri, the commander of Al-Qaeda, in Kabul signifies a more significant problem. Most of these groups exhibit a comparable ideological orientation to the Taliban and are thought to be directly controlled by them. The primary extremist group with a focus on external activities is Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has a significant number of fighters and supporters in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the main composition of the group primarily comprises local insurgents operating within Pakistan. Foreign extremist organisations persist in maintaining their affiliation with the Taliban and appear to be evading any coordinated resistance to their authority. Presently, these organisations persist in providing assistance to the Taliban and appear to be evading any concerted resistance against their control (Azizi, 2019)..

While without the possibility of other countries taking action against the Taliban, the Taliban face security risks simply because of these people. If a foreign militant organisation were to switch allegiance and join forces with the anti-Taliban forces, this might strengthen the resistance while also undermining the collective authority of the Taliban. Even in cases where their actions are without doubt, the Taliban leadership continuously denies the existence of these militants. The Taliban responded to Zawahiri's killing with audacity, as seen by the ludicrous assertion made by one of their spokespeople that the American drone attack had struck an empty house. As will be discussed in greater depth later, the Taliban maintain in private that they are acting to limit these organisations' independence and prevent them from engaging in violent revolt (Azizi, 2019).

3.4.6. The Afghan Taliban's Strategy: *Counter Actions*

In light of their newfound obligation to safeguard the nation and the difficulties of operating in unfamiliar territory, the Taliban have modified their military positioning and employed a combination of strategies. While they frequently resort to brutal methods to

establish dominance, they have occasionally shifted towards more subtle approaches, which, when compared to the actions of other groups in Afghanistan, display a greater level of sophistication (Azizi, 2019). The Afghan Taliban, since their emergence, have exhibited a dynamic approach to achieving their objectives, particularly in the face of changing circumstances and international pressures. Amidst the evolving landscape of conflict and governance in Afghanistan, the Taliban have adapted their strategies to maintain relevance, consolidate power, and counter opposing forces. This adaptability underscores their resilience and determination to pursue their vision for the country.

One significant aspect of the Taliban's strategy is their military positioning, which has undergone notable transformations over time. Initially emerging as a guerrilla force in the 1990s, the Taliban capitalized on their knowledge of local terrain and tribal networks to seize control of vast territories. However, following the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 and subsequent years of insurgency, the Taliban faced significant setbacks, prompting them to rethink their approach. They diversified their tactics, blending conventional warfare with asymmetric tactics such as ambushes, suicide bombings, and targeted assassinations (Gopal, 2019).

Moreover, the Taliban have strategically exploited the political and social landscape of Afghanistan to garner support and undermine their adversaries. They have capitalized on grievances against the government, corruption, and inefficiency to portray themselves as a viable alternative. Additionally, they have exploited ethnic and tribal fault lines to sow discord and weaken the cohesion of opposing factions. Through a combination of coercion, persuasion, and coercion, the Taliban have sought to establish themselves as the dominant authority in areas under their control (Goodson, 2019).

Importantly, the Taliban's strategy is not solely reliant on military force but also encompasses efforts to win hearts and minds. While they have employed brutal tactics to instill fear and assert control, they have also engaged in outreach activities, such as providing social services, dispute resolution, and justice according to their interpretation of Islamic law (Barfield, 2018). This multifaceted approach allows the Taliban to maintain a degree of popular support, particularly in rural areas where government presence and services are limited.

Furthermore, the Taliban have demonstrated a capacity for tactical flexibility, adjusting their methods in response to changing circumstances and international pressures. In recent

years, as peace negotiations gained momentum, the Taliban have displayed a willingness to engage in dialogue and compromise, albeit on their terms (Ruttig, 2020). This strategic pragmatism reflects their recognition of the need to adapt to achieve their long-term objectives while navigating a complex geopolitical landscape.

In conclusion, the Afghan Taliban's strategy of counter actions encompasses a range of military, political, and social tactics aimed at consolidating power, undermining adversaries, and achieving their vision for the country. Their ability to adapt and evolve in response to changing circumstances underscores their resilience and determination to pursue their objectives, albeit through controversial and often brutal means.

3.4.7. Transformation in Strategy and Tactics

After assuming control, the Taliban began dismantling the extensive network of checkpoints that had been maintained by both parties during the battle from 2001 to 2021. Travelers who journeyed on roadways around the nation reported a substantial reduction in checkpoints, resulting in improved ease of movement (Saikal, 2012). Taliban security officials have said that they have reduced their level of caution throughout the majority of the country due to improved safety conditions (Coll, 2004). They have instructed their soldiers to decrease the interrogation of civilians (Rashid, 2009). The scrutiny at checkpoints is mostly directed on individuals who are in possession of weapons, particularly members of the Taliban (Saikal, 2012). Due to personnel constraints after August 2021, the Taliban had to consolidate their troops in strategic locations (Linschoten & Kuehn, 2012). The Taliban's decision to remove checkpoints may have been driven by a shortage of personnel (Rubin, n.d.). During their insurgency, the Taliban did not need a huge permanent army as most of its fighters operated close to their own residences (Truman, 1951). The estimates on the size of their forces were sometimes inflated, however, it is certain that the Taliban sustained significant losses during the concluding phases of the war (Grau & Gress, 2002). Due to personnel shortages that occurred after August 2021, the Taliban had to focus their forces in strategic locations including as border areas, access points to provincial capitals, and sections of important highways (Saikal, 2012). This was particularly done in provinces that were considered likely to experience insurrection. The Taliban's control over this territory enabled them to restrict the movements of the armed opposition. In the beginning of 2022, Taliban officials started indicating that further modifications were underway regarding both the quantity of forces and their positioning. The

government recently announced its plans to establish a substantial security force, potentially exceeding the size of the existing Republic's security apparatus, with a projected strength in the hundreds of thousands.

Simultaneously, the Taliban deployed extra troops to the borders with Pakistan and Tajikistan in reaction to the increasing activities of TTP, IS-KP, and NRF. One possible justification for increased border security is to prevent the smuggling of weapons out of Afghanistan, particularly from the large stockpiles left by Republic forces. The Taliban deployed a substantial number of combatants to Nangarhar, Panjshir, and other provinces with the aim of quelling the dangers posed by IS-KP and NRF (Crisis Group, 2022)

3.4.8. Challenges for Taliban to Control Afghanistan

The Taliban's attempts to stabilize Afghanistan after regaining power in 2021 have faced numerous obstacles, particularly regarding their function as security providers in urban settings and the mountainous northern regions. As a group historically grounded in rural insurgent tactics, the Taliban has found it challenging to navigate the complexities of governance and security provision in varied and densely populated areas. While they possessed significant experience in guerrilla warfare and rural insurgency, they encountered considerable hurdles in managing security in urban hubs like Kabul and Jalalabad, which became increasingly vulnerable to organized crime, insurgent activities, and other security threats following the collapse of the Afghan government (Kundi, 2025).

In their rural strongholds, the Taliban established an effective framework for hindering opposing forces from gaining territorial control. Their military strategy primarily focused on mobility and nighttime operations, making use of Afghanistan's challenging countryside terrain. The Taliban employed various tactics, including creating checkpoints and carrying out regular patrols in remote areas, often at night when their units could act more discreetly. However, their reliance on mobility and operations based in rural settings fell short when it came to urban security, where issues such as criminal activity, insurgent infiltration, and civilian unrest were more pronounced. This failure to adapt to the demands of urban security emerged as a significant challenge as the Taliban took control of Afghan cities, where they confronted increasing pressure to ensure public order (Pant & Passi, 2022).

A major security issue for the Taliban was the escalation of criminal activities in urban

areas after the previous government fell. The sudden power vacuum made many cities susceptible to organized crime and violent extremism, with groups like the Islamic State- Khorasan Province (IS-KP) intent on exploiting these weaknesses. IS-KP has specifically targeted the Taliban in urban locations, aware of their limited experience in handling such environments. In cities such as Jalalabad and Kabul, the Taliban found themselves exposed to lethal ambushes and attacks, particularly in densely populated regions where civilian casualties were significant (Siddique, 2021).

The increasing violence in urban areas compelled the Taliban to modify their strategies. In late 2021, IS-KP launched a series of attacks in Jalalabad, highlighting the Taliban's weaknesses in city environments. To counter this, the Taliban sent multiple fighter groups into the city with the goal of regaining control and suppressing the insurgency. As part of their response, the Taliban prioritized the protection of critical infrastructure and aimed to restore a visible security presence through the establishment of new checkpoints and mobile roadblocks. For example, they were noted to have focused on inspecting rickshaws, which were frequently used by IS-KP members to carry out attacks. While these actions contributed to reducing violence, they did not completely eliminate the threats from insurgent factions. The Taliban's dependence on checkpoints, although somewhat effective in reducing certain attacks, was insufficient to adequately confront a rapidly mobile and decentralized insurgency like IS-KP, which continued to function in various regions throughout the country (Pant & Passi, 2022).

Another significant challenge for the Taliban arose in the mountainous northern provinces, especially in Baghlan and Panjshir. These areas have consistently resisted Taliban authority, and the group's unfamiliarity with the terrain complicated their security operations. The Taliban possessed tactical strengths in engaging in mountain combat, which they had utilized previously, but these northern regions presented distinctive difficulties due to their strategic importance and the presence of organized resistance groups. The National Resistance Front (NRF), a coalition of anti-Taliban forces, persisted in executing frequent raids and ambushes in these regions, often retreating into the mountains to evade direct engagement with Taliban forces (Siddique, 2021).

In the summer of 2022, the Taliban reacted by sending extra troops to the Hindu Kush region, concentrating on reinforcing key valleys and setting up more checkpoints. While these

actions helped restrict the movement of fighters and vehicles, they did not offer a comprehensive solution to the ongoing insurgency in the area. The establishment of checkpoints manned by militants from different provinces also underscored the Taliban's effort to incorporate local forces into their security framework. Nevertheless, these deployments remained more of an exception than a standard practice. The broader strategy of the Taliban did not emphasize extensive military mobilization in mountainous regions, as the group typically preferred to uphold its operations in rural areas and a decentralized structure featuring smaller, more mobile units as opposed to large-scale military deployments (Pant & Passi, 2022).

Despite their endeavors, the Taliban achieved limited success in displacing insurgents from their mountain strongholds. While they managed to secure some significant positions, the NRF's capability to stage disruptive raids and then retreat into the difficult terrain made it challenging for the Taliban to establish enduring control. Furthermore, the Taliban's failure to fully adjust their rural-focused strategies to the urban and mountainous contexts of Afghanistan accentuates the difficulties they encounter in upholding national security. The gap between the Taliban's rural-based insurgency and their security difficulties in urban and mountainous areas emphasizes the intricate nature of governance and security provision in Afghanistan. The group's attempts to secure both urban centers and remote regions have yielded mixed outcomes, as their lack of experience in urban law enforcement and the complexities associated with mountain warfare continue to impede their effectiveness in stabilizing the country. The Taliban's challenges in adapting to these environments reflect the larger obstacles confronting their governance, especially as they seek to solidify control following their return to power (Siddique, 2021).

3.4.9. Taliban's Counteract Moves

In areas where the Taliban have encountered a resurgence of armed opposition, they have utilised several strategies to handle their adversaries. These actions vary from denying and minimising threats, to severe human rights abuses, to employing various nonviolent tactics to reduce anti-Taliban opposition. Dismissing and minimising threats. Upon assuming power, the Taliban immediately claimed that they did not face any security issues. The new government first disregarded IS-KP as mere propaganda. The comments regarding the NRF were sarcastic, depicting the rebels as individuals who engage in online activism and follow instructions from discredited politicians residing abroad. In the beginning of May, when the NRF initiated

offensives against Taliban forces, the government remained silent, claiming that no events had occurred. This tactic seems to be designed to prevent opponents from gaining exposure and prospects for recruitment. Stringent actions. Although the Taliban may talk disparagingly about armed resistance groups, they have actively sought and engaged with them in a lethal manner. Certain forceful strategies employed by them bear resemblance to the methods employed by the previous security forces and their global partners in the prolonged mission to eradicate the Taliban. These purportedly encompass nocturnal assaults, capricious detentions, torment, coerced admissions, widespread retaliations, unlawful executions, and the desecration of adversary remains. Under the current regime, further forms of abuse have grown increasingly widespread, including as the systematic identification and persecution of anti-Taliban populations. This includes the forceful removal of individuals from their homes and extensive search operations conducted from house to house. The Taliban's efforts to repress real or suspected armed adversaries have been the predominant catalyst for violent occurrences across the nation since they assumed control. The Taliban have apprehended and detained a substantial number of individuals who are believed to be affiliated with resistance organisations, without providing them with the protection of legal safeguards. The exact number is uncertain, however, authorities asserted that a significant number of NRF combatants surrendered in the beginning of May alone. Currently, the Taliban have not made any public statement regarding the appearance of these captives in court. Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that detainees are given legal representation or granted any type of due process. According to local reports, security and intelligence authorities are frequently detaining citizens based on suspicions of affiliation with armed organisations or being related to opposition individuals, using it as a means of punishment. The destiny of detainees is frequently influenced by political factors, resulting in some being imprisoned incommunicado while others are granted pardons, often following assurances of good behaviour from local elders. Amidst the Taliban's offensive against IS-KP in Nangarhar, unverified videos surfaced on social media showing the mangled bodies of suspected IS-KP members left exposed in public, perhaps as a means to discourage other members of the group.

According to UN human rights experts, the Taliban executed at least 50 individuals suspected of being members of IS-KP without any legal process. The executions involved methods including as hanging and beheading, and the Taliban further exhibited the bodies publicly. Some individuals have asserted larger figures about extrajudicial deaths. In recent

times, human rights organisations have levelled accusations against government forces for engaging in torture and summary executions of alleged members of the NRF in Panjshir province. Prior to their assumption of power, the Taliban have a longstanding record of forcibly removing families believed to be affiliated with IS-KP and setting fire to their residences. Under the current Taliban regime, the practice of holding families and extended relatives accountable for freed prisoners has persisted. In situations of repeat offences, they are occasionally evicted from their homes as a form of punishment. There is some indication that the government may be employing similar strategies, albeit to a restricted extent, against alleged NRF combatants in northern Afghanistan. Taliban authorities refuted allegations of evictions, contending that the families in question were relocated as a result of armed conflict. Particularly in the initial months of their rule, while facing challenges from IS-KP and the NRF, the Taliban specifically focused on villages that were believed to be supporting these groups. Due to the predominant Salafi beliefs held by IS-KP members, the Taliban implemented comprehensive limitations on this religious minority, exacerbating tensions with its adherents. In response to the IS-KP attacks in late 2021, the Taliban implemented a partial shutdown of Salafi madrasas in the provinces of Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Kunar, which are known strongholds of IS-KP.

Additionally, certain madrasas located in Kunduz, Takhar, and Balkh provinces, which are further away from the strongholds, were also affected by the closure. Several Salafi intellectuals and seminary lecturers were found deceased, with accompanying messages affixed to their bodies, alleging their sympathy for IS-KP. On other occasions, the Taliban carried out the execution of political opposition figures based on accusations of their affiliation with IS-KP. Following the comeback of the NRF in early 2022, the Taliban began employing profiling strategies against ethnic Tajiks. This indicates a potential link between the intensity of armed group activity and the imposition of limitations on communities believed to support these groups. Individuals who showed solidarity with the NRF or were perceived as having favourable views towards the group were apprehended by authorities. Residents of Panjshir province, particularly those who have historical connections to the old Northern Alliance or the former Republic security forces, were subjected to specific scrutiny. Amid the Taliban's systematic search operations in Kabul and other regions, allegations arose indicating that certain Tajik households were subjected to more extensive searches and, in certain instances, looting, due to suspicions of backing the NRF or involvement in criminal activities. One possible

explanation is that the newly established authorities have attempted to make up for their inadequate police and limited intelligence capabilities by relying on profiling and implementing collective punishment. The Taliban's aggressive strategies have not fully achieved their desired outcomes and, in some instances, have actually had the opposite effect, leading to a reconsideration of their approach, at least in select areas. Senior Taliban security officials from Nangarhar province admitted that their oppressive actions were causing frustrations that were actually strengthening, rather than impeding, the recruitment efforts of IS-KP. In order to counter the appearance of severe governance and undermine support for IS-KP and the NRF, the Taliban altered their tactics multiple times in that province and others. Commencing in the latter part of 2021, they prioritised implementing structural and personnel modifications within the security apparatus to enhance command and control. Additionally, they granted leniency to apprehended opposition combatants, endeavoured to achieve extensive disarmament, and initiated campaigns to garner local backing for the government. The Taliban had previously employed some of these tactics, but they appeared to be increasingly dependent on them. Due to the Taliban's utilisation of local concerns to increase recruitment during their time as insurgents, they possess a strong understanding that public dissatisfaction may drive opposition. In response to increasing insecurity or internal conflicts within the Taliban, the new government has promptly replaced local officials with individuals from outside who do not have any personal interest in local ethnic, tribal, or other dynamics. This approach reduces the likelihood of worsening existing divisions.

When IS-KP initiated an attack in September 2021, the Taliban promptly substituted the governors of Kunar and Nangarhar with high-ranking officials from different provinces. Following a series of violent incidents in the northern region in May, the Taliban made changes to their security personnel in various districts. The new appointments in both the northern and eastern regions were bolstered by combatants from other provinces who had no involvement in local dynamics. This strategy yielded advantages by solidifying Taliban command-and-control structures and creating a separation between their officials and local political affairs. However, it also had drawbacks. In their fervour to eliminate opposition, several recently appointed authorities regarded the local population with distrust. Reports surfaced regarding security actions that disregarded local customs. Several of these issues exhibited a striking resemblance to the challenges encountered by the preceding administration. The government has also

attempted to provide pardons and conditional releases to certain captured adversaries, primarily those affiliated with IS-KP. During their time as rebels, the Taliban employed same strategies, frequently releasing prisoners after obtaining assurances from community leaders that the individuals in question would not engage in further wrongdoing. Initially, the Taliban had a tendency to release IS-KP inmates without any conditions and grant forgiveness to newly captured individuals. In addition, the Taliban shown clemency towards the IS-KP detainees who fled during a series of jail breakouts when they assumed control in the summer of 2021. They let those who returned to their homes to be encompassed within the new authorities' overall pardon. However, this strategy caused apprehension among Taliban officials who thought that IS-KP was taking advantage of the situation to reestablish its networks (Crisis Group, 2022).

Consequently, local authorities began to reinstate the practice of requiring assurances from tribal elders. On certain occasions, tribe elders also made commitments to penalise future wrongdoers, which may involve exiling them and setting their residences ablaze. Although relatively rudimentary, these measures were comparatively less brutal than certain counter-insurgency tactics employed by the Taliban. The Taliban have implemented extensive precautionary measures to gain control over the abundant stockpiles of guns, ammunition, and other military equipment in the nation. In December 2021, the government declared that the High Commission for Security and Clearance Affairs, headed by Deputy Defence Minister Fazil Mazloom and comprising of police, intelligence, and defence personnel, would assume the duty of gathering and eliminating explosive devices. Subsequently, the commission assumed a prominent position in conducting thorough searches of residences in many regions of the nation, notably in Kabul. In February 2022, it made the extraordinary decision to mandate the search of every household in the capital. Although the authorities claimed that the search was conducted for the purpose of combatting crime, one of the main objectives was to gather firearms. The commission promptly expanded these efforts to include Panjshir, Parwan, and Kapisa provinces, which are all strongholds of the NRF. Subsequent campaigns occurred in Logar, Laghman, Baghlan, Takhar, Herat, Badghis, and Nangarhar provinces. According to the Taliban leaders, the de facto authorities intend to carry out these operations throughout the entire country. Furthermore, the searches aimed to decrease the quantity of privately owned firearms and military equipment, with the intention of thwarting any plans by the opposition for a spring offensive by limiting their available firepower (Crisis Group, 2022).

With shared goals in mind, it is anticipated that the commission would persist in carrying out these activities in different regions of the nation. The Taliban display particular apprehension regarding the rumoured weapon stockpiles held by NRF combatants in Panjshir region and those owned by ethnic Hazara commander, Abdul Ghani Alipoor, in Wardak province. Security forces, specifically the Taliban intelligence agency, around the nation have started implementing measures to seize caches. Implementing the amnesty and engaging in outreach efforts towards former adversaries. As the Taliban gained control over significant portions of land in the summer of 2021, they announced a general amnesty, although its implementation has been inconsistent. The amnesty ensured that all former government officials, including security officers, and other individuals connected to the previous political regime would be able to live in peace and without any sort of harassment under the Taliban's governance. The vow diminished the Republic government's last defence against the insurrection by alleviating concerns that could have caused the old guard to resist. The Taliban forces largely adhered to the amnesty throughout their takeover, however, they were subsequently accused of numerous and massive violations after assuming control. The reports on the overall count of retaliatory killings were inconsistent, occasionally reaching several hundred. The infrequent occurrence of retaliations, and their limited frequency compared to the scale of the Republic's political and security infrastructure, indicated that it was not the Taliban's overarching strategy to actively pursue all former government officials throughout the entire country (Crisis Group, 2022).

However, the Taliban apprehended and subjected numerous former security officials to questioning in regions such as Nangarhar and Panjshir, where armed resistance was particularly intense. Aware that retaliations have aided armed opposition factions in attracting new members, the Taliban have started emphasising the significance of adhering to the amnesty decree among their own members, going so far as to present it as an Islamic duty. Although Crisis Group has no knowledge of any documented instances of a Taliban warrior being prosecuted by judicial authorities for severe violations of the amnesty, there have been reports of some individuals being incarcerated on such grounds. From September 2021 to February 2022, the Taliban assert that they have disarmed and expelled 4,350 persons deemed "undesirable" from their organisation, including those who violated amnesty agreements. The Taliban additionally formed a "high commission" to engage with influential Afghan exiles, inviting them to return to the nation in order to dissuade them from aligning with opposing factions.

During the initial six months of 2022, this commission provided a secure means for numerous Afghan political figures, including former high-ranking defence officers, to come back to their home country. Notable individuals who have returned have been assured of a friendly reception, along with Taliban security escorts and other expressions of welcome. Furthermore, the new government has been actively enlisting former security officials, namely individuals possessing technical and administrative expertise. Former security officers have been assigned to important, albeit not highest-ranking, roles. The government has employed Islamic academics to strengthen its position and weaken rebels. In Nangarhar, Kunar, and Badakhshan provinces, local authorities have made known the declarations of loyalty by assemblies of Salafi scholars, who have denounced the atrocities perpetrated by IS-KP as "un-Islamic." A provincial ulema council, consisting of local clerics, was established by the government in Panjshir. Their main responsibilities include mediation and public outreach. Council delegates seemed to enjoy political support from the central Taliban authority, as they provided guidance to provincial officials, monitored reports of abuse by Taliban militants, and resolved local disputes. The Taliban have made significant investments in endeavours aimed at establishing the legitimacy of their governance. This is exemplified by their initiative to convene a grand assembly in July, where they gathered 4,500 clerics from various regions of the nation. The meeting concluded with a formal proclamation of support for the leadership of the Taliban (Brown & Ressler, 2013).

3.4.10. Initial Success Amid Challenges for Taliban

The Taliban's approach to quelling armed resistance has yielded varying outcomes, with certain tactics demonstrating efficacy while others have proven to be very detrimental. The increased security presence in Nangarhar led to a significant decrease in armed opposition activities. Likewise, the government's comprehensive door-to-door searches were associated with a temporary decrease in opposition attacks in the specific areas that were targeted. However, these invasive operations, albeit less violent than other strategies used by the group, may be exacerbating local sensitivities and contributing to the recruitment of armed opposition groups. The Taliban's most oppressive actions, like as indiscriminate arrests, torture, and unlawful executions, are further exacerbating discontent. The Taliban's utilisation of profiling and collective punishment poses a potential threat of alienating entire populations and pushing them towards their adversaries. In general, although the Taliban made some attempts to shift their most

severe strategies and use more sophisticated methods to suppress the insurgencies in the northern and eastern regions, they were unsuccessful in halting the decline in security in early 2022. The incidence of violence had a sharp reduction following the Taliban's assumption of power, but has since begun to increase once more (Giustozzi, 2022a).

3.5. Future Likely Security Challenges for Afghanistan

In the immediate future, the Taliban are not confronted with any imminent danger to their control over power from the various disorganised armed factions opposing them. However, the obstacles facing Afghanistan's current government are yet to be fully resolved and may have consequences that extend beyond its boundaries. The following situations, although currently improbable, have the potential to cause significant destabilisation in the medium term (Giustozzi, 2022a).

3.5.1. Division in Taliban Ranks

A potential situation that might significantly heighten insecurity would be the disintegration of the Taliban movement. Certain high-ranking government officials may be motivated to defect from the Taliban if they perceive that they have not received enough advantages from their military triumph. Primarily due to this reason, the new authorities strategically filled the administration with loyal and long-standing members of the Taliban, rejecting the idea of power-sharing with individuals outside the organisation. Instead, their objective was to ensure that all factions of the old resistance were duly acknowledged and rewarded. Almost all significant Taliban figures are currently serving in the new government, although their jobs have different levels of significance. While there have been reports of individual Taliban militants joining armed groups like as IS-KP, it seems that no significant commanders have defected at this time. The absence of high-profile resignations thus far indicates the absence of any significant divisions. However, internal differences within the Taliban continue to exist. The severe suppression of Salafis and other marginalised groups in insurgent regions may estrange individuals from underprivileged religious and ethnic minority communities inside the movement. The most severe divisions within the Taliban thus far have arisen when dissatisfied Taliban commanders from ethnic minority groups have clashed with the Pashtun-dominated leadership (Crisis Group, 2022)..

In early 2022, the Taliban detained an ethnic Uzbek commander in Faryab province for a

brief period. The second individual was an ethnic Hazara who engaged in small-scale battles with Taliban forces in June, following his dismissal as the intelligence chief of Bamyan province. Any potential future conflict regarding the succession of leadership could potentially expose internal splits, although this possibility is completely theoretical. If the Taliban leadership were to modify its ideological principles in order to engage with regional and international entities, the hardliners within the group may perceive this as a sign of weakness. If the Taliban leadership were to modify its fundamental principles in order to engage with regional and international entities, it is possible that hardline members of the group may perceive this as a sign of weakness. IS-KP has consistently conveyed the notion that the Taliban leadership has strayed from its initial vision in recent years. Until now, the Taliban's rigid stance on social matters, such as excluding young girls from attending schools, has mitigated these critiques. This action is considered so backward that even some members of the Taliban are against it. There is limited evidence to suggest that the minimal concessions made by the Taliban, such as discreetly permitting the opening of females' secondary schools in certain districts, are causing ideological conflicts within its members (Khan, 2020).

Potentially, factional schisms could arise if a substantial contingent of Taliban, such as the Haqqani clan hailing from the southeastern region, were to engage in conflict with other influential factions, such as the formidable groups from the southern territories. The movement is characterised by a strong sense of unity, and the leadership is expected to be vigilant about the possibility of division and ready to respond with appropriate actions. In the event that the group does indeed divide due to any of the aforementioned reasons or any other foundation, there is a possibility of a resurgence of the multi-sided civil wars that occurred in the 1990s. This is because Taliban defectors may not necessarily align themselves with IS-KP or the NRF, but instead may form new factions. This scenario has the potential to signify the breakdown of the Taliban's control in certain areas of the country, leading to the emergence of new factions vying for control over their respective territories (Crisis Group, 2022).

3.5.2. Merger of Hostile Groups

Another potential scenario that might result in an increase in violence would be the formation of anti-Taliban factions merging into a stronger rebellion, which could then escalate the conflict and entangle the government in a more extensive and lethal battle. The primary competitors, IS-KP and the NRF, are actively seeking to enlist individuals from various armed

factions and broaden their activities throughout the nation. The IS-KP is actively recruiting individuals who have defected from the Taliban and other jihadist groups. Meanwhile, the NRF and Afghanistan Freedom Front are engaged in a competition to establish a resistance movement that includes all former security forces of the Republic. IS-KP has also made a growing effort to enlist individuals of Tajik and Uzbek ethnicity from Afghanistan and Central Asia. These endeavours are still in their early stages. Following the Taliban's takeover, IS-KP has not received any backing from other jihadist organisations in Afghanistan, such as al-Qaeda and TTP (Rashid, 2022). These groups do not desire conflict with the Taliban and, in the case of al-Qaeda, are engaged in a worldwide struggle for dominance against ISIS. The National Resistance Front (NRF) has faced difficulties in expanding its support base outside its stronghold in Panjshir. Additionally, numerous influential commanders from the northern region have chosen not to support the NRF. Despite occasional collaboration, the Afghanistan Freedom Front and the NRF are unlikely to unite due to their competing efforts to recruit militants from one another. Currently, a merger between the High Resistance Council and the NRF is improbable owing to disputes regarding leadership. In the immediate future, it is unlikely that the various groupings will come together in agreement (Brown & Ressler, 2013).

3.5.3. Insurrections by Other Jihadist Groups

Afghanistan continues to serve as a base for many jihadist organisations, such as al-Qaeda, TTP, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and others. A significant number of these groups find refuge in Afghanistan and allegedly experience more extensive liberties under Taliban governance compared to the previous regime. The Taliban persist in asserting their refusal to permit these factions from utilising Afghan soil for the purpose of devising or executing assaults beyond the borders of the nation (Sohail, 2025). However, the TTP, which has been suspected of carrying out assaults across the border into Pakistan, has already weakened these guarantees. The Taliban seem to be implementing cautious measures to exert control over these groups, including relocating foreign militants from the border region to Taliban strongholds. This strategy aims to hinder cross-border attacks and enable the new authorities to closely monitor these individuals. Additional measures may involve the creation of what the Taliban refer to as "refugee camps" to accommodate militants and their families. This aligns with the Taliban's customary approach of labelling Islamist fighters from foreign nations as political dissidents. Furthermore, there may be efforts to incorporate jihadists, including

individuals from other countries, into the administrative framework of the Taliban government. The Taliban may be using the term "refugees" to pretend that they are following the 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement. This agreement permits the Taliban to offer shelter to those who are not considered a danger to the security of the United States and its allies. The Taliban perceive this approach of granting safe haven to terrorist groups in Afghanistan as effective, however it has significant hazards (Rashid, 2022).

The Taliban perceive this technique as effective, however it carries significant risks. If the Taliban were to provoke the militants, there is a slight possibility that one or more of the factions could revolt, perhaps resulting in violent conflict. While some of these groups lack the military strength to fight a Taliban crackdown, any confrontation might provoke the Taliban's lower-ranking members, potentially causing them to defect. However, if we permit these groups to maintain a secure base in Afghanistan and adopt a lenient approach towards controlling them, there is a certain level of risk that they will carry out operations outside of Afghanistan (similar to what the TTP is already doing), regardless of whether they have the approval of Taliban leaders, and that external forces will intervene. Consequently, a series of events could be set in motion: for instance, after Zawahiri's assassination, there were reports of anti-U.S. demonstrations in various provinces. Currently, even after the murder of Zawahiri, the new authorities seem to have confidence that they can effectively control these groups in order to tackle regional and worldwide security issues, without resorting to repressive actions that could provoke a violent reaction (Brown & Ressler, 2013).

3.5.4. Foreign Funding to Insurgent Groups

One possible scenario that could lead to worsening security is if armed opposition groups gain significant assistance from regional or international entities. The Taliban officials often express this concern during discussions with external counterparts as the main security risk. The Taliban's fears are also intensified by the occasional emphasis that regional governments place on their amicable ties with anti-Taliban factions. Certain governments in the region do have motivations to back opposition factions (Weinstein, 2021). As an illustration, the recent Taliban leadership has predominantly excluded the Tajik minority, a people that Iran and Tajikistan have historical connections with. Neighbouring nations may view the act of providing shelter to Tajik political dissidents from Afghanistan as a means to influence the Taliban towards establishing a more inclusive administration. Regional nations may also perceive the necessity of maintaining

connections with factions that oppose the Taliban as a strategic measure to safeguard against the possibility of a resurgence of civil conflict. Certain Taliban leaders feel that regional actors may attempt to undermine their governance due to their preference for a neighbouring state that is feeble and compliant to the demands of others (Giustozzi, 2022).

Currently, there is insufficient evidence to indicate that regional or international governments are offering substantial assistance to opposition groups. Senior leaders from the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe have privately shown a lack of desire to financially support an armed opposition group. The British government has officially said that it does not endorse or back any individual or group attempting to bring about political change in Afghanistan by means of violence (Ahmed & Yousaf, 2023).

Organisers of anti-Taliban factions have expressed strong dissatisfaction with the absence of external support. A negative loop could arise if regional entities provide backing to anti-Taliban elements as a means of protecting themselves against internal challenges originating from Afghanistan. However, the Taliban continue to issue warnings about the potential destabilisation of the country and the catastrophic consequences for regional and international peace and security that could result from foreign backing for resistance organisations. A negative loop may arise if regional entities provide backing to anti-Taliban elements as a means of protecting themselves against internal dangers within Afghanistan, as this might potentially lead to the Taliban forming stronger alliances with transnational jihadists (Brown & Rassler, 2013).

3.5.5. Regional Security Implications

Regional, Western, and international entities hold varying perspectives regarding the possible risks originating from Afghanistan, particularly in light of the incoming Taliban government. Every actor has their own individual perception of hazards, yet, they all have a collective and significant level of concern. Effectively addressing insecurity originating from Afghanistan is a shared global priority in various aspects. China's main priority is to prevent the spread of militancy into its territory, particularly focusing on Uighur combatants. The Taliban has initiated discussions with the Taliban authorities over this matter, and there are indications that the Taliban have moved certain fighters away from the border between Afghanistan and China (Cronin, 2022). However, Taliban officials are apprehensive that continuing with this approach may result in Uighur militants aligning themselves with IS-KP. Russia, Iran, and the Central

Asian governments are primarily focused on preventing the strengthening of IS-KP. However, they also have concerns about other foreign militant groups, including Uighur militants who are aligned with the Taliban. Similar to China, these powers saw the Taliban authority as the most viable option to prevent Afghanistan from posing a threat to regional stability (Hussain, 2021). However, their tolerance may soon wane. Despite the current Afghan authorities' efforts to suppress IS-KP, the group continues to carry out small-scale attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Hayat, 2025).

Consequently, these countries are now considering various measures to protect their borders. According to reports, drones from Uzbekistan have purportedly entered northern Afghanistan, although Uzbekistan has denied these claims. Tajikistan is allegedly contemplating the procurement of American drones to surveil its borders, as per unsubstantiated accounts. However, this diplomatic effort has not yet resulted in a complete end to hostilities. The TTP attacks have persisted throughout the summer of 2022. India has resumed its engagement with the Taliban about security matters, possibly motivated by the Taliban's strained relationship with Pakistan, which is India's primary adversary. This re-engagement comes after a prolonged period of hostility between New Delhi and the Taliban (Brown & Rassler, 2013).

During the 1990s, when the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan, they provided a safe place for militant groups opposed to India. India is currently showing a strong willingness to pursue a new approach by actively interacting with the Taliban regime. The primary objective is to prevent the proliferation of weapons and terrorists into the region of Kashmir. According to media reports, the Taliban has made a commitment to New Delhi to respond to threats against India based on Indian intelligence. However, it is uncertain to what extent the Taliban would take action against groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed or Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, which have historically received indirect support from Pakistan. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent persists in issuing threats to conduct strikes on India (Fair & Hamid, 2023).

Western governments continue to harbour significant concerns over transnational militant organisations, who have found a relatively secure environment in Afghanistan following the Taliban's assumption of power. Western governments are highly concerned about transnational militant groups that have found a relatively safe haven in Afghanistan since the Taliban assumed control (Barfield, 2021). For instance, Zawahiri, a prominent figure, is residing in a luxurious

villa that was previously used by organisations supported by the United States in Kabul. The United States and its allies withdrew from Afghanistan with the aim of remotely controlling terrorist threats. After the Taliban gained control, the United States allegedly established a capability to launch strikes from beyond the visible horizon, but refrained from carrying out an attack until the Zawahiri strike. Several U.S. officials indicate that the Taliban have so far hindered the revival of al-Qaeda, but they also voice apprehension that this situation may alter. Upon finding the al-Qaeda leader in close proximity to the Taliban, U.S. officials announced their intention to reassess these findings (Giustozzi, 2022b).

3.5.6. The Peril of Unilateral Strikes

In light of this situation, Western or regional countries may find it appealing to counteract the aforementioned risks with unilateral military intervention in Afghanistan. Conducting regular long-distance operations without on-site intelligence resources is challenging and costly, but U.S. officials have not dismissed the possibility. However, resuming the use of airstrikes or other forms of attacks as a regular method for countering terrorism would be an error. If the U.S. were to find high-ranking militant commanders, like as Zawahiri, in Afghanistan, it is probable that they would launch another attack. However, whereas airstrikes have the capability to eliminate individuals, on their own they are improbable to completely dismantle militant organisations. The blowback may solidify perspectives on the field and inspire a fresh cohort of externally oriented militants. Anti-Taliban militants, who pose a threat to many countries, are currently engaging in recruitment efforts by portraying the new government as a puppet of foreign powers. The occurrence of airstrikes would reinforce these narratives by arousing suspicions of Taliban collaboration with the West. Consequently, the Taliban would be compelled to make significant efforts to dispel these accusations, thereby assuming a more confrontational position towards Western governments. Regular airstrikes may result in unforeseen and adverse consequences. The Taliban are actively attempting to prevent inciting hostility from the foreign jihadists they harbour, while also dissuading them from planning and executing acts outside the country that would result in severe retaliation from foreign countries (Crisis Group, 2022).

The drawbacks of this method are clearly seen, and it is justified for the external world to take measures to protect against it. Simultaneously, it is evident that a larger-scale operation of airstrikes against foreign militants could potentially provoke negative consequences. These consequences may include defections from the Taliban to IS-KP, the emergence of internal

divisions within the group that could escalate into factional conflicts, or the Taliban becoming more tolerant of militant plotting. Pakistan has provoked strong emotions among the Taliban by conducting airstrikes on TTP sites, which has caused significant tensions between the two nations. Although the crisis was successfully resolved by all parties, Taliban leaders claim that the Pakistani strikes had the undesirable effect of prompting debates inside the Taliban about intensifying their support for anti-Pakistan forces. This was seen as a strategy to acquire leverage and prevent any future encroachments on Afghan sovereignty. Such a situation had the potential to initiate a series of retaliatory acts, with Pakistan carrying out more strikes and the Taliban intensifying militancy. Thankfully, diplomacy has thus far successfully averted such an adverse outcome (Barfield, 2021). The Taliban have requested that regional and Western nations provide "actionable intelligence" instead of taking independent actions. The Taliban have requested regional and Western nations to provide "actionable intelligence" instead of taking independent actions. However, it is questionable whether the Taliban will actually act upon this information, and foreign governments are showing only lukewarm inclination to offer such information. Taliban authorities maintain confidence in their ability to handle these threats without jeopardising their rule or causing a decline in the security situation in the near future (Giustozzi, 2022b).

3.5.7. Future Prospects for Cooperation

Although, it is prudent to exercise caution when considering the use of force, it is not necessary for the international community to remain entirely uninvolved. Regional and Western governments should adopt a policy of practical cooperation with the Taliban on specific security issues. This approach aims to promote stability and benefit the Afghan population. Additionally, efforts should be made to ensure that the Taliban fulfils their previous security commitments. Despite the recent Zawahiri strike, there is still potential for Western countries to collaborate with the Taliban on security matters, despite their deep suspicion of the Taliban. External observers may get advantages from this type of restricted involvement, such as the ability to closely monitor the developing situation. The involvement could perhaps enhance the confidence required for any possible future collaboration, however achieving such a favourable outcome is currently unlikely. The unwavering determination of senior Taliban officials on adhering to the 2020 Doha accord could perhaps facilitate practical involvement. Both the United States and the Taliban have accused one another of breaching the agreement, which facilitated the

removal of U.S. military personnel. The Taliban's inept attempts to obscure the truth about al-Qaeda, along with the cross-border assaults by IS-KP, provoke significant doubts over their willingness or capability to fulfil their part of the agreement (Fair & Hamid, 2023). However, the agreement should, hypothetically, clearly outline the Taliban's obligations to prevent terrorism and the United States' promises to refrain from carrying out attacks on Afghan soil. It would be unwise to revise the language, as it might lead to unforeseen consequences (Zaman, 2025).

However, discussions on the implementation of the pact would be appropriate at this time. The U.S. envoy responsible for the agreement has stated that it includes undisclosed further sections outlining specific criteria for assessing the Taliban's actions. Conducting such an assessment might potentially result in improved understanding and transparency for both parties involved. Despite the lack of enforceability, both parties have utilised the agreement as a basis for their shared expectations, indicating their desire to maintain it as a set of standards. If there is a possibility for modest collaboration, as some Western officials hope even after Zawahiri's death, it would be beneficial to take small practical steps towards making Afghanistan safer for its people and preventing the spread of insecurity to neighbouring areas. These initiatives may involve cooperation to regulate the spread of firearms within Afghanistan and decrease the illegal trade of arms across borders. The former Republic forces left behind a substantial quantity of military equipment in the country, a big portion of which was supplied by the United States. This equipment could pose a threat if it falls into the hands of transnational militant groups, however there have been no reports of widespread arms trafficking at this time. Halting the illicit transportation of such weapons is a primary focus for the Taliban, as well as for external forces. Foreign entities might potentially aid in the improvement of Taliban border controls and provide assistance in the identification, storage, and disposal of excess weapons. The ongoing existence of landmines, unexploded ordnance, and unused improvised explosive devices (IEDs) remains a significant concern in the humanitarian context. The Taliban is implementing measures to gather and eliminate outdated explosives, although there have been instances of violent mishaps. Children are frequently losing their lives and limbs while searching for scrap metal in the aftermath of battle. Regional or Western entities could offer support to the security forces under Taliban control in order to facilitate the disposal of hazardous materials (Giustozzi, 2022).

The primary objective should be to cultivate the necessary ties for the Taliban to act upon

common intelligence regarding transnational threats. Another possibility for restricted cooperation would entail the sharing of intelligence with neighbouring countries. This would involve exchanging information with Afghanistan regarding transnational dangers in return for insights from neighbouring states about the influx of anti-Taliban rebels. In fact, certain regional entities have been cultivating such alliances with the Taliban over an extended period. Sharing intelligence with Western governments is currently unlikely due to a lack of trust, especially after the Zawahiri incident. However, it is theoretically possible in the future, depending on the progress of relations with the Taliban and the Western powers' confidence in their lawful and responsible use of shared information. The prolonged and fierce battle spanning several decades will not readily transition into cooperation between the Taliban and the international community. However, the primary objective should be to cultivate the necessary contacts for the Taliban to act upon common intelligence regarding transnational threats, even if achieving this goal is likely to be a long-term endeavor (Giustozzi, 2022).

3.5.8. The Security of Afghanistan: *Priority Concern*

The decisions made in foreign capitals will have significantly less impact compared to the extent to which the Taliban themselves take on the primary responsibility for Afghan security. While acknowledging the significant difficulty of this problem, there are particular measures that the authorities could implement to steer the country in a more favourable direction. Many of these necessitate the Taliban to completely shift their approach from heavy-handed techniques that have already proven counterproductive in particular regions, in order to prevent these tactics from generating additional grievances and escalating violence. To enhance the professionalism of the security services, it is recommended to broaden training programmes that educate personnel on the fundamental principles of international humanitarian and human rights law. Additionally, establishing judicial procedures with adequate safeguards for prosecuting opposition fighters, ensuring accountability for misconduct among their own members, and discontinuing the practice of penalising families and communities for the actions of individuals would be benefic. It is crucial that the Taliban takes decisive actions to guarantee complete adherence to the wide amnesty they provided as the conflict concluded one year ago. Specifically, it is imperative to bring legal action against Taliban members who defy that directive in order to discourage future infractions and establish assurance that the policy is still being enforced. In order for the country to successfully move away from decades of strife, it is imperative to

rigorously implement the amnesty policy and adopt conciliatory strategies towards past adversaries. Following the dramatic conclusion of Afghanistan's protracted conflict, all key participants are still grappling with the consequences. Although the Taliban is focused on eliminating challenges to its authority, they are also striving for global acknowledgement as the legitimate administration, which appears highly unlikely in the near future. Regional countries are cautiously establishing contact with the Taliban, recognising them as the most practical option for ensuring peace at the moment (Crisis Group, 2022).

However, in certain instances, they are also keeping connections with anti-Taliban factions as a precautionary measure. Western nations are apprehensive about Afghanistan turning into a sanctuary for perilous adversaries, as they fear that extremist groups may carry out attacks against Western countries. Due to security concerns and ethical issues, particularly regarding the Taliban's treatment of women, many governments are maintaining a cautious approach towards the new authorities in Kabul. However, although these perspectives may vary, they are not so fundamentally different that they completely prevent practical cooperation on specific topics in the near future, which might eventually lead to broader collaboration in addressing security concerns from all parties involved. Despite its inherent difficulty, it is imperative that all parties actively seek and engage in modest cooperation without delay. This is particularly crucial because there are additional threats that still exist within the country, apart from the recently killed al-Qaeda commander, al-Zawahiri. Afghanistan will continue to pose a significant threat for the foreseeable future. The governance of the Taliban will continue to be severely lacking, and there is a strong possibility of another period of extensive conflict. However, there is still a possibility that the government might improve its safety conditions for both Afghans and the global community (Crisis Group, 2022).

Chapter-4

4.1 REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF AFGHAN IMPASSE

To effectively deal with the security consequences of Afghanistan's conflict, it is imperative for neighbouring nations, regional organisations, and the international community to work together in a unified manner. Regional collaboration is of utmost importance, necessitating neighbouring countries to engage in information exchange, collaborative security initiatives, and synchronised border control measures to counteract terrorism, extremism, and illegal activities. Diplomatic involvement is crucial for promoting conversation and building confidence among Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries, as well as regional and international actors. This engagement helps to facilitate the resolution of conflicts and the advancement of peace processes. Facilitating peace initiatives led by Afghanistan, strengthening governance, and fostering economic development are essential elements in attaining long-lasting stability. In addition, resolving the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the conflict requires collective aid for displaced populations and host communities, guaranteeing their access to vital services and providing long-term support. To alleviate the impact of the conflict and promote security and prosperity in Afghanistan and the surrounding area, stakeholders should prioritise regional collaboration, diplomatic engagement, and support for peace and stability.

4.2 Following are the Key Implications:

4.2.1 Terrorism and Extremism:

The Taliban and ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) are classified as terrorist organisations by multiple countries and international entities because of their radical ideas and aggressive strategies. The existence of these factions in Afghanistan not only endangers the peace and security of the nation itself but also has wider ramifications for regional security. Afghanistan's extensive and challenging landscape, along with its persistent instability, has rendered it an appealing location for terrorist organizations in search of secure bases. Historically, the Taliban has offered refuge to other terrorist groups, including as al-Qaeda, enabling them to carry out operations and strategize strikes from Afghan territory. In a similar vein, ISIS-K has successfully established a presence in some areas of Afghanistan, utilising them as strategic locations to initiate assaults and disseminate their radical ideology (Crisis Group, 2022).

The existence of these extremist organizations in Afghanistan gives rise to apprehensions

over their capacity to initiate transnational assaults into adjacent nations, so becoming a direct menace to regional stability. Nations such as Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian states have valid apprehensions regarding the overflow of terrorism and bloodshed from Afghanistan onto their territory (Rashid, 2021; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This has the potential to disrupt their internal security and exacerbate instability in the area. The instability and conflict in Afghanistan provide favourable conditions for radicalization, as marginalised individuals may be vulnerable to extremist beliefs promoted by groups such as the Taliban and ISIS-K. The proliferation of radicalism in Afghanistan may have far-reaching consequences, extending to adjacent nations and exacerbating domestic security dilemmas (Fair, 2021; Haidari, 2021).

To tackle these challenges effectively, a comprehensive strategy is needed that targets the underlying causes of extremism and terrorism. This includes tackling issues related to governance and socio-economic disparities, fostering inclusive political systems, and opposing extremist propaganda and recruitment activities. Regional collaboration and synchronisation are crucial in countering the cross-border menace presented by terrorist organisations operating in Afghanistan and the wider area (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008; Barfield, 2010).

4.2.2 Refugee Crisis:

The enduring conflict in Afghanistan, combined with political unrest and declining security conditions, has resulted in the forced migration of millions of people both within the country and across borders. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan poses considerable challenges not only for those affected but also for neighboring nations, especially Pakistan and Iran, which have historically accommodated large groups of Afghan refugees. The increase in refugees entering these countries frequently leads to heightened pressure on local resources, economic infrastructures, and social services, which can potentially trigger economic and social disputes. As the number of displaced people continues to grow, international cooperation and a holistic approach are essential to tackle the challenges linked to refugee movements and lessen their possible adverse effects on host nations.

The predicament of Afghan refugees is longstanding, as both Pakistan and Iran have been longstanding hosts for displaced persons fleeing Afghanistan due to its persistent conflicts, including the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, the civil unrest in the 1990s, and the recent turmoil following the Taliban's return in 2021. Pakistan has historically sheltered millions of

Afghan refugees, with estimates indicating that approximately 5 million Afghans found refuge in Pakistan over the last few decades (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2021). While many Afghan refugees initially settled in border areas and refugee camps, a considerable number have progressively integrated into urban centers, resulting in the establishment of large Afghan communities in cities like Quetta, Peshawar, and Karachi. These refugees often inhabit informal settlements or impoverished neighborhoods, competing for limited access to essential resources such as education, healthcare, housing, and job opportunities. This struggle for scarce resources can generate tensions between the refugee community and local residents, as well as intensify existing socio-economic issues. For instance, the rising demand for jobs can strain the local job market, potentially leading to resentment among host communities who may view refugees as rivals for limited employment opportunities (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Iran has also been a major host for Afghan refugees, with around 1 million Afghan refugees reported to be living there in recent years (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2023). Similar to Pakistan, Iran's geographical closeness to Afghanistan has eased the movement of refugees seeking safety. While Iran has offered humanitarian support and asylum to these refugees, the influx of displaced persons has exerted significant pressure on the nation's resources and public services. The challenges encountered by Iran in hosting Afghan refugees involve ensuring adequate healthcare, education, housing, and job opportunities. Furthermore, the arrival of large numbers of refugees has, at times, led to social discord and resentment between the Afghan refugees and the local Iranian population. In certain instances, the surge of Afghan migrants has contributed to increasing unemployment, particularly in underdeveloped regions where job options are already scarce.

The strain on host countries like Pakistan and Iran goes beyond economic and social challenges; it also encompasses security issues. Refugee groups, especially those living in informal settlements or refugee camps, are often susceptible to being taken advantage of by criminal groups or extremist entities. The absence of proper security and protection for refugees can foster an environment rife with lawlessness and instability, complicating the security landscape in the region. In several cases, host countries have raised alarms regarding the risk of Afghan refugees becoming radicalized or engaged in cross-border terrorism, especially in light of the ongoing instability in Afghanistan and the presence of militant organizations such as the Taliban and

ISIS- Khorasan (IOM, 2021).

4.2.3 Border Security:

Afghanistan has consistently raised significant alarms in the global battle against crime due to its involvement in various illegal activities. The country's easily navigable borders, fragile governance systems, and inadequate law enforcement establish a setting where drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking can thrive. These combined elements pose substantial challenges not only for Afghanistan but also for its neighboring nations as well as the broader international community.

One of the most notable illegal industries in Afghanistan is the production and distribution of narcotics, with a particular emphasis on opium and heroin. Afghanistan stands as the top global producer of opium, a crop mainly grown in rural regions where governmental influence is often limited or absent. The country's prominent role in the international drug trade is largely due to the ineffective governance and law enforcement present in many rural areas, allowing drug traffickers to operate with considerable freedom (World Bank, 2021).

The rugged landscape of Afghanistan is also a significant factor in aiding drug smuggling. The mountainous borders with countries like Pakistan, Iran, and Turkmenistan offer natural pathways for smugglers to move drugs in and out of the country. These routes are challenging to monitor effectively because of both the difficult geography and the lack of collaboration among border security personnel (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Consequently, drug traffickers can avoid detection and persist in transporting illegal substances across borders, exacerbating addiction issues and financing criminal enterprises both locally and globally.

The opium trade is especially widespread as it generates considerable income for the Afghan economy, especially in regions where traditional agricultural practices have been disrupted by conflict. A significant number of farmers resort to cultivating opium as a survival strategy due to the high profitability associated with the crop. This results in a harmful cycle where poverty, conflict, and corruption perpetuate the production and distribution of narcotics, while the income from this trade supports insurgency groups and organized crime networks (World Bank, 2021). This situation complicates the Afghan government's efforts to effectively tackle drug trafficking, as the profits from the drug trade often finance opposition factions,

including the Taliban.

The global consequences of Afghanistan's drug trade are extensive. The heroin manufactured in Afghanistan is trafficked not only to neighboring nations but also to markets in Europe, Russia, and elsewhere. According to the UNODC (2023), global demand for heroin continues to grow, further sustaining the illegal trade. The income generated from drug trafficking also finances various criminal and extremist organizations, contributing to worldwide insecurity.

Beyond drug trafficking, Afghanistan serves as a crucial hub for arms trafficking, which intensifies both internal strife and regional instability. Various types of weapons, including small arms, light weapons, and heavy artillery, are frequently smuggled into Afghanistan from nearby nations as well as from more distant locations. These arms are utilized not only in Afghanistan's continuing civil unrest but are also redirected to insurgent factions operating in neighboring countries.

Arms trafficking poses a significant threat in Afghanistan, given the extensive availability of both legal and illicit weapons. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, a massive influx of weapons entered the country, and these arms continue to circulate among the diverse groups engaged in the nation's civil conflict and insurgency. Consequently, Afghanistan has emerged as a significant supplier of arms to various militant organizations in the region, including those located in Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia (UNODC, 2023).

The smuggling of arms into Afghanistan has been aided by the nation's weak border security and the poor coordination among law enforcement agencies. This situation has resulted in the ease of transporting weapons across porous borders, exacerbating violence and conflict. The repercussions of this arms trafficking extend beyond Afghanistan, affecting neighboring countries, where the influx of weapons heightens existing conflicts and undermines peacekeeping efforts.

The availability of weapons poses considerable challenges to initiatives aimed at combating terrorism and insurgency in the region. Armed groups exploit these weapons to conduct attacks, destabilize governments, and perpetuate violence. Specifically, the Taliban and other insurgent factions have employed smuggled arms to initiate attacks on Afghan security forces and to assert control over specific regions.

Human trafficking represents another illegal activity that flourishes in Afghanistan due to the country's ineffective governance and porous borders. The geographic position of Afghanistan, as a junction between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, establishes it as a significant transit hub for human trafficking operations. These trafficking networks take advantage of at-risk populations, especially women and children, for purposes that include forced labor, sexual exploitation, and organ trafficking (UNODC, 2023).

The ineffective border enforcement in Afghanistan allows human traffickers to move their victims across borders with relative ease. Afghanistan shares its borders with several countries that are also susceptible to trafficking, such as Pakistan, Iran, and Turkmenistan. The lack of cooperation among law enforcement agencies in these nations enables traffickers to function with little interruption. According to the UNODC (2023), human trafficking is especially rampant in conflict zones where individuals are frequently displaced and vulnerable to exploitation. In Afghanistan, the persistent conflict and instability have fostered conditions in which people are more likely to fall victim to trafficking.

In Afghanistan, human trafficking frequently includes the recruitment of women and children for forced domestic work, sexual exploitation, and even as combatants in armed groups. Traffickers target families suffering from poverty and desperation, luring them with false assurances of jobs or improved living conditions abroad. Once victims are moved across borders, they face various forms of mistreatment and exploitation. The absence of robust legal safeguards and inadequate law enforcement efforts to address human trafficking has positioned Afghanistan as a major source and destination for trafficked individuals.

To tackle the intricate and interconnected issues of drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking in Afghanistan, a comprehensive strategy is necessary. One of the most vital measures is to enhance border security. Due to the porous nature of Afghanistan's borders, bolstering border controls is crucial to interrupting the movement of illegal goods and individuals. This necessitates better coordination between Afghan border forces and those of neighboring nations, alongside increased investment in border security infrastructure.

The challenging landscape of Afghanistan poses considerable difficulties for border security initiatives, but the country's strategic position makes it essential to improve border control in order to reduce cross-border criminal activities. Strengthening border security would

not only hinder the trafficking of drugs, firearms, and humans but also foster an environment in which law enforcement agencies can more effectively identify and dismantle criminal organizations (World Bank, 2021).

In addition to bolstering border security, enhancing governance and the rule of law in Afghanistan is imperative. The lack of effective government authority in various regions has permitted criminal networks to thrive. Reinforcing governance frameworks, including local law enforcement, judiciary, and administrative bodies, would establish a more comprehensive approach to combat these illegal operations.

Furthermore, international collaboration is vital in addressing the transnational aspects of these crimes. Afghanistan cannot resolve these challenges independently, as criminal enterprises frequently operate across various countries. Coordinated actions among Afghanistan, its neighboring countries, and the wider international community are essential to disrupt these networks and avert the trafficking of drugs, arms, and individuals. The international community must also offer technical support and resources to enhance the capabilities of Afghan law enforcement agencies and to aid in the establishment of more effective governance systems.

The weak governance, porous borders, and insufficient law enforcement in Afghanistan have fostered an environment where illicit activities like drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking can flourish. These criminal enterprises not only destabilize the country but also impact the surrounding region and contribute to global insecurity. Tackling these challenges demands a holistic strategy that involves enhancing border security, improving governance, and promoting international collaboration. Only by implementing these measures can the flow of illegal goods and criminal activities be significantly reduced, paving the way for a more stable and secure Afghanistan, which in turn benefits the entire region.

4.2.4 Economic Impact:

The ongoing violence and insecurity in Afghanistan have significant consequences, especially for regional trade routes and energy initiatives, thereby threatening the economic stability and energy security of adjacent countries. Historically, Afghanistan has served as a crucial crossroads for trade and cultural interaction, with significant trade paths like the Silk Road enabling economic exchanges among Central Asia, South Asia, and beyond. However, the

persistent instability in Afghanistan has become an increasingly disruptive element for regional connectivity, obstructing trade, disrupting supply chains, and complicating the development of energy infrastructure. This paper analyzes how the continuous violence in Afghanistan undermines regional trade and energy initiatives, explores the impacts on neighboring countries, and considers possible solutions to alleviate the negative effects on regional economic and energy security.

Afghanistan's pivotal location has historically positioned it as an important contributor to regional commerce. The historic Silk Road ran through Afghanistan, linking Central Asia with South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. These trade paths facilitated not only the exchange of products but also the transmission of culture, technology, and ideas across extensive areas. In modern times, Afghanistan continues to play a crucial role in regional trade, with corridors like the Kabul-Kandahar-Herat route serving as essential links between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Additionally, Afghanistan's road network is vital for moving goods among China, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf, providing access to key global markets (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2022).

Nevertheless, the persistent violence, political turmoil, and insecurity within Afghanistan have significantly hindered these vital trade routes. Ongoing armed conflicts and insurgency activities have rendered large areas of Afghanistan unsafe or unreachable, resulting in delays in goods transportation. For example, the movement of freight between Central Asia and Pakistan, which traverses Afghanistan, has become increasingly dangerous, marked by frequent assaults on transport convoys and infrastructure (Goodhand & Sisk, 2020). This unpredictability fosters a climate where traders and businesses are compelled to reevaluate the dependability of Afghanistan as a transit route, resulting in heightened risks, delays, and expenses.

The insecurity further contributes to increased shipping costs, as businesses may have to divert shipments or implement additional security measures to protect their goods. These raised expenses often lead to higher consumer prices, thereby obstructing trade and economic growth in neighboring countries. Moreover, the instability hampers the establishment of long-term business partnerships or investment in necessary infrastructure improvements, which would be essential for sustaining efficient and dependable trade networks (Katzman, 2022).

Consequently, neighboring countries that depend on these trade routes for their import and export activities, such as Pakistan, Iran, and China, face escalating dangers of experiencing supply chain interruptions that could adversely affect their economic stability.

This scenario underscores the fragility of nations that rely on Afghanistan's trade routes for access to both regional and global markets. For instance, landlocked countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan depend significantly on Afghanistan's transport network to reach ports in Pakistan. Any disruption to these pathways can critically impact their ability to trade and secure essential resources. Furthermore, the rising costs and hazards associated with trade in the region reduce the likelihood of attracting foreign investment aimed at developing the necessary infrastructure to alleviate these disruptions, perpetuating the cycle of economic stagnation in Afghanistan and its neighboring nations (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [UNESCAP], 2021).

The violence and instability in Afghanistan represent a considerable threat to vital regional energy infrastructure projects, particularly pipelines and power transmission lines. Two significant energy initiatives that traverse Afghanistan and have the potential to transform regional energy collaboration are the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) electrical transmission project. These initiatives aim to bolster energy security in the region by enabling the flow of natural gas and electricity across national boundaries; however, the precarious security conditions in Afghanistan jeopardize their successful completion and operation.

The TAPI pipeline, designed to carry natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India via Afghanistan, is viewed as a pivotal project for regional energy collaboration. It holds the promise of delivering a dependable and secure energy supply to energy-deficient nations like Pakistan and India, both of which are experiencing rising energy demands. Nevertheless, the security dangers linked to the construction and operation of the pipeline through Afghanistan are considerable. Insurgent groups have previously targeted infrastructure such as pipelines and transmission lines, disrupting similar energy projects in the region, and TAPI is similarly vulnerable. The insecurity in Afghanistan creates a threatening environment for foreign investors and contractors participating in such ventures, as the potential for financial losses from attacks or sabotage renders these investments increasingly less appealing (International Crisis Group

[ICG], 2022).

In the same vein, the CASA-1000 project, which seeks to transmit electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, encounters significant obstacles due to the security situation in Afghanistan. This project is vital for alleviating energy shortages in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and it has the potential to enhance regional energy interconnectivity and cooperation. However, the persistent insurgency and instability in Afghanistan have introduced uncertainties regarding the construction and upkeep of the transmission lines. Like the TAPI pipeline, the risk of attacks on infrastructure raises concerns about the safety of personnel and the capability to maintain the long-term functionality of the energy grid (Katzman, 2022).

The threat to energy infrastructure in Afghanistan not only impacts the immediate countries involved in these projects but also undermines the broader ambition of regional energy security. Given that these nations are interconnected in terms of their energy demands and resources, any disruption in one segment of the energy network can trigger ripple effects across the entire region. For instance, if the TAPI pipeline experiences delays or sabotage, Pakistan, which significantly depends on natural gas imports, will confront additional energy shortages, worsening the energy crisis in the nation (World Bank, 2021). Likewise, if CASA-1000 cannot consistently deliver power, Afghanistan and Pakistan will struggle to fulfill the energy requirements of their expanding populations.

Addressing the challenges arising from insecurity in Afghanistan necessitates a comprehensive strategy that prioritizes regional collaboration, improved security measures, and diversification of energy and trade routes. A primary step is to enhance the security landscape within Afghanistan. Regional stakeholders, including the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Turkmenistan, should work together to bolster the security of trade pathways and energy infrastructure. This could entail coordinated military and security initiatives, along with the creation of regional security frameworks focused on safeguarding vital infrastructure projects (United Nations, 2022). Furthermore, international allies like the United States and NATO, along with regional powers such as China and Russia, have a significant interest in maintaining stability in Afghanistan and must participate in delivering both financial and security assistance to the region.

Another crucial tactic is to reinforce regional economic cooperation and trade

collaboration. Improving the ability of neighboring nations to access alternative trade routes, through the establishment of new roads and rail connections that bypass Afghanistan, can help alleviate the risks associated with instability. Expanding cross-border trading agreements and promoting the creation of regional trade centers could also aid in decreasing reliance on Afghan routes, serving as a safeguard against disruptions (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2022).

Regarding energy security, the advancement of alternative energy sources and infrastructure can provide a means to lessen the impacts of disturbances to current energy projects. Neighboring nations might focus on investing in renewable energy, such as solar and wind, which are less susceptible to the security threats linked to traditional energy infrastructure. Additionally, enhanced energy diversification, encompassing the development of domestic energy resources the import of energy from other regional partners, would reduce the region's dependence on a single pipeline or transmission route (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2022).

To tackle these difficulties, it is necessary to improve security and stability in Afghanistan, bolster regional collaboration, and expand commerce and energy channels to decrease dependence on susceptible pathways. Furthermore, allocating resources towards alternate energy sources and infrastructure can effectively reduce the negative effects of interruptions and improve the ability of neighbouring nations' energy systems to withstand and recover from challenges (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2022).

The ongoing instability in Afghanistan poses a major obstacle to regional trade and energy security. Disruptions to essential trade routes and energy initiatives jeopardize the economic stability of neighboring nations and hinder the prospects for regional collaboration. In response, both regional and international players need to prioritize enhancements in security, fortify trade and energy networks, and invest in alternative energy sources to mitigate vulnerabilities. A unified approach to tackle the underlying causes of instability and foster cooperation is essential for ensuring sustained economic growth and energy security in the region.

4.2.5 Geopolitical Competition:

Afghanistan's geopolitical importance has consistently made it a contested area for regional and global powers vying for influence. The persistent instability in the nation has merely heightened this rivalry, as multiple entities strive for power and dominance. Adjacent nations, including Pakistan, Iran, and India, together with influential regional forces like as China and

Russia, have all endeavoured to promote their own interests in Afghanistan. Each player possesses distinct strategic objectives, encompassing economic, security, and geopolitical factors. For example, Pakistan has endeavoured to retain control over Afghanistan in order to offset Indian influence and secure a cooperative administration in Kabul that is not closely aligned with its adversary, India. Iran has historical, cultural, and economic connections with Afghanistan. Additionally, Iran aims to oppose the influence of Sunni extremist organisations and prevent the spread of instability beyond its borders (Bajoria, 2021; Rashid, 2021).

India has made investments in development projects in Afghanistan with the intention of promoting positive relations and countering Pakistan's influence. Additionally, India seeks to get access to Central Asian markets by utilising Afghanistan as a gateway. China is motivated to ensure security in Afghanistan in order to curb the proliferation of extremism and promote its Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to bolster connectivity and trade throughout Asia. Russia harbours apprehensions regarding the proliferation of extremism and terrorism emanating from Afghanistan and infiltrating Central Asia, which might potentially jeopardise its own security interests.

Pakistan's engagement with Afghanistan is primarily influenced by its security issues and the dynamics of regional power, particularly concerning India. Pakistan regards Afghanistan as an essential buffer state between itself and its larger neighbor, India. Historically, Pakistan has tried to retain influence in Afghanistan to thwart India's establishment of a presence in Kabul (Rashid, 2021). Specifically, Pakistan views India's increasing influence in Afghanistan as a threat to its own regional security and strategic goals. In this light, Pakistan has backed various Afghan factions, including the Taliban, to maintain leverage over Kabul and counter Indian influence (Bajoria, 2021).

Moreover, Pakistan has long been apprehensive about the threats posed by insurgent groups that operate along the porous border with Afghanistan. Organizations like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which have been active in Pakistan's tribal areas, often take refuge in Afghanistan, adding to Pakistan's security challenges. Consequently, Pakistan's approach in Afghanistan has centered on ensuring that the government in Kabul is sympathetic to its objectives and capable of limiting the influence of hostile factions (Bajoria, 2021). Nonetheless, Pakistan's actions in Afghanistan have at times heightened tensions with other regional actors,

especially India, which considers Pakistan's support for the Taliban as a destabilizing force.

Iran's stakes in Afghanistan are influenced by a blend of historical, cultural, religious, and security factors. Sharing a long border with Afghanistan, Iran has profound cultural and historical connections with the country, particularly among Persian-speaking communities. Iran aims to enhance its influence in Afghanistan, partly through soft power strategies, such as economic assistance, promoting cultural exchanges, and backing political groups that share its interests (Rashid, 2021). Beyond these cultural and diplomatic aspects, Iran is significantly worried about the emergence of extremist Sunni factions, particularly the Taliban and ISIS, in Afghanistan. As a Shia-majority nation, Iran perceives the rise of radical Sunni groups as a threat to its internal stability and regional clout. To counter this danger, Iran has provided support to political factions in Afghanistan that oppose Sunni extremism, including Shia groups and former Northern Alliance leaders (Bajoria, 2021). Iran's strategy also aims to stop Afghanistan from becoming a launchpad for Sunni jihadist organizations that could infiltrate Iranian territory, especially in the turbulent Baluchistan region. Additionally, Iran has a strong interest in preventing instability from extending into its borders, which could heighten its own security issues.

India's participation in Afghanistan is shaped by both its historical enmity with Pakistan and its intention to gain access to Central Asia. India has invested extensively in Afghanistan's development, notably in infrastructure projects like roads, power facilities, and dams, in addition to educational and healthcare initiatives (Bajoria, 2021). These investments aim not only to build positive relations with the Afghan government but also to offset Pakistan's influence in the region. For India, sustaining a friendly and stable partnership with Afghanistan is vital for limiting Pakistan's strategic advantages and countering its sway.

Furthermore, in light of its rivalry with Pakistan, India perceives Afghanistan as an entry point to Central Asia's abundant energy resources and developing markets. Afghanistan provides India with the chance to enhance its economic and trade relations with Central Asia, circumventing Pakistan, which has traditionally been an obstacle to trade between India and Central Asia (Rashid, 2021). By investing in Afghanistan, India hopes to boost regional connectivity and improve its access to the larger Central Asian market.

Russia's interests in Afghanistan are primarily influenced by its worries about regional

security, especially regarding the risk of extremist and terrorist activities spreading from Afghanistan to Central Asia. Russia has deep-rooted connections with Central Asia, where it exerts considerable geopolitical influence. The ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan represents a direct danger to Russia's security interests in Central Asia, as extremist organizations based in Afghanistan could easily breach the region and create instability (Rashid, 2021).

Aside from addressing extremism, Russia is also apprehensive about the possibility of drug trafficking from Afghanistan affecting Central Asia and potentially reaching Russia. Afghanistan has historically been a significant source of opium production, and the illegal drug trade has been a continuous security issue for Russia (Bajoria, 2021). To counter these challenges, Russia has aimed to strengthen its ties with Afghanistan's neighboring countries, notably the Central Asian republics, and has engaged in multilateral discussions emphasizing regional security.

The rivalry between these external powers vying for influence in Afghanistan can intensify tensions in the region and hinder efforts to attain stability and peace. In order to tackle the difficulties faced by Afghanistan, it is necessary to have collaboration and discussions among the neighbouring countries to reduce these tensions and facilitate a peaceful conclusion to the war (Bajoria, 2021; Rashid, 2021).

The geopolitical competition surrounding Afghanistan mirrors the larger power dynamics both in the region and globally, as each foreign actor attempts to advance its own strategic, economic, and security objectives. The rivalry among Pakistan, Iran, India, China, and Russia has made it more difficult to stabilize Afghanistan and achieve a lasting peace. The persistent unrest in Afghanistan has led to a divided political environment that embodies the conflicting interests of regional and global players. It is essential for neighboring nations and international partners to engage in conversations and collaboration to ease tensions and foster a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The future of Afghanistan will hinge on the ability of these entities to navigate their rivalries and strive for regional stability and tranquility.

4.2.6. Proxy Conflicts:

The backing of various factions in Afghanistan by neighbouring nations has the potential to intensify tensions and fuel proxy conflicts, so exacerbating the instability in the region. This phenomena has consistently occurred throughout the history of Afghanistan, as

external entities have frequently supported different factions in order to promote their own geopolitical objectives, resulting in long-lasting war and instability.

Pakistan's past backing of the Taliban has been perceived as a means to uphold its dominance in Afghanistan and counter Indian expansion in the area. Conversely, India has offered assistance to the Afghan government and other factions that are against the Taliban, perceiving them as a menace to the stability of the area (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2022; Ruttig, 2021).

Iran has provided support to specific factions in Afghanistan that are either aligned with Iranian goals or opposed to Sunni extremist groups. Likewise, Russia and countries in Central Asia are worried about the proliferation of extremism and terrorism originating from Afghanistan. They may lend their support to factions that they believe are capable of effectively combating these dangers.

External actors' participation in bolstering various factions can intensify internal divides and rivalries within Afghanistan, hence escalating violence and impeding endeavours to attain peace and stability. Furthermore, proxy battles among adjacent nations have the potential to intensify tensions and result in wider regional instability, which can have significant implications for security and development (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2022; Ruttig, 2021)

To tackle these issues, it is crucial to actively encourage communication, healing, and collaboration among all parties involved, both within Afghanistan and among the nations that share its borders. Regional countries should abstain from endorsing surrogates and instead prioritise diplomatic resolutions and comprehensive strategies to address problems and foster peace and stability in Afghanistan and the broader region. In order to achieve lasting peace in Afghanistan, it is essential to establish a thorough and all-encompassing political agreement that effectively resolves the concerns of all involved parties and guarantees the involvement of all individuals with a vested interest in the country's future.

4.2.7 Narcotics Trade: Opium Production:

The cultivation of opium in Afghanistan has become a major issue, not only because it contributes to the global drug trade and addiction epidemic but also because it acts as a crucial income source for insurgent factions and criminal organizations, thereby increasing security

challenges in the region. This problem is closely linked to a variety of intricate political, economic, and social factors that influence both Afghanistan's internal stability and the wider international community. The illegal farming of opium poppy, frequently conducted in isolated and hard-to-reach areas, provides farmers with a means to earn a living in a nation where sustainable economic alternatives are limited (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). As a result, Afghanistan remains the leading global producer of opium, making up a substantial portion of the worldwide opiate market. This unlawful trade not only drives addiction globally but also supports organized crime and insurgency, complicating endeavors for regional security and socio-economic growth (Gossman, 2017).

The origins of Afghanistan's opium cultivation issue are complex. The country's mountainous landscape and inadequate infrastructure have created an ideal setting for opium poppy cultivation. Many of these remote locations are challenging for government officials to access or control, allowing illegal activities to thrive with minimal interference (Felbab-Brown, 2021). Furthermore, the political instability and weak governance within the country have fostered an environment where illegal activities, such as drug trafficking, can prosper. The shortage of economic opportunities and restricted access to essential services like education, healthcare, and infrastructure further intensify the issue, compelling numerous farmers to depend on opium poppy cultivation as their main source of income (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). The Afghan government's jurisdiction over rural areas remains limited, making it hard to execute effective law enforcement and alternative development initiatives (Chouvy, 2020).

For many farmers in Afghanistan, cultivating opium poppy is not a voluntary decision but a desperate measure due to the lack of other livelihood options. Opium poppy thrives in the climate of Afghanistan and offers a higher return on investment compared to other crops. Additionally, the relatively weak state control over rural regions allows many farmers to grow and harvest opium without facing direct government or law enforcement intervention (Felbab-Brown, 2021). This situation has resulted in a scenario where, for a significant number of people, cultivating opium poppy is a rational economic choice despite its illegality. Consequently, drug trafficking organizations take advantage of this vulnerability, offering farmers lucrative prices for their poppy harvests and sustaining a steady demand for the product. This cycle not only perpetuates poverty and illegal trade in Afghanistan but also reinforces the hold of insurgent groups and criminal networks on local populations (Mansfield, 2016).

The financial incentives from opium trafficking have played a vital role in fueling Afghanistan's ongoing conflicts. Insurgent organizations, such as the Taliban, have increasingly depended on the financial gains from the opium trade to support their activities, including acquiring weapons and other resources. These groups often levy "taxes" or "protection fees" on farmers, further entrenching themselves in the rural economy. The Taliban's participation in the drug trade provides a significant source of funding, allowing them to exert control over large areas of Afghanistan's countryside. As reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023), it is estimated that the Taliban and other insurgents generate hundreds of millions of dollars each year from the opium trade, bolstering their capacity to continue violent operations. This financial backing enhances their standing in the conflict and undermines the efforts of both Afghan security personnel and international peacekeeping forces (Kerr, 2019).

4.2.8 Human Rights Concerns:

The instability in Afghanistan presents substantial risks to minority communities, who are frequently susceptible to human rights violations and persecution in the midst of conflict and political upheaval. Ethnic groups such as Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Sikhs have encountered prejudice, brutality, and exclusion in Afghanistan. Minorities of different ethnic and religious backgrounds are at risk of being persecuted by various armed factions, such as the Taliban and other extreme groups. These circumstances can result in the uprooting of people, coerced changes in religious beliefs, large-scale killings, and other serious infringements of human rights.

The oppression of minority groups in Afghanistan can potentially have wider regional consequences. As marginalised groups facing persecution seek security and sanctuary, nearby nations may experience a rise in the number of refugees entering their territories, leading to heightened tensions along their borders. Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian countries have always provided shelter to Afghan refugees, especially minority groups. However, the large number of migrants can put a burden on their resources and give rise to social, economic, and political difficulties.

Furthermore, the oppression of minority groups in Afghanistan has the potential to intensify pre-existing conflicts among various ethnic and religious communities in neighbouring nations, especially those that have significant Afghan minority populations. This has

the potential to exacerbate the instability of vulnerable areas and intensify confrontations between different communities. To effectively address the challenges faced by minority communities in Afghanistan, it is crucial to make focused endeavours to safeguard their rights, foster inclusiveness and tolerance, and ensure that those responsible for violating human rights are held accountable. Furthermore, it is imperative for neighbouring nations and the global community to collaborate in order to provide assistance to refugees and minimise the consequences of refugee movements on the communities hosting them. Ensuring enduring tranquilly and security in Afghanistan is crucial for protecting the rights and welfare of its whole population, especially minority groups (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

4.2.9 Strain on Regional Relations:

The ongoing strife in Afghanistan has certainly ignited differing strategies among its neighboring countries, a scenario that not only complicates regional diplomacy but also worsens the chances of achieving peace and stability. Driven by their strategic interests, historical ties, and ideological beliefs, these nations often find themselves on conflicting sides of the conflict. Consequently, the political and military situation in Afghanistan is frequently influenced by external players, each following their own objectives. This outside involvement complicates an already unstable scenario, as it promotes further polarization, fuels rivalry, and creates hindrances to reaching a peaceful solution (Siddique, 2021).

Among the key neighboring participants in Afghanistan's conflict are Pakistan, India, Iran, and the Central Asian nations, each possessing their own goals and interests that shape their respective strategies towards Afghanistan. These regional actors often align themselves based on their historic political, cultural, and economic ties, along with their perceptions of security threats originating from Afghanistan. This has led to the formation of various alliances, each with unique priorities, which frequently clash, thereby intensifying regional tensions (Naseer, 2025).

Pakistan's historical connections with Afghanistan, especially with the Taliban, have significantly influenced its foreign policy. For many years, Pakistan has supported the Taliban as a means to counter Indian influence in the area. The Taliban's control over Afghanistan offered Pakistan a strategic ally in its efforts to restrict Indian access to Central Asia and to assert its authority over Afghanistan's political situation. Some experts suggest that Pakistan's

backing of the Taliban was driven by a need to establish a "strategic depth" in the event of military confrontation with India, using Afghanistan as a buffer state (Siddique, 2021). Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, however, has resulted in allegations of destabilizing the area by providing covert support to insurgent factions and undermining the Afghan government. These activities have strained its relationships with both Afghanistan and the global community, as the persistent instability in Afghanistan has often spilled over into Pakistan, worsening the security situation along the border (Pant & Passi, 2022).

Conversely, India has adopted a different stance towards Afghanistan, primarily concentrating on backing the central government and promoting development within the nation. India regards Afghanistan as a vital ally in its overarching strategy to counter Pakistan's influence in the region and ensure stability in South Asia. As a result, India has made significant investments in Afghanistan's infrastructure, development initiatives, and capacity-building efforts. India's support for the Afghan government, both politically and economically, is viewed as part of a broader initiative to foster regional stability and to address the threat posed by extremist groups, particularly those linked to Pakistan.

Moreover, India's involvement in Afghanistan is driven by its apprehensions regarding the increasing presence of Pakistan-backed insurgent factions and the potential for their influence to further destabilize the region (Siddique, 2021). Hence, India's strategic goals in Afghanistan align with its wider vision of advancing peace, democracy, and development throughout the region (Pant & Passi, 2022).

Iran has substantial interests in Afghanistan, largely motivated by anxiety over the emergence of Sunni extremist factions like the Islamic State (ISIS) and the threat they pose to its own borders. As a country with a majority Shia Muslim population, Iran is cautious about the proliferation of Sunni extremism in Afghanistan, especially given the increasing influence of ISIS and other militant organizations. Consequently, Iran's engagement in Afghanistan is partly to thwart the dissemination of radicalism and to ensure that its neighboring country does not become a source of instability that could affect Iranian soil. To achieve this, Iran has pursued strong ties with various Afghan factions, including Shia and Hazara communities, as a strategy to uphold its influence and counter the Sunni extremist menace (Siddique, 2021). Additionally, Iran's geographical closeness to Afghanistan and its shared cultural and religious connections with

specific Afghan groups provide it with considerable leverage in the area (Pant & Passi, 2022).

The Central Asian nations, situated north of Afghanistan, have also been actively involved in responding to the conflict in the region. Countries like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have a strong interest in maintaining stability in Afghanistan, driven by fears of the spread of extremism, terrorism, and drug trafficking encroaching on their borders. These republics emphasize the importance of security in Afghanistan to prevent the potential spillover of violent extremism and the destabilization of their territories. Moreover, the Central Asian countries share historical cultural and economic ties with Afghanistan and are eager to foster cooperation in fields like trade, energy, and transportation. Due to their geographic proximity to the ongoing conflict, these nations are particularly motivated to avert the creation of a power vacuum in Afghanistan that could be taken advantage of by militant groups (Pant & Passi, 2022).

However, the differing approaches and priorities of these regional stakeholders often lead to a precarious and unpredictable geopolitical landscape. The rivalry between Pakistan and India, for instance, has occasionally manifested in their engagements in Afghanistan, with both nations supporting rival factions and contributing to the division within Afghan politics. Likewise, the activities of Iran, Central Asian states, and other regional participants have complicated the pursuit of a unified and inclusive peace process in Afghanistan. Although each nation possesses its own set of interests, the combined impact of these varied strategies has heightened regional tensions, deepened mistrust, and obstructed efforts to tackle the foundational causes of the conflict (Siddique, 2021).

To address these obstacles and move towards a peaceful resolution, it is vital to promote regional collaboration and diplomatic discussions among Afghanistan's immediate neighbors. Regional powers should focus on building trust, facilitating dialogue, and cooperating on initiatives to stabilize Afghanistan. This involves backing intra-Afghan negotiations, fostering economic growth, and jointly tackling the root causes of extremism and instability in the region. A holistic strategy that prioritizes diplomacy, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility is essential for achieving enduring peace and stability. Furthermore, regional actors must recognize the need for collective action and refrain from exacerbating tensions that could trigger further conflict and instability (Pant & Passi, 2022).

In the end, resolving Afghanistan's prolonged conflict necessitates a collaborative effort

from all regional players, one that weighs their individual interests while focusing on the long-term stability and security of both Afghanistan and the wider area. Achieving this strategy will involve thoughtful diplomacy, shared compromises, and a dedication to peace-building that overcomes national conflicts. Only through unified regional action can the cycle of violence in Afghanistan be disrupted and the chances for enduring peace throughout the region be achieved (Siddique, 2021).

Chapter-5

5.1 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Bringing long-term peace and stability to Afghanistan after the US withdrawal is a complex and challenging task that requires a multifaceted approach involving the Afghan government, regional stakeholders, and the international community. Here are some key steps that could contribute to achieving lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan:

5.1.1 Inclusive Dialogue and Reconciliation:

Encourage inclusive peace talks involving all Afghan factions, including the Taliban, to negotiate a political settlement. Address the root causes of the conflict and grievances of all parties involved. Engage with local tribal and religious leaders to promote reconciliation at the community level.

5.1.2 Support the Afghan Government:

Strengthen the capacity of the Afghan security forces to maintain law and order. Invest in governance structures, rule of law, and anti-corruption measures to build public trust in the government. Ensure transparent and credible elections to establish a legitimate government.

5.1.3 Humanitarian Assistance and Development:

Provide humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations to address immediate needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Invest in long-term development projects focusing on infrastructure, education, healthcare, and job creation to improve living conditions.

5.1.4. Regional Cooperation:

Engage neighboring countries, especially Pakistan, Iran, China, and India, in supporting stability in Afghanistan. Encourage regional economic integration to boost trade and connectivity, fostering mutual interests and reducing the likelihood of conflict.

5.1.5 Counterterrorism Measures:

Continue cooperation on counterterrorism efforts to prevent extremist groups from using Afghanistan as a safe haven. Strengthen intelligence sharing and collaborate internationally to combat terrorism.

5.1.6 Women's Rights and Social Inclusion:

Protect and promote the rights of women and minorities, ensuring their active participation in the peace process and public life. Invest in education and awareness programs to change societal

attitudes toward gender equality and social inclusion.

5.1.7 International Diplomacy and Aid:

Engage the international community to provide financial and technical support for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development. Establish a coordinated international approach to avoid power vacuums and conflicts.

5.1.8 Civil Society and Media:

Support civil society organizations and independent media to ensure that diverse voices are heard and public opinion is represented. Promote education and awareness programs to encourage a culture of peace and tolerance.

5.1.9 Economic Diversification:

Diversify the Afghan economy to reduce its dependency on illicit activities like drug trafficking. Promote agriculture, industry, and services sectors to create jobs and stimulate economic growth.

5.1.10 Long-Term Commitment:

Understand that achieving lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan will take time and persistent effort. Maintain a long-term commitment to support Afghanistan's development and security even after the withdrawal of foreign troops.

5.1.11 Track Progress and Adjust Strategies:

Establish clear metrics to measure progress in various areas such as security, governance, and economic development. Regularly assess the effectiveness of implemented strategies and be willing to adjust approaches based on the evolving situation. It's essential for the international community to work together with the Afghan government and its people, respecting their sovereignty and culture, to help Afghanistan rebuild and create a stable, prosperous, and peaceful future.

5.2. The *Instability in Afghanistan*:

The US pullout can be attributed to several interconnected factors:

5.2.1 Taliban Insurgency:

The Taliban, an insurgent group, intensified its attacks on Afghan security forces and government institutions after the US withdrawal. They sought to exploit the security vacuum and

regain control in certain areas.

5.2.2 Weak Afghan Security Forces:

Despite years of training and financial support, the Afghan security forces struggled to fill the void left by the departing US troops. They faced challenges related to morale, equipment, and leadership, making it difficult to counter the Taliban effectively.

5.2.3 Political Instability and Corruption:

Afghanistan's political landscape has been marred by infighting and corruption, which weakened the government's ability to provide effective governance and services to its citizens. Political divisions hindered a unified response to the Taliban threat.

5.2.4 Economic Challenges:

Afghanistan faced economic difficulties exacerbated by the withdrawal. The reduction in foreign aid and investment impacted the country's ability to sustain development projects, provide basic services, and generate employment. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021 created a power vacuum that various regional and global players have attempted to fill. The analysis emphasizes the conflicting interests and strategies of these actors, along with their implications for Afghanistan's political and strategic landscape.

5.2.5 Regional Influence and Proxy Wars:

Afghanistan's instability is often influenced by regional powers pursuing their strategic interests. Countries in the region, such as Pakistan and Iran, have historically been accused of supporting various Afghan factions, further complicating internal stability.

5.2.6 Ethnic and Sectarian Divisions:

Afghanistan is ethnically diverse, and historical tensions between different ethnic and sectarian groups have occasionally led to conflicts. The Taliban's rise exploited these divisions, leading to localized violence.

5.2.7 Narcotics Trade:

Afghanistan is a significant producer of opium, and the narcotics trade has provided a source of revenue for insurgent groups. The instability in the country allowed this trade to flourish, sustaining the finances of these groups.

5.2.8 Deteriorating Humanitarian Situation:

Ongoing instability has created a humanitarian crisis, leading to internal displacement and straining resources. Displaced populations often live in precarious conditions, contributing to social tensions and instability. The Taliban's resurgence has intensified Afghanistan's existing humanitarian and economic difficulties. The freezing of foreign reserves and the halt of international assistance have rendered the regime with scarce resources to meet the population's needs. As reported by the United Nations, over 24 million Afghans require humanitarian support, with widespread poverty, food scarcity, and unemployment impacting millions (UNOCHA, 2023). The regime's failure to address these issues has further eroded its legitimacy and raised alarms about the country's future stability.

5.2.9 COVID-19 Pandemic:

The pandemic further strained Afghanistan's resources and healthcare system, diverting attention and resources away from addressing security concerns and economic challenges.

5.2.10 Lack of Consensus on Peace Process:

While there were attempts at peace talks, achieving a consensus among all Afghan factions, including the Taliban, proved challenging. Differences over issues such as power-sharing, the role of Islamic law, and women's rights complicated the peace process. The convergence of these factors created a volatile environment, leading to continued instability in Afghanistan after the US pullout. Addressing these challenges requires not only a robust security response but also comprehensive political, economic, and social reforms, along with regional cooperation and international support.

5.3 Findings in General:

5.3.1 Afghanistan's Political Landscape Transformation

The Taliban's reestablishment of control in August 2021 signified a significant alteration in Afghanistan's political environment, bringing an end to two decades of foreign involvement and initiating a new phase of governance under an authoritarian regime. The analysis highlights several critical elements of this shift:

5.3.2 Disintegration of the Afghan National Government

The swift disintegration of the Afghan National Government (ANG) in 2021 was a pivotal event in the nation's history. Despite considerable global investment in the development of state institutions, the ANG could not withstand the Taliban's onslaught due to inherent vulnerabilities, such as corruption, lack of legitimacy, and inadequate governance (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008). The exit of U.S. and NATO forces eliminated the external backing that had sustained the ANG, revealing its fragility and inability to operate independently (Suhrke, 2011).

5.3.3 The Taliban's Approach to Governance

The governance strategy employed by the Taliban is marked by a stringent interpretation of Islamic law, which has profound effects on Afghanistan's internal politics. The regime has emphasized ideological conformity over practical governance, resulting in policies that limit women's rights, curtail freedom of speech, and marginalize ethnic and religious groups (Barfield, 2010). Although the Taliban has attempted to project stability and order, its governance framework has struggled to tackle the nation's urgent problems, including economic deterioration, humanitarian crises, and domestic dissent (Johnson, 2021).

5.3.4 Pakistan's Strategic Goals

Pakistan has become one of the most influential actors in Afghanistan's post-2021 scenario. Islamabad's historical support for the Taliban, stemming from its strategic goal of countering Indian influence and securing its western border, has positioned it as a crucial intermediary between the Taliban and the global community (Fair, 2021). Nevertheless, Pakistan's strategy carries risks, as the repercussions of unrest in Afghanistan—including terrorism, refugee outflows, and drug trafficking—pose serious threats to its own security and stability.

5.3.5 China's Interaction with the Taliban

China's involvement with the Taliban regime is motivated by its broader strategic goals under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its aim to diminish U.S. influence in the area (Small, 2021). Beijing's main concerns include the potential for Afghanistan to harbor Uyghur militants and the effects of instability on its investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

5.3.6 Russia and Iran's Cautious Engagement

Russia and Iran have employed hedging strategies in their dealings with the Taliban.

Russia's approach is influenced by its objective to counter the threat from ISIS-K and other extremist factions, as well as its overarching geopolitical rivalry with the United States (Katz, 2021). Conversely, Iran has aimed to safeguard its interests in western Afghanistan while navigating its complex relationship with the Taliban (Haidari, 2021). Both nations have interacted with the Taliban prudently, balancing their strategic goals with the dangers posed by instability.

5.4 Findings through Survey

Out of the 50 experts contacted to participate in the survey on the evolving political and strategic dynamics in Afghanistan, a total of 30 respondents engaged with the survey. This resulted in a response rate of 60%, which is considered commendable within academic research contexts, especially for surveys targeting experts in specialized fields. The participation of 30 experts provides a substantial pool of responses for analysis and contributes to the richness and depth of insights garnered from the survey data. This diverse group of respondents, representing various occupations including academia, journalism, diplomacy, defense, intelligence, and humanitarian aid, ensures a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter. Their multifaceted perspectives and expertise enrich the survey findings, offering valuable insights into the complex political and strategic landscape of Afghanistan.

5.4.1 Gender and Age Distribution:

The respondents include a mix of genders and age groups, indicating a diverse sample population.

5.4.2 Nationality:

The respondents represent various nationalities, including the USA, Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc., suggesting an international perspective on the issues related to Afghanistan.

5.4.3 Political Situation in Afghanistan (Q4):

Responses to Question 4 indicate varying perceptions of the political situation in Afghanistan post-US withdrawal, with some describing it as "unstable" or "uncertain." This reflects the complexity of the situation and differing perspectives among respondents.

5.4.4 Factors Contributing to Political Dynamics (Q5):

Respondents identified a range of factors contributing to the evolving political dynamics in Afghanistan, including the influence of neighboring countries and internal power struggles. This highlights the multifaceted nature of the challenges facing Afghanistan.

5.4.5 Taliban's Approach (Q6):

Views on the Afghan Taliban's approach towards transnational terrorist groups vary, with responses ranging from "hostile" to "cooperative." This suggests differing perceptions of the Taliban's stance on addressing security threats in Afghanistan.

5.4.6 Tackling Issues (Q7):

Responses to Question 7 indicate mixed views on the effectiveness of the Afghan Taliban in tackling issues such as proxy wars and drug trafficking. While some respondents believe they are tackling these issues effectively, others express doubts.

5.4.7 Regional Implications (Q8):

Respondents foresee various regional implications of the evolving political dynamics in Afghanistan, including increased instability, shifts in power dynamics, and strengthening regional alliances. This underscores the interconnectedness of Afghanistan with its neighboring countries and the broader region.

5.4.8 Concerns (Q9):

Many respondents express high levels of concern about the potential spillover effects of the situation in Afghanistan on neighboring countries. This reflects the perceived gravity of the situation and the need for regional cooperation to address it effectively.

5.4.9 Additional Comments:

Several respondents provide additional comments expressing their views, concerns, and suggestions regarding the situation in Afghanistan. These comments offer valuable insights into individual perspectives and further contextualize the survey responses.

Overall, the interpretation of the responses highlights the diverse range of perspectives on the political and strategic dynamics in Afghanistan and the regional implications thereof. It underscores the complexity of the situation and the importance of considering multiple viewpoints in analyzing and addressing the challenges facing Afghanistan and its neighbors.

5.5 Based on the responses provided following are Findings:

5.5.1 Perception of Political Situation:

The majority of respondents perceive the political situation in Afghanistan post-US withdrawal as unstable or uncertain, indicating a lack of consensus on the current state of affairs.

5.5.2 Factors Contributing to Political Dynamics:

Respondents identify various factors contributing to the evolving political dynamics in Afghanistan, including the influence of neighboring countries and internal power struggles. This suggests a recognition of the multifaceted nature of the challenges facing Afghanistan.

5.5.3 Taliban's Approach towards Transnational Terrorism:

Views on the Afghan Taliban's approach towards transnational terrorist groups are mixed, with some perceiving it as hostile while others view it as cooperative. This reflects differing perspectives on the Taliban's stance on addressing security threats in Afghanistan.

5.5.4 Effectiveness of Taliban in Tackling Issues:

There is a lack of consensus among respondents regarding the effectiveness of the Afghan Taliban in tackling issues such as proxy wars and drug trafficking. While some believe they are addressing these issues effectively, others express skepticism.

5.5.5 Regional Implications of Political Dynamics:

Respondents foresee various regional implications of the evolving political dynamics in Afghanistan, including increased instability and shifts in power dynamics. There is also a recognition of the need for regional cooperation to address the challenges effectively.

5.5.6 Concerns about Regional Spillover Effects:

Many respondents express significant concerns about the potential spillover effects of the situation in Afghanistan on neighboring countries. This highlights the perceived gravity of the situation and the need for proactive measures to mitigate risks.

Overall, the findings suggest a complex and nuanced understanding of the political and strategic dynamics in Afghanistan and the regional implications thereof. There is a recognition of the challenges facing the country and the importance of regional cooperation in addressing them effectively. However, there is also a lack of consensus on certain issues, indicating the need for further research and dialogue to develop comprehensive solutions.

5.6. Key Findings Overview:

- **Political Situation:** Majority view it as unstable or uncertain.
- **Factors Influencing Political Dynamics:**
Complex factors like neighboring country Influence and internal conflicts.

- **Taliban's Approach to Transnational Terrorism:**
Differing views between hostile and cooperative stances.
- **Effectiveness of Taliban:**
Mixed opinions on effectiveness in addressing major issues.
- **Regional Implications:**
Concerns about regional instability and power shifts.
- **Concerns About Spillover:**
High concern for the spillover effects on neighbouring countries.

Overall Interpretation:

The survey demonstrates a nuanced and intricate perspective on the changing political and strategic landscape of Afghanistan. While there is significant acknowledgment of the challenges facing Afghanistan and the importance of regional collaboration, there remains a considerable disagreement on various critical issues, underscoring the difficulty in identifying solutions and the necessity for additional research and conversation.

Chapter-6.

6 CONCLUSION

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a significant turning point in the country's security landscape and had far-reaching implications for the entire region. The abrupt exit of American troops after nearly two decades of military involvement left a power vacuum that had immediate and profound consequences for Afghanistan's security and stability. This essay has explored the security situation in Afghanistan post-U.S. pullout and its regional implications, delving into the rise of the Taliban, the challenges of governance, the humanitarian crisis, and the impact on neighboring countries. The withdrawal of U.S. forces, which had provided a semblance of stability and security in Afghanistan, created an environment ripe for the resurgence of the Taliban. The Taliban, emboldened by the departure of foreign troops, swiftly took control of the country, leading to concerns about the reinstatement of their oppressive regime.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 represented a crucial turning point in the security dynamics of the nation, with extensive repercussions not only for Afghanistan itself but also for neighboring nations and the international community at large. Following almost two decades of military engagement, the abrupt and disorganized exit of American forces resulted in a notable power vacuum in Afghanistan, leading to immediate and significant effects on its security and stability. This essay examines the security conditions in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal, particularly focusing on the Taliban's resurgence, governance challenges, the ongoing humanitarian crisis, and the repercussions for surrounding countries. It also discusses the wider regional impacts, considering Afghanistan's strategic position in Central Asia and its historical relevance to regional politics.

For close to 20 years, U.S. and NATO personnel were deployed in Afghanistan with the aim of stabilizing the nation, dismantling terrorist organizations, and strengthening Afghan security forces. Despite its numerous shortcomings and the challenge of achieving a comprehensive peace, this military presence provided a façade of security and allowed for some level of governance in the country. However, the exit of U.S. forces in 2021 resulted in a power vacuum that the Taliban quickly exploited, a group that had been combatting the Afghan

government and its international supporters for years. The withdrawal of U.S. forces, in tandem with the pullout of NATO troops and the decreasing presence of international assistance, weakened the fragile administration of Ashraf Ghani and facilitated the Taliban's rapid reestablishment of control over the nation.

The Taliban's resurgence following the U.S. withdrawal was both rapid and violent. Having been expelled from power in 2001 by U.S.-led military operations, the Taliban returned with a significantly fortified presence in the country. The group had spent the intervening years enhancing its military strength, gaining support from certain segments of the Afghan populace, and capitalizing on the central government's vulnerabilities. As the U.S. initiated its withdrawal, the Taliban seized the opportunity presented by the power vacuum to launch a series of swift offensives throughout the country, culminating in their capture of Kabul in August 2021. Their takeover was characterized by a frantic and chaotic evacuation of U.S. and allied foreign nationals from Kabul, alongside countless Afghans seeking to escape the new regime's rule. The rapidity of the Taliban's advance underscored the failure of Afghan security forces, many of whom disintegrated without the backing of U.S. military support and airpower.

This rapid takeover by the Taliban has sparked numerous worries, especially concerning the potential return of the oppressive governance that characterized their previous rule from 1996 to 2001. During that era, the Taliban enforced a stringent interpretation of Islamic law, significantly curtailing the rights of women and minorities while committing widespread human rights violations. Many were apprehensive that the resurgence of the Taliban would indicate a rollback of the progress achieved over the last two decades, especially regarding women's rights, education, and political liberties. Indeed, reports have surfaced indicating that the Taliban has reintroduced policies that restrict the rights of women, such as prohibiting girls from attending secondary school and limiting their capacity to work outside their homes. These developments have elicited widespread condemnation from the international community, yet the Taliban has responded defiantly, invoking cultural and religious justifications for their policies. Beyond the political challenges posed by the Taliban's return, Afghanistan also grapples with serious governance issues. The rapid takeover left the Taliban in command of a politically fragmented, economically distressed country that was heavily dependent on international aid.

The Afghan security forces, despite years of training and substantial financial support

from the international community, proved unable to withstand the Taliban onslaught, highlighting deep-rooted issues of corruption, lack of morale, and inadequate leadership within the Afghan military and government. The return of the Taliban regime had immediate regional implications, especially for neighboring countries like Pakistan, Iran, China, and Central Asian states. Pakistan, which shares a long and porous border with Afghanistan, faced challenges related to border security, refugee influx, and the potential spillover of violence from across the border. The Taliban's takeover also complicated Pakistan's delicate internal security situation, as extremist ideologies gained traction among domestic militant groups inspired by the Taliban's success. Iran, another neighboring country, had concerns about the flow of refugees and the potential increase in drug trafficking following the Taliban's resurgence. Moreover, Iran feared the export of radical Sunni ideologies, which could destabilize its own Shia-majority regions. China, with its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, eyed Afghanistan's strategic location but was wary of security threats emanating from the country. The Taliban's control raised questions about the safety of Chinese investments and infrastructure projects in the region, necessitating a reassessment of China's approach towards Afghanistan. Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, confronted the risk of increased radicalization and the potential spillover of violence and instability. These states, which had experienced the devastating consequences of the Taliban's rule in the 1990s, were understandably apprehensive about the Taliban's return and its potential to export extremist ideologies and unrest across borders.

Moreover, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan raised concerns among NATO allies in Europe. European countries, which had contributed troops to the coalition forces, faced the possibility of a renewed influx of refugees and the potential for terrorist attacks orchestrated or inspired by extremist groups operating in Afghanistan. The refugee crisis strained European countries' resources and tested their ability to manage the humanitarian needs of the displaced populations. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, exacerbated by the Taliban's takeover and the withdrawal of international aid, added another layer of complexity to the regional situation. The Afghan people faced dire conditions, including food shortages, lack of healthcare, and limited access to education. The collapse of the Afghan economy, coupled with severe droughts and the COVID-19 pandemic, pushed millions of Afghans to the brink of starvation. Neighboring countries, already grappling with their internal challenges, struggled to accommodate the

influx of Afghan refugees, further stretching their limited resources. In response to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, the international community faced a moral and strategic dilemma.

Humanitarian organizations scrambled to provide aid to the Afghan people, but the Taliban's restrictions and security concerns hampered their efforts. Diplomatic initiatives aimed at engaging with the Taliban and influencing their behavior encountered skepticism and resistance, given the Taliban's history of oppressive rule and human rights violations. The United Nations and various countries explored avenues to establish dialogue with the Taliban, urging them to respect human rights, ensure inclusivity, and form a representative government. However, the Taliban's actions, including restrictions on women's rights, media censorship, and reprisals against dissent, raised doubts about their willingness to adhere to international norms and standards. The international community's recognition of the Taliban government remained a contentious issue, with divergent views on engagement versus isolation. As the situation in Afghanistan remained fluid and uncertain, regional actors began recalibrating their strategies to adapt to the new reality. Some countries, including China and Russia, cautiously engaged with the Taliban, seeking to protect their interests and prevent the spillover of instability.

The global community has also struggled with the consequences of the U.S. exit from Afghanistan. The Taliban's comeback has sparked discussions about the success of the U.S. and NATO's military intervention, and whether the efforts and sacrifices made over twenty years were ultimately futile. The inability to create a stable, democratic government in Afghanistan has triggered debates regarding the future trajectory of U.S. foreign policy in the area and the wider implications for global security. Although the U.S. and its allies have redirected their attention to countering China and Russia in different regions, the situation in Afghanistan continues to be a major concern for stability in the region. The withdrawal of U.S. troops has also led to a reassessment of the role of international intervention in conflict regions and the difficulties associated with nation-building in post-conflict nations.

The situation in Afghanistan post-withdrawal is still dynamic and unpredictable, with the country confronting significant challenges on numerous fronts. The reemergence of the Taliban has brought Afghanistan back into the global focus, yet the chances for peace, stability, and rebuilding remain ambiguous. The trajectory of the country will largely depend on the Taliban's

ability to manage the intricate political and economic difficulties ahead, along with their openness to engage constructively with the international community. It also relies on Afghanistan's neighboring nations cooperating to tackle the regional consequences of the crisis and to address the emerging refugee and security issues. Ultimately, the lasting effects of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will be felt for many years, and the repercussions for both Afghanistan and the larger region will continue to develop over the coming decades. These countries advocated for a pragmatic approach, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and cooperation with the Taliban-led government while urging the international community to support Afghanistan's reconstruction and development efforts. On the other hand, countries like India, which had historically supported the Afghan government and invested in developmental projects, faced a challenging dilemma. The Taliban's rise raised concerns about the security of Indian investments and the safety of Indian nationals working in Afghanistan. India's traditionally friendly relations with the Afghan people posed a potential obstacle to engaging with the Taliban, given the group's historical animosity towards India. The United States, while no longer directly involved in military operations in Afghanistan, continued to monitor the situation closely. The Biden administration faced criticism for the chaotic manner of the withdrawal and its handling of the Afghan crisis. The U.S. government grappled with finding a balance between humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism efforts, and diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. The U.S. also sought to reassure its allies and partners in the region, emphasizing its commitment to preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorists who could threaten global security. In conclusion, the security situation in Afghanistan after the U.S. pullout had profound and multifaceted regional implications. The rise of the Taliban, the humanitarian crisis, and the challenges faced by neighboring countries underscored the interconnectedness of security in the region. Addressing these challenges required a concerted and coordinated effort from the international community, regional actors, and the Afghan people. A sustainable solution to Afghanistan's security dilemma necessitated a comprehensive approach that prioritized dialogue, diplomacy, and development.

Humanitarian aid and support for the Afghan people were crucial to alleviate their suffering and prevent a further deterioration of living conditions. Diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, while challenging, was essential to influence their behavior, protect human rights, and encourage a more inclusive and representative government. Furthermore, regional cooperation

and dialogue were indispensable in addressing shared security concerns and promoting stability. Countries in the region needed to collaborate on border security, counterterrorism efforts, and managing refugee flows. Building trust and fostering economic interdependence could create incentives for peaceful coexistence and regional stability. The international community, including the United Nations, played a pivotal role in facilitating dialogue, delivering humanitarian aid, and supporting reconstruction efforts. Diplomatic initiatives aimed at bringing together regional stakeholders, international organizations, and the Afghan government were essential to finding common ground and fostering lasting peace. Additionally, addressing the root causes of conflict in Afghanistan, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of education, was fundamental to preventing the resurgence of extremism and violence. Investments in infrastructure, healthcare, and education could create opportunities for the Afghan people, empowering them to shape a more stable and prosperous future. In navigating the complex and evolving security landscape in Afghanistan and the surrounding region, the principles of inclusivity, respect for human rights, and adherence to international norms remained paramount. By upholding these principles and working together collaboratively, the international community and regional actors could contribute to the establishment of a secure, stable, and peaceful Afghanistan, fostering a positive trajectory for the entire region.

The political and strategic landscape in Afghanistan has entered a transformative phase following the key events of 2021, impacting not only the country itself but also the surrounding region. This investigation has thoroughly analyzed the various aspects of these dynamics, uncovering a complex relationship involving domestic governance issues, rivalries among regional powers, and global geopolitical interests. The exit of international forces, along with the Taliban's resurgence, has altered Afghanistan's political environment, creating effects that extend well beyond its borders. The outcomes of this research emphasize the significant regional consequences of these changes, pointing out both the potential opportunities and dangers that lie ahead.

At the core of this examination is the acknowledgment that Afghanistan serves as a geopolitical pivot, a truth reaffirmed by the developments of 2021. The Taliban's return to authority has not only transformed internal governance frameworks but has also shifted the strategic calculations of neighboring countries. Nations such as Pakistan, Iran, China, India, and Russia have each attempted to adapt to these new realities in ways that align with their national

priorities. For example, China's involvement with the Taliban government reflects its broader aspirations under the Belt and Road Initiative, while Pakistan's backing of the Taliban highlights its aim for strategic depth and influence in the area. In contrast, India's careful stance and Russia's cautious strategy demonstrate the inherent uncertainties and risks tied to the new status quo.

The events of 2021 represented a significant turning point in the contemporary history of Afghanistan, fundamentally altering its political landscape and establishing the groundwork for a new era marked by governance, conflict, and regional dynamics. The exit of U.S. and NATO forces, along with the swift downfall of the Afghan National Government, facilitated the Taliban's resurgence, bringing an end to two decades of international involvement and introducing a regime grounded in a strict interpretation of Islamic rule. This shift has far-reaching consequences for Afghanistan's internal politics, its interactions with the global community, and its position within the wider region. This section critically explores the main aspects of this transformation, examining the challenges and opportunities it creates for Afghanistan's future.

The fall of the Afghan National Government in August 2021 represented a pivotal moment in the nation's history, signaling the conclusion of a twenty-year endeavor in state-building and democratic governance. The rapidity and extent of the government's disintegration surprised many, highlighting the frailty of the institutions that had been developed with considerable international assistance. Despite receiving billions in aid and training for hundreds of thousands of Afghan security personnel, the government could not withstand the advance of the Taliban, emphasizing the entrenched challenges of governance, corruption, and legitimacy that had beset the administration.

The government's collapse also highlighted the shortcomings of international intervention, which failed to tackle the underlying causes of instability in Afghanistan. Although the intervention was successful in overthrowing the Taliban regime in 2001 and creating an environment conducive to democratic governance, it did not succeed in establishing a self-sustaining state capable of withstanding internal and external pressures. The dependency on foreign military and financial backing weakened the government's legitimacy and efficacy, making it susceptible to collapse once that support was removed.

The Taliban's takeover in 2021 marked the pinnacle of a two-decade-long insurgency and indicated a significant transformation in Afghanistan's political environment. The group's capacity to take control of the country with relative ease showcased its resilience, adaptability, and entrenched support among certain sections of the population. However, the Taliban's approach to governance, based on a strict interpretation of Islamic law, has struggled to align its ideological commitments with the practical requirements of state management.

One of the most notable elements of the Taliban's resurgence has been its attempts to project an image of stability and authority. The group has aimed to present itself as a legitimate governing body, capable of maintaining order and delivering basic services to the populace. Nevertheless, its policies, especially those affecting women's rights, education, and freedom of expression, have faced extensive criticism from the global community and have alienated substantial portions of the Afghan population. This conflict between ideology and practical governance poses significant implications for Afghanistan's future, as it directly affects the regime's capacity to obtain legitimacy both domestically and internationally.

The Taliban's governance framework has encountered considerable difficulties in the post-2021 period, as the group has wrestled with the numerous challenges facing the nation. The regime's policies regarding women's rights have become a major point of contention, both within the country and on the international stage. The Taliban's limitations on women's participation in education, employment, and public life have attracted widespread disapproval and have impeded the regime's attempts to establish legitimacy.

The Taliban's governance approach has also been defined by a lack of inclusiveness and transparency. The leadership is predominantly comprised of a small group of individuals, many from the group's traditional stronghold in southern Afghanistan, which has sidelined various ethnic and political groups, fueling discontent and opposition. This lack of inclusivity has further restricted the regime's ability to meet the diverse needs and aspirations of the Afghan populace, further weakening its legitimacy.

Human rights issues have drawn significant international scrutiny since the Taliban's return to power. The regime's policies have faced widespread criticism for their effects on women, ethnic minorities, and other vulnerable populations. The global community has urged the Taliban to uphold human rights and the rule of law, but the regime's response has been

uneven. Although there have been some attempts to address these matters, the overall direction has been one of decline, raising serious doubts about the regime's dedication to human rights.

The effects of Afghanistan's political and strategic changes are both short-term and long-term. In the immediate term, the humanitarian disaster, economic breakdown, and security void have paved the way for transnational threats, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and the movement of refugees. These issues have placed tremendous pressure on neighboring countries, intensifying pre-existing tensions and complicating collaborative efforts in the region. The return of groups like ISIS-K and the possibility of Afghanistan becoming a base for militant organizations present substantial threats to regional stability, demanding a coordinated response from regional and international actors alike.

In the longer perspective, the changing dynamics in Afghanistan are expected to significantly alter the regional framework. The Taliban's success in consolidating power and achieving international legitimacy will rely on its ability to tackle governance shortcomings, ensure safety, and interact positively with the global community. However, the regime's ideological inflexibility and track record on human rights, especially concerning women and minorities, remain considerable barriers to its acceptance worldwide. Regional players, for their part, must carefully manage a balance between practical engagement and principled diplomacy, as they aim to safeguard their interests while reducing the risks of instability.

This research has also pointed out the shortcomings of current frameworks for comprehending and addressing the difficulties in Afghanistan. Established paradigms of nation-building and conflict resolution have been inadequate given the country's distinct historical, cultural, and geopolitical situation. Looking ahead, a more nuanced and context-driven strategy is essential, one that emphasizes inclusivity, regional collaboration, and sustainable development. The involvement of multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, will be crucial in promoting dialogue and encouraging collective efforts.

The political and strategic landscape in Afghanistan following 2021 has highlighted the interdependence of domestic and regional factors, emphasizing the necessity for a comprehensive and forward-thinking strategy to tackle the challenges and prospects that lie ahead. Although the road to stability and prosperity in Afghanistan is laden with unpredictability, the lessons

learned from the past and the current necessities call for a renewed dedication to diplomacy, collaboration, and shared accountability. Achieving a sustainable and inclusive future for Afghanistan will necessitate confronting the fundamental causes of instability, such as governance weaknesses, economic disparity, and social division. This will require a collective effort from both the Taliban regime and the international community to foster inclusive governance, uphold human rights, and promote sustainable development. At the same time, regional stakeholders must focus on dialogue and cooperation rather than competition and rivalry, understanding that their collective security and prosperity are closely tied to Afghanistan's stability.

One of the urgent issues facing Afghanistan in the post-2021 period is the need to resolve governance weaknesses. The return of the Taliban to authority has introduced a governance system that is firmly based on a strict interpretation of Islamic law, which has had difficulty balancing ideological commitments with the practical necessities of governance. The regime's policies, particularly in regard to women's rights, education, and freedom of speech, have faced significant criticism from the international community and have marginalized substantial portions of the Afghan populace. This conflict between ideology and practicality carries serious consequences for Afghanistan's future, as it directly affects the regime's capacity to earn legitimacy both within the country and internationally.

To progress towards a sustainable and inclusive future, the Taliban regime must embrace a more adaptable and inclusive governance strategy. This will involve engaging a wider array of Afghan society, including women, ethnic minorities, and civil society organizations, to ensure that the needs and ambitions of all Afghans are considered. The international community, in turn, must play a positive role in backing these initiatives, offering technical support, capacity-building, and financial aid to assist the Taliban regime in establishing effective and accountable institutions. Simultaneously, the international community must hold the Taliban responsible for its pledges regarding human rights and the rule of law, utilizing a mixture of incentives and pressure to inspire constructive change.

Economic disparity is another underlying factor contributing to instability in Afghanistan that needs to be addressed to realize a sustainable and inclusive future. The nation's economy has been spiraling downward since the Taliban regained control, with widespread poverty,

unemployment, and food scarcity impacting millions of Afghans. The humanitarian crisis has worsened due to the freezing of Afghanistan's foreign reserves and the halt of international assistance, leaving the Taliban regime with few resources to meet the population's needs.

To combat economic inequality, the Taliban regime must focus on economic recovery and development, emphasizing job creation, agricultural revitalization, and infrastructure rebuilding. This will require a concerted effort to attract foreign investment and reintegrate Afghanistan into the global economy. Meanwhile, the international community must extend the necessary support to help Afghanistan overcome its economic hurdles, including unfreezing foreign reserves, resuming development assistance, and providing humanitarian aid. Regional players, especially neighboring nations, can also significantly contribute to Afghanistan's economic recovery by enhancing trade, investment, and connectivity.

Social fragmentation continues to be one of the most significant obstacles for Afghanistan, posing a considerable challenge to the attainment of a sustainable and inclusive future for the nation. The country's varied ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities have always played a crucial role in its social makeup, enriching the national identity. Nonetheless, this diversity has also been a source of conflict, division, and tension. The main ethnic groups—namely the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks—have historically held divergent political and social interests, which have been intensified by external forces, internal power struggles, and geopolitical conflicts. The absence of unity among these groups has frequently resulted in cycles of violence, marginalization, and mistrust, especially during periods of political upheaval. Tackling this fragmentation is vital for Afghanistan to progress towards a future that is not only peaceful but also inclusive and sustainable for all its citizens.

The social divisions in Afghanistan are not a recent development; they have been ingrained in the country's political and social history for a long time. From the monarchic era to the advent of communist control, through the civil war of the 1990s, and up until the U.S.- led invasion in 2001, Afghanistan's ethnic and political landscape has been shaped by a complex web of power struggles. During the Soviet occupation and the subsequent civil conflict, numerous factions—often delineated along ethnic lines—vied for dominance over the country's political frameworks, often undermining national cohesion. The Taliban's initial ascent to power in the 1990s can be attributed partly to the disorganized nature of Afghanistan's warlords and their

failure to establish any form of unity. Although the Taliban aimed to enforce a rigid, homogenous interpretation of Islam, their policies frequently marginalized the country's ethnic minorities, particularly the Hazaras, exacerbating the divisions (Giustozzi, 2021).

The rift between ethnic groups continues to endure even in the current scenario of Taliban governance. Afghanistan's population has largely consisted of Pashtuns, and their governance has faced criticism for marginalizing ethnic minorities and worsening social division (Benthall, 2022). This absence of inclusivity, along with the Taliban's continued oppression of women and ethnic groups, has heightened feelings of alienation and unrest among its citizens. The failure to address the genuine political and social grievances of all Afghan ethnic communities has resulted in ongoing tensions, which could further threaten the stability of the nation. These cleavages are not merely internal issues; they carry significant implications for the region, especially concerning Afghanistan's relations with neighboring countries.

Besides internal challenges, Afghanistan's geopolitical context has complicated the pursuit of regional cooperation. Its neighboring countries—especially Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian states—hold competing strategic interests that have often been in conflict. The intricate geopolitical environment of the region has hindered the establishment of a cohesive and coordinated approach to Afghanistan's difficulties. For example, Pakistan has often been accused of backing the Taliban, seeing the group as a strategic partner against Indian influence. On the other hand, Iran has its own agendas in Afghanistan, particularly regarding the protection of its Shia community, and has provided varying types of assistance to Afghan factions (Cunningham & Rassler, 2022). Central Asian nations like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are equally worried about the possible spillover effects of instability from Afghanistan, including the emergence of extremist groups such as Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K), which could pose risks to their own security.

Moreover, Afghanistan's political and security volatility has transformed it into an arena for influence projection by larger global powers, including Russia and the United States. Both of these countries have strategic interests in the area, though often with conflicting priorities. While the U.S. and NATO have concentrated on counterterrorism strategies and democracy promotion, Russia has voiced concerns about the growth of radicalism and has sought to exert influence in Afghanistan through diplomatic and military channels. These conflicting interests

among global and regional powers complicate the potential for cooperation and hinder the creation of a unified strategy to tackle Afghanistan's issues (Khan, 2022).

Notwithstanding these geopolitical tensions, there is an increasing acknowledgment that regional collaboration is essential for stabilizing Afghanistan and addressing the wider problems of social disintegration and conflict. Afghanistan's neighbors must prioritize dialogue and cooperation over rivalry and competition. Accomplishing this necessitates a significant change in how regional actors engage with Afghanistan. Rather than viewing one another solely through a competitive lens, there should be a focus on common interests, such as counterterrorism, economic stability, and the containment of extremism. These shared objectives could serve as a basis for collaboration, even among nations with otherwise differing political aspirations.

Building trust among Afghanistan's neighboring countries will be a crucial step in enhancing regional collaboration. In order to establish this trust, it is important for these regional actors to participate in sincere discussions and demonstrate a shared accountability for Afghanistan's future. This involves not only addressing their individual national security issues but also recognizing the wider social and political challenges within Afghanistan that have been sources of conflict for many years. Tackling the social divisions in Afghanistan requires not only an internal resolution but also a regional approach, where neighboring nations actively contribute to fostering peace, reconciliation, and inclusive governance.

Multilateral entities, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the United Nations (UN), can play a significant role in promoting dialogue and encouraging collaborative efforts. The SCO, which consists of China, Russia, and various Central Asian states, could act as a forum for regional collaboration on security, economic growth, and political stability in Afghanistan. The organization has already shown interest in stabilizing the country and curbing the spread of terrorism, positioning it as a useful platform for cooperation. Likewise, the UN, with its extensive resources and global influence, can assist in initiatives aimed at building trust among Afghanistan's neighbors and supporting multilateral discussions. Additionally, the UN's efforts in providing humanitarian assistance and backing development initiatives can further address Afghanistan's internal social fragmentation by fostering a sense of unity and collective progress (UN, 2022).

The international community, including regional powers, must also confront the fundamental causes of conflict in Afghanistan, which are closely linked to governance, inclusivity, and social justice issues. This entails prioritizing actions that engage all ethnic and political groups in the decision-making process of governance, ensuring that no community is sidelined or excluded. By endorsing an inclusive political structure, Afghanistan's neighbors can contribute to establishing a more stable and cohesive nation. Furthermore, addressing the economic and humanitarian crises, which particularly affect marginalized groups, can alleviate social tensions and encourage a sense of shared responsibility and unity among the Afghan populace.

The international community has an essential responsibility in aiding Afghanistan's journey towards a sustainable and inclusive future. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021 concluded a two-decade military intervention that had significant repercussions for both Afghanistan and the surrounding region. Although the intervention did not meet its declared goals, it also underscored the limitations of external involvement and the difficulties of state-building in complex and contested situations.

Following the global withdrawal from Afghanistan, the difficulties confronting the nation have become increasingly evident, necessitating a sophisticated and context-specific approach from the international community. The resurgence of the Taliban has brought forth a variety of new political, economic, and social challenges, all of which require a careful and knowledgeable response. The global community must maneuver through a complicated environment, balancing engagement with the Taliban regime while making sure they are held responsible for their commitments related to human rights, governance, and the rule of law. This equilibrium is particularly critical given the Taliban's historical pattern of human rights abuses, particularly with regard to women and minority groups. Although the international community cannot overlook these issues, it also bears the responsibility to assist Afghanistan during its crisis, providing humanitarian assistance and aiding in the nation's economic recovery.

A key concern is the escalating humanitarian crisis, which has intensified following the Taliban's takeover and the subsequent halt of international aid. The United Nations has alerted us to an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe, with millions of Afghans experiencing extreme food shortages, inadequate healthcare, and displacement. The economy has been

plummeting, leading to soaring unemployment, widespread poverty, and a severely damaged infrastructure. These circumstances have rendered Afghan civilians susceptible to exploitation, with the most vulnerable groups—including women, children, and ethnic minorities—bearing the brunt of the suffering. The international community must intervene to deliver vital assistance, but this aid must be distributed in a manner that ensures it reaches those in greatest need and does not inadvertently reinforce a regime that has demonstrated minimal dedication to human rights or democratic principles.

In addition to humanitarian support, the global community also needs to aid Afghanistan's economic recovery. The country's dependence on foreign aid prior to the Taliban's takeover means that the sudden halt of international assistance has triggered an economic crisis. Afghanistan's banking system is chaotic, foreign assets are frozen, and critical sectors like agriculture, education, and healthcare are near collapse. Revitalizing Afghanistan's economy will necessitate a comprehensive strategy that includes reestablishing access to global financial systems, encouraging domestic industries, and offering technical support for governance and infrastructure development. A long-term economic recovery plan must be established with an emphasis on sustainable development, job creation, and poverty reduction, all while promoting accountability and transparency.

Creating a sustainable and inclusive future for Afghanistan involves numerous challenges, many of which are deeply rooted. The political instability, widespread corruption, and historical ethnic and tribal divisions present significant obstacles that must be addressed any meaningful progress. Furthermore, the lack of a cohesive governance model under the Taliban complicates the identification of clear paths forward. The leadership of the Taliban remains predominantly composed of Pashtun figures, and many ethnic and religious minorities feel sidelined from the political discourse, which only exacerbates tensions in the nation. For Afghanistan to thrive, it is crucial that the Taliban strive for an inclusive political framework that honors the rights and contributions of all ethnic groups. This will necessitate dialogue with opposition groups, the inclusion of women in political activities, and a dedication to maintaining the principles of justice and human dignity. A vital takeaway from Afghanistan's history is the necessity for inclusive governance. Previous efforts at building the state in Afghanistan, particularly after the Taliban's fall in 2001, faltered partly due to neglecting the country's ethnic diversity and the importance of broad political representation. While the international

community concentrated on forming a centralized Western-style government, it failed to consider the complex social dynamics of the nation. For the future of Afghanistan to be inclusive, it is imperative to ensure that every ethnic and political faction has representation in the decision-making process, and that the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups are safeguarded. This strategy is crucial not only for fostering national unity but also for averting further fragmentation and conflict in the future.

Alongside tackling internal governance challenges, the global community must also prioritize regional collaboration. The security and stability of Afghanistan are closely linked to the well-being of its neighboring countries, and regional partnerships will be vital for achieving lasting peace. Nations like Pakistan, Iran, China, and the Central Asian republics all possess strategic interests in Afghanistan, and their engagement will be critical for stabilizing the nation. However, these countries have historically adopted competitive strategies, often perceiving Afghanistan as a battleground for rivalry instead of collaboration. To mitigate this, the international community must encourage dialogue between regional stakeholders and motivate them to pursue common objectives. Creating a cooperative framework to address issues like counterterrorism, economic development, and migration will be essential for promoting regional stability.

International organizations such as the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can play a key role in fostering regional cooperation. These bodies can provide platforms for conversation and offer support for diplomatic efforts focused on easing tensions and encouraging collaboration. The SCO could act as a platform for China, Russia, and Central Asian nations to align their efforts regarding Afghanistan, especially in relation to security and economic development. The United Nations, due to its extensive mandate and resources, could take on a pivotal role in delivering humanitarian assistance, aiding the reconstruction of Afghan institutions, and advocating for inclusive governance.

In the end, Afghanistan's future is closely linked to the stability and security of the surrounding region. Neglecting to engage with Afghanistan in a constructive and holistic way could lead to serious repercussions, not just for the nation itself but also for its neighboring countries and the global community overall. Afghanistan has been a hotspot of conflict and instability for many years, and while the journey towards peace and prosperity will be challenging and lengthy, it is not impossible. The international community must sustain its dedication to

Afghanistan's transition, backing the nation's efforts to rebuild institutions, stabilize its economy, and promote inclusive governance. The risks associated with abandoning Afghanistan at this pivotal moment are too substantial to overlook, and the potential benefits of a peaceful, stable Afghanistan could offer significant advantages for the region and beyond.

A concerted and unified international initiative will be essential in assisting Afghanistan to address its difficulties. The country's social divisions, political unrest, and humanitarian challenges will not be resolved in a short time, but through ongoing diplomatic efforts, economic assistance, and regional collaboration, the vision of Afghanistan evolving from a source of instability into a pillar of hope and resilience is attainable. The international community must heed the lessons of the past, dedicating itself to a long-term strategy that emphasizes peace, inclusivity, and shared accountability. Only then can Afghanistan progress toward a future characterized by stability, prosperity, and peace in a tumultuous region.

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