

Post-Event Report

INTERNATIONAL ROUNDTABLE CONFERENCE
IDENTIFYING PATHWAYS AND INTERFACES FOR **ENGAGEMENT IN**
AFGHANISTAN

APRIL 27, 2023
ISLAMABAD

JOINLY ORGANIZED BY



Centre for Stabilisation at the Royal Danish Defence College's (RDDC) Institute for Strategy and War Studies (ISW), Denmark.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) and Centre for Stabilisation (CFS) at the Royal Danish Defence College's (RDDC) Institute for Strategy and War Studies (ISW), Denmark, jointly organized an international roundtable conference on April 27, 2023 in Islamabad at the Serena Hotel. The roundtable applied strict Chatham House Rules, for which reason no specific argument or remark can be attributed to the individual participants.

The conference provided valuable insights into the complex internal and external dynamics of Afghanistan, particularly the Taliban's governance and the challenges faced by the international community in engaging with them. Key findings include:

1. *Afghanistan's relationship with neighbouring countries:* Afghanistan's complex ethnic composition and its relationships with neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, Iran, and China, have significant implications for its stability. While Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan has been marked by missed opportunities for cooperation, China has shown interest in jointly countering the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and investing in economic development in Afghanistan. Although trade with Iran has declined, and skirmishes occur at the border, Tehran still remains an important neighbour. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have capitalized on economic opportunities, while Tajikistan remains concerned about the spread of extremism.
2. *Post-regional engagement with the Taliban:* The United States holds considerable economic influence in Afghanistan and collaborates with the Taliban on security and intelligence matters. That engagement can be expanded. Russia seeks better relations with the Taliban but focuses more on diplomatic engagement rather than economic support. The Taliban's aspiration for recognition from the international community and the United States in particular provides an opportunity to engage them and negotiate on certain issues. Whether this can also include issues of high political sensitivity, such as women's rights and inclusive governance, seems unlikely.
3. *Challenges faced by the Taliban government:* The Taliban's strengths lie in assuring peace, maintaining unity, and maintaining 'relative stability' across the country. However, challenges include the lack of international recognition, sustained economic crisis, delay in creating a safe environment for female education and employment, and providing basic services for the Afghan population. The Taliban also face resistance from armed groups, including the National Resistance Front (NRF) and the Islamic State of the Khorasan Province (ISKP).
4. *International engagement short of recognition:* Unlike the Taliban government's previous tenure, especially regional and neighbouring countries, but also few states from the wider international community, are increasingly engaging with the Taliban without extending formal recognition. Many countries have reopened embassies in Kabul and the number of countries handing over Afghan diplomatic missions to Taliban appointed officials is increasing. Currently being the only available option in Afghanistan the world has no choice but to engage with the Taliban.
5. *Pathways for constructive engagement:* Constructive engagement with the Taliban requires a multifaceted approach, understanding their policy-making drivers, and learning from past engagement experiences. It is crucial to go beyond security concerns and address economic development, poverty eradication, and access to frozen assets. In short, when outlining an engagement strategy, it would be beneficial to focus on non-salient policy areas. Regional cooperation and a larger regional framework are important for accountability and counterterrorism efforts.

In conclusion, the conference shed light on the complexities of engaging with the Taliban and finding pathways for constructive engagement in Afghanistan. The speakers emphasized the need for a patient, creative and nuanced approach that considers the political reality in Afghanistan, the policy objectives of the Taliban, and the regional dynamics. Continued dialogue, accountability, and a focus on non-salient issues such as economic development and counterterrorism efforts are key elements for successful engagement in Afghanistan.

The conference was financed by the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund as part of the Afghanistan-Pakistan programme managed by the Royal Danish Defence College.¹

¹. For more about the work of the Royal Danish Defence College in Afghanistan and Pakistan, please contact Special Advisor, Jens Mathiesen (jema@fak.dk).

SESSION 1

TALIBAN'S RELATIONS – FRIENDS AND FOES BOTH STATE AND NON-STATE

The situation in Afghanistan presents a complex web of internal and external dynamics, posing significant challenges for understanding the Taliban. This is also an issue of ethnic fractions cutting across state borders. More Pashtuns live in Pakistan than in Afghanistan and more Tajiks live in Afghanistan than in Tajikistan. Similarly, there are Uzbek, Turkmen and Hazara ethnic segments who have interlinkages with different neighbouring countries.

One aspect of this complexity lies in Afghanistan's relationship with neighbouring Pakistan, which has been accident-prone and marked by missed opportunities for cooperation. Taliban's coming into power could not address the prevailing mistrust between the two countries. Similarly, Iran adopts a multifaceted approach towards Afghanistan, supporting various factions and presenting a challenge for Afghanistan's management of its relations with its western neighbour.

China's interest in Afghanistan centres around countering the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and fostering economic development through significant investments in, among other areas, the mining industry. China has not only built trust but also effectively managed to address the issue of ETIM by convincing Taliban to relocate Uighur fighters away from provinces near China.

In contrast to the past, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have capitalized on economic opportunities and tried to maintain positive relations with the Taliban government. However, Tajikistan, while advocating for greater representation of Tajik population in the governance structure, sees Taliban government as a long-term threat as it fears that their presence as the government of Afghanistan may spread extremism in its own society. Despite the violent history of Tajikistan and the Taliban, there has been some improvement in the relations, as the Tajik government have handed over one of the consulates to Taliban appointed diplomats in March 2023.

The United States, a significant player in Afghanistan, holds considerable economic influence and collaborates with the Taliban on security and intelligence matters. Notably, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has developed better relations with Taliban intelligence. 40 million dollars per week are injected by the US into the Afghan economy that has kept it afloat and helped stabilize the Afghani from depreciation. The US's approach is still 'security centric' rather than engaging Taliban on a larger canvas.

Russia is very keen on establishing better relations with the Taliban government and has played a positive role in helping Taliban improve their relations with other Central Asian countries including Tajikistan. However, Moscow believes that reconstruction and rehabilitation of the country is primarily a job of the United States and the West who they claim to be wholly responsible for creating the situation. Russia has not recognized the Taliban government, but are engaging diplomatically. Besides this, Russia is to a lesser extent involved on the economic front, albeit reports of oil and gas deals have surfaced.

The presence of militant groups - some labelled as terrorist organizations - further complicates the situation in Afghanistan while exacerbating existing challenges. The most prominent groups are 1) the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and 2) the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).² As a result of the close relationship between the Taliban and the TTP, they also helped facilitate a ceasefire between TTP and Pakistani government in June 2022. 3) The Islamic State of the Khorasan Province (ISKP) is the only group posing a significant threat to the Taliban as they have been conducting a number of deadly attacks in 2022. As a response, the Taliban has conducted several counter-terror raids on ISKP hideouts limiting the terrorist activities in 2023. Finally, there is 4) Al-Qaeda which has a very

².Both ETIM and TTP are groups to which the Taleban has made pledges to China and Pakistan in May 2023 to deny access to their territory. See:

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202305/30509_11073522.html

limited presence in Afghanistan, but also has close relations to the Haqqani-faction of the Taliban.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA)³ worked hard to establish foreign relations across three categories of states: 1) regional and neighbouring countries, 2) the Islamic world, and 3) western countries and international institutions. The scope and ambition of these relationships varies significantly across the categories.

The IEA enjoys good relationships with regional states: China, Russia, Iran, and most Central Asian countries. As 'frontline'-states the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan pursue a certain level of pragmatism in their engagement. Looking at the wider Islamic world, some progress has been made with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but the relationship with Saudi Arabia remains limited. Qatar has assumed a special role as the mediating state providing a political neutral ground for the Doha negotiations. In May 2023, reports surfaced that the Qatari prime minister met with Emir Haibatullah Akhunzada, indicating the Qatar is leveraging this position. Regarding the international community, and Western countries, some progress has been made with the United States and some of the countries of the European Union (EU). However, this remains very limited as Western states has mostly pursued an approach characterized by non-engagement or even outright isolation.

Unlike their previous tenure, the Taliban have managed to garner more functional relationships and some level of acceptability in the international community. While the level of international engagement has steadily increased since August 2021, the interim Afghan government is still largely isolated from the international community.

Understanding the Taliban's aspirations for recognition from or at least enhanced diplomatic relations with the United States is crucial. Combining strict Islamic principles with relations with the West poses a significant challenge for the group. Surprisingly, there was an initial tolerance by the Taliban as they had neither shut down girls' education nor private TV channels immediately after August 2021. This indicates that an opportunity of a constructive dialogue was missed in the initial phase. It is inherently difficult to obtain concrete knowledge about the Taliban's priorities in terms of external relations. However, their aspiration to enhance engagement with the West and the US can be utilized to engage them on various topics.

Engagement with the Taliban calls for nuanced and direct approaches, avoiding assumptions fuelled by social media and disinformation. Pragmatism, patience, and a genuine willingness to understand and engage with Afghanistan is key to these approaches. Likewise, it must be noted that the Taliban are sensitive towards criticism for which reason diplomatic communication must be carefully outlined.

IEA/Taliban have not declared any country as their enemy while currently no country has also declared them as its enemy. Similarly, Taliban could not find any friendly country too. There are varying degree of engagements by different countries and international organizations presuming that currently Taliban is the only option left to deal with.

The speakers highlighted the importance of engagement on broader issues rather than focusing on selective demands. They emphasized the need for flexibility and persuasion on both sides to show greater accommodation and move forward. It was repeatedly proposed by the speakers to increase engagement and dialogue with the Taliban, and even consider recognition, as this can induce progress and entail mutual benefits.

³.The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), the Interim Afghan Government (IAG) or the Taliban regime/ government are all used interchangeable in this report as describing the current government in Afghanistan (post-august 2021). Please note, that when using the Taliban's self-titled 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', this is not a matter of 'recognition', 'normalisation' or 'legitimizing' the Taliban government, but simply an analytical descriptor.

SESSION 2

UNDERSTANDING THE INTERIM AFGHAN GOVERNMENTS'S INTRA-GROUP DYNAMICS AND THEIR AMBITIONS AND GOALS

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan possesses certain strengths and weaknesses. Some of its strengths include assuring relative peace throughout the country, achieving internal obedience within its affairs, and maintaining unity within the government. Additionally, Afghanistan has become less dependent on external financial support, relying more on internal sources of revenue. The interim government also states that it asserts full control over the entire country, eliminating financial and administrative corruption.

However, the IEA faces several challenges. One panellist stated that one significant challenge is the lack of recognition by the international community. Other panellists argued, that delays in creating a safe environment for girls' education and employment have also been observed to hinder progress. It was noted that the IEA has not properly utilized existing capacities to strengthen domestic trust and confidence. This is also a matter of the IEA not sharing power or government with other factions, potentially leading to political tensions. Furthermore, issues like poverty and unemployment persist within the country.

Despite disagreements over the level of so-called internal divide within Taliban, the speakers generally argued that this is in fact not serious enough at the moment to result in any sort of collapse in the foreseeable future. There are indeed divisions in approaches as well as struggles for more power in the Taliban organization, however, the Emir Mullah Haibatullah is the most powerful person and unity of command is strictly adhered in the Taliban movement. Some speakers also suggested that the narrative of 'internal divisions', which is typically circulated in Western media and intelligentsia, can bear negative consequences, as it is sometimes confused with official diplomatic statements and policies of foreign governments.

The IEA faces challenges from armed groups that continue to fight against them. This also includes opposition groups such as the National Resistance Front (NRF) and Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF). Notably, some former commanders of the armed forces of the previous Afghan republic have also joined the fight against the Taliban. ISKP being the biggest challenge is posing serious concerns for the Taliban as well as for the regional and international stakeholders. However, the presence of ISKP also provides Taliban to get more assistance and cooperation from regional and international players such as the US, Russia, Iran and Pakistan. The Taliban have initially gained the upper hand in fighting against all these groups, which has brought a level of relative peace and stability to Afghanistan.

To address the situation, it is imperative to seize the current opportunity of relative peace in Afghanistan. This can be achieved by bringing together sincere and experienced Afghan political and ethnic leaders to lead the country towards permanent peace and economic development. The support, motivation, and encouragement of neighboring countries play a crucial role in realizing this objective. The Afghan people, who abhor war, urge the Islamic Emirate to assist them and implement necessary reforms within their system.

The internal resistance, including the NRF and AFF, against the Taliban is fragmented and lacks a common agenda. Some speakers argued, that the absence of a comprehensive and inclusive political solution and pluralistic political setup in Afghanistan is seen as one of the legacies of the Doha-agreement and therefore a significant mistake made by the West. Some speakers argued against imposing Western agendas on the Taliban and noted that their policy on human rights will remain ultraconservative. However, variations can be observed in the implementation of their policies, particularly regarding education for girls and treatment of minorities. The IEA is unlikely to succumb to

sanctions and threats of isolation, and might be further inclined to embrace their current trajectory if this pressure continues.

The political structure of Afghanistan is significantly influenced by its geographical, political, and cultural environment. Afghanistan faces various economic challenges, including widespread poverty, lack of a comprehensive economic development model, and persistent corruption. Politically, the country must navigate interactions with foreign actors while establishing a stable governance structure, which puts certain limits on the scope and ambition of foreign engagements.

Some speakers also suggested that the international community should identify and engage with moderate elements within the Taliban to influence and reform the movement. They mentioned the importance of intelligence gathering to distinguish between different Taliban factions and their affiliations with transnational extremist movements. However, some speakers suggested to approach the Taliban through official diplomatic channels as the de facto government in Afghanistan and establishing communication with them, acknowledging the reality of their control. They suggested avoiding the pursuit of specific moderate groups within the Taliban, as it could further complicate the situation.

Some speakers argued that there is an unnecessary obsession with understanding the differences within the Taliban. They suggested that if a significant percentage of the Taliban supports girls' education, it could be seen as a positive sign. They expressed hope that those in favour will outweigh the minority opposing education for girls. There was a general disagreement among the speakers to what degree the population supports the ultraconservative policies of Taliban, especially those regarding women. This question is also important for the Taliban government, as they need the support of the conservative “fighters”, who may go and support ISKP if the Taliban is not conservative or fundamentalist enough.

Speakers expressed different points of view regarding input about whether and how the Taliban are able to assess the ‘public pulse’ – i.e. the public opinion of the Afghan people. One speaker argued that there is no systematic way for the Taliban to gauge the public pulse while the other replied that information is brought forward from foot soldiers, mosque sermons, and local intelligence. The speakers also differed on whether the public pulse reflect in the decision

SESSION 3

IDENTIFYING PATHWAYS FOR ENGAGEMENT: LINES OF CONFLICT AND RECONCILIATION

The speeches delivered by the four speakers touched upon various aspects of engaging with the Taliban and finding pathways for constructive engagement in Afghanistan. While each speaker had their own perspective, several common themes emerged from their discussions.

Firstly, there was a consensus among the speakers that engaging with the Taliban requires a multifaceted approach grounded in both the political reality and policy objectives of the international community. This approach entails understanding the Taliban's policy-making drivers, such as implementing Sharia law and maintaining organizational cohesion, while acknowledging their aspirations for international legitimacy and potential for policy moderation over time.

The speakers also highlighted the importance of learning from past engagement experiences. Lessons included avoiding punitive actions and pressure that may entrench the Taliban's positions, helping the Taliban familiarize themselves with international diplomacy to manage expectations, and recognizing the slower timelines and internal constraints the Taliban faces in policy-making.

Furthermore, the speakers emphasized the need for a way forward in engaging with the Taliban. This includes building a constructive and cooperative relationship, initiating consultations, understanding the limitations and constraints faced by the Taliban, and expanding engagement beyond security to address issues like the economy and employment opportunities.

They stressed the importance of demonstrating readiness to work with the Taliban and engaging in sincere cooperation. This can be achieved by going beyond security and political matters and focusing on economic development and poverty eradication. Continued dialogue and patience were seen as crucial elements in the engagement process.

Additionally, the speakers highlighted the significance of regional cooperation and a larger regional framework in engaging with the Taliban. This approach consolidates bilateral engagements and holds the Taliban accountable on various fronts, including counterterrorism. Counterterrorism efforts were stressed as vital and not to be overshadowed by other concerns, as they contribute to overall security and progress in other areas.

In summary, the speakers provided insights into the complexities of engaging with the Taliban, stressing the need for a comprehensive and nuanced approach grounded in understanding the political reality and policy objectives. They emphasized the importance of learning from past experiences, focusing on regional cooperation, and addressing issues beyond security to foster constructive engagement in Afghanistan.

ANNEXTURE 1 FULL LIST OF PANELLISTS AND MODERATORS

The list of participants and moderators are randomized, and does not reflect the order of the sessions.



Major General
Muhammad Saad
Khattak (Rrd)
Chairman PICSS



Ambassador
Muhammad Sadiq (Rtd)
Former Pakistani Special
Envoy for Afghanistan



Mr. Jens Vesterlund
Mathiesen, Special
Consultant, Royal Danish
Defence College (RDDC)



Ms. Bette Dam, Author
and Journalist



Mr. Abdullah Khan
Managing Director PICSS



Ambassador Ayaz Wazir
(retd.), a career
diplomat



Mr. Salman Javed,
Director General Pak
Afghan Youth Forum
(PAYF)



Mr. Ziaullah Amerkhail,
Former Governor
Nangarhar, Afghanistan



Ms. Amina Khan,
Director of the Centre
for Afghanistan, Middle
East and Africa (CAMEA)
at the Institute for
Strategic Studies
Islamabad (ISSI)



Mr. Hujjatullah
Mujadidi, head of the
Afghan independent
journalist association
Afghanistan



Dr. Abdul Latif Nazari,
Deputy Minister of
Economy in the current
Afghan administration



Mr. Pinda Khan Hikmat,
Chairman of the Ulema
Coordination
Commission of the High
Council of National
Reconciliation



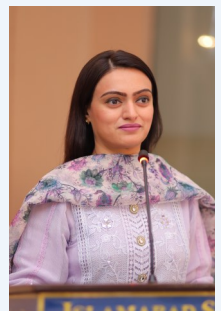
Mr. Douglas Tripp Copeland, former
analyst at the US Department of Defence
(DOD) and State Department



Ms. Mona Sheikh, Senior
Researcher at the Danish
Institute for
International Studies

ANNEXTURE 2

PICTORIAL HIGHLIGHTS OF RTC



ANNEXTURE 3

PICTORIAL HIGHLIGHTS OF POST EVENT DINNER

