

# Mantraya



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## Annual Report 2022-23

Policy Briefs, Analyses, Occasional Papers,  
and Voices from the Region

# Policy Briefs, Analyses, Occasional Papers, and Voices from the Region

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## Limits of Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy

SHANTHIE MARIET D'SOUZA

### ABSTRACT

*The Afghan Taliban are seemingly breaking free from their former sponsors. They have refused to accept the Durand Line as the international border with Pakistan and have failed to force the TTP to give up its violent attacks in Pakistan. Islamabad's attempt to weaken the Taliban by driving a wedge between the hardliners' and pragmatists' camps has not succeeded. This compels Pakistan to reconsider its Afghan policy, seeking ways to mend fences with Kabul.*



Pakistan's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar concluded a one-day trip to Kabul on 29 November 2022, Image Courtesy: Dawn)

Pakistan's Afghanistan policy is navigating rough waters. The patron-client relationship with the Afghan Taliban, envisioned by the Pakistani military establishment, was intended to create a weak state in Afghanistan and at the same time, allow Islamabad to regain the 'strategic depth' in that country. Post-August 2021, the Taliban, however, have not only failed to deliver on the expectations of Islamabad but have actually turned on their former sponsors. Despite the latter's attempts of weakening the Taliban through fissures and factions, the divisions between the hardliners (Kandahar shura) and pragmatists (Doha shura) have not made many dents on the movement and more importantly, their view on contentious issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is now up to Islamabad to unveil other strategies to ensure that its decades-long investment in the former insurgency does not go astray.

Taliban's intransigence towards its sponsors is evident in their refusal to accept the Durand Line as the international border and continuously opposing attempts to fence the border between the two countries. The escalating border skirmishes have resulted in the killing of several Pakistani personnel by the Taliban fighters, a development which is entirely unimaginable prior to August 2021. The latest clashes occurred on 18 November at the Spin Boldak-Chaman

crossing in the Afghan province of Paktia, leaving one Pakistani border guard dead. Reports from the field indicate an increasing number of such clashes.

The other serious lapse is on Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has around 5000 to 10000 fighters in Afghan territory.<sup>[2]</sup> Islamabad had hoped that the Afghan Taliban would reign in or influence the TTP to agree to a peace deal. In the initial days, the Haqqani Network did try to broker a deal between the Pakistani state and the TTP. However, that deal as well as the one made in June this year has not lasted. On 28 November, the TTP called off the ceasefire and directed its fighters to resume attacks on the Pakistani state. Thereafter, the first suicide attack by the TTP in Balochistan on 30 November targeted security personnel guarding polio workers and killed three people<sup>[3]</sup>.

The TTP's violence is clearly on the rise and in recent times has resulted in high-profile attacks including the attack on the counter-terrorism centre in Bannu.<sup>[4]</sup> Its potential, vide its sanctuaries in Afghanistan, remains more or less intact, giving it a remote control of sorts to increase or decrease the level of violence at the time of its own choosing. According to The Khorasan Diary, a Pakistan-based news and research organization, the group has claimed 267 attacks in Pakistan between September 2021 and April 2022, including 42 in January and 54 in April.<sup>[5]</sup> An Islamabad-based think tank has also reported a 50 percent surge in terror attacks in Pakistan in the year since the Taliban took over Afghanistan.<sup>[6]</sup> The Pakistan military has relied on the Afghan Taliban to curb the TTP's violence potential or to make it amenable for a peace deal. Neither has been fulfilled. Pakistan's Prime Minister's statement describing Afghanistan as a safe haven for terror groups that has miffed the Taliban is only a desperate expression of frustration.

By refusing to accept the sanctity of the Durand line and Pakistani attempts to fence the border, the Taliban are asserting their idea of sovereignty. In addition, in their symbiotic relationship with the TTP that runs both at the ideological, ethnic, and operational levels, they find a tactical pressure point to limit Islamabad's control over Kabul. Neither is acceptable to Islamabad, which unfortunately is running out of its cards. It had hoped that the Haqqanis would be more amenable to maintaining their subservient ties with Islamabad. However, the recent developments have underlined the former's unwillingness to rock the boat of the Islamic Emirate. The hardliners and the pragmatists within the Taliban, for the time being, appear more focused on fighting common adversaries, i.e. the Islamic State's Khorasan Province, and the resistance groups; and working towards a common goal, i.e. seeking global legitimacy. The disinclination of Islamabad, which maintains its embassy in the country with a handful of other countries, to formally recognize the Taliban regime has not helped its own cause.

However, Islamabad is under no illusion that its 'strategic depth' in its original form is unachievable under the circumstances. In its conceptual form, it mostly meant subordinating Afghanistan for the purpose of Pakistan using its territory for a military redoubt in the event of being overrun by India in a conflict. Given the development of the last three decades, Islamabad can at best hope to have a friendly/cooperative regime in Kabul, nothing more.

On 29 November, Pakistan rushed its deputy foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar to Kabul for a day-long visit. Although the purpose of the visit was notified as a 'range of bilateral issues of common interest' by the Pakistani foreign office, smoothening the bilateral relationship and removing the irritants is high on Islamabad's agenda.<sup>[7]</sup> She held talks with some of the regime's top ministers and met office-bearers of a women's business forum. Afghan media reported that Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob rejected Pakistan's request to meet with Ms. Khar.<sup>[8]</sup> Earlier in August 2022, Yaqoob had said that American drones entered Afghanistan's airspace from Pakistan.<sup>[9]</sup>

The Afghan Taliban are clearly looking for avenues for image makeover to gain legitimacy not only internationally but also inside the country. This is crucial as the regime refuses to compromise on its hardcore ideology, which has resulted in decisions such as banning women from attending universities.<sup>[10]</sup> Its Pakistan policy, on the other hand, demonstrates that they are eager to shake off the image of being stooges of Pakistan. The outreach to India, especially Mullah Yaqoob's request for India's assistance to train troops in India<sup>[11]</sup>, is another indicator of how the Taliban are trying to show independence from Pakistan. Opposing the Durand line may also help them further stoke the dream of Pashtunistan, a clear shot in their arms to gain domestic legitimacy, particularly among the Pushtuns. The subsequent developments pose a significant security and foreign policy challenge for Islamabad. The coming months would demonstrate how it plans to reset the ties to its advantage before it is a little too late.

## END NOTES

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<sup>[2]</sup> “Pakistan Says TTP Militants Upto 10,000 In Border Region With Afghanistan”, *Outlook*, 29 December 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/international/pakistan-says-ttp-militants-upto-10-000-in-border-region-with-afghanistan-news-249152>.

<sup>[3]</sup> “Pakistan Taliban claim suicide blast killing 3, injuring 28”, *The Hindu*, 30 November 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-taliban-claim-suicide-blast-killing-3-injuring-23/article66203980.ece>.

<sup>[4]</sup> “Hostages taken at Pakistan counterterrorism centre seized by TTP”, *Al Jazeera*, 19 December 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/19/hostages-taken-at-pakistan-counterterrorism-centre-seized-by-ttp>.

<sup>[5]</sup> “Pakistan Saw 51% Rise in Terrorist Attacks in Year Since Taliban Took Over Afghanistan: Report”, *The Wire*, 21 October 2022, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/pakistan-saw-51-rise-in-terrorist-attacks-in-year-since-taliban-took-over-afghanistan-report>.

<sup>[6]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[7]</sup> “Khar, Taliban leadership discuss security issues and economic cooperation in wide-ranging talks”, *Dawn*, 29 November 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1723818>.

<sup>[8]</sup> “Afghan defence minister Mullah Yaqoob refuses to meet Khar?”, *Daily Times*, 30 November 2022, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1033565/afghan-defence-minister-mullah-yaqoob-refuses-to-meet-khar/>.

<sup>[9]</sup> “Taliban accuses Pakistan of allowing US drones in Afghan airspace”, *Al Jazeera*, 28 August 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/28/taliban-accuses-pakistan-of-allowing-us-drones-in-afghan-airspace>.

<sup>[10]</sup> “Taliban says women banned from universities in Afghanistan”, *Al Jazeera*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/20/taliban-says-women-banned-from-universities-in-afghanistan>.

<sup>[11]</sup> “Taliban willing to send Afghan troops to India for training: Mullah Yaqoob”, *News 18*, 2 June 2022, <https://www.news18.com/news/world/great-expectations-of-india-gave-crucial-help-in-past-afghan-defence-minister-to-news18-global-exclusive-5292811.html>.

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## MANTRAYA POLICY BRIEF#44: 28 DECEMBER 2022

# Myanmar in 2022: Future of the Opposition’s Armed Uprising

BIBHU PRASAD ROURAY

### ABSTRACT

*The bloody war of the Myanmar military unleashed on the civilian PDFs and the ethnic armed organisations continues to claim lives daily. The opposition’s violent resistance, centred around restoring democracy, although impressive thus far, needs external support to succeed.*



## **A Bloody War on the People**

Myanmar continued to witness a bloody civil war situation throughout 2022. Since the February 2021 coup, at least 2,641 people<sup>14</sup> have been killed by the military junta in its attempt to stabilise the country and silence the opposition. Another 16,592 people have been detained. The opposition too has claimed to have killed hundreds of the junta soldiers and sympathisers. The junta has responded to the determination shown by the Opposition by launching an unrelenting phase of violence. It has repeatedly vowed to crush the ‘terrorism’ unleashed by the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs) and the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). While the obligation of the regime to protect its interests is understandable, the level of motivation of the opposition in the face of a virulent scorched earth policy pursued by the military and the longevity of the resistance need contextual understanding.

### **Motivation**

The motivation to keep the banner of uprising flying seems to be the outcome of the merging of two divergent senses: of hurt and betrayal for the Bamar pro-democracy civilian and politically motivated groups, and an enduring anti-military outlook of some of the EAOs. The pro-democracy groups and the supporters of the National League for Democracy (NLD) have been outraged by the military’s move to overturn the results of the 2020 general elections, which not only provides a huge setback to the prospect of democracy in the country but also cast its shadows over a lot many associated freedoms and opportunities that came along with it. For these groups and people, it is a fight to preserve the freedom they experienced for the past decade.

Some of the EAOs who have allied their causes with that of the PDFs, on the other hand, have been fighting the military junta for decades to protect, what they consider, their inherent right to autonomy over land and natural resources. Barring a few recent years, such fighting has been a persistent reality in the country’s periphery, and so is the violence, loss of human lives and livestock, and property. For them, camaraderie with the PDFs is about continuing the same fight, with renewed momentum. Victory against the junta may result in a scenario when a new regime endorses its long-held autonomy demand. The parallel National Unity Government (NUG)’s acceptance of their demands gives them such hope.

### **Longevity of Resistance**

Coming together of the battle-hardened EAOs and the tech-savvy and motivated civilians is the key factor behind the sustenance of the armed uprising so far. While the EAOs bring in the elements of perseverance and commitment to

continue fighting with the military even while suffering losses, the PDFs use their educational background, past exposure to the military's functioning, and their networking capacity within the country and beyond to whip up and support a passionate fight. The EAOs like the Kachins, Rakhines, Karens, and Shans provide examples of survival for decades while pitted against a militarily superior adversary. The PDFs, over time and with the help of the EAOs, seem to have harnessed the skill of converting odd ambushes into a full-fledged urban insurgency in the heart of Myanmar. It is probably this combination of unique skill sets that make them an effective and possibly durable fighting force.

It is this combination of typical and complementary strength, which manifests itself in a constant upgradation in the quality of attacks against the military and their perceived associates. The parcel bomb explosion in the high-security Insein Prison which killed eight persons on 19 October and the attack on the Immigration office in the southern Mon State town of Ye on 3 August, which killed five officials are among the large number of attacks carried out by the PDFs. In addition to killing police personnel, ward administrators, and suspected informers of the junta, recent successes of the PDFs include the killing of Former Brigadier-General Ohn Thwin and his son-in-law in September.

The strategy of carrying out random attacks of opportunity has been replaced with one that is intended to spread fear among the military officials and their supporters but also prevents the junta from going ahead with its plan of holding a general election in 2023. The EAOs are doing their bit in the periphery by inflicting high casualties on the military. For instance, between 20 and 30 October 2022, intense violence in Kachin, Karen, Rakhine, and Kayah states and Mandalay, Sagaing, Magwe, Bago, and Tanintharyi regions, reportedly claimed the lives of 162 soldiers. Another 67 soldiers including an army major were killed between 3 and 7 November.

A critical contribution of the Bamar young, enthusiastic, and tech-savvy participants, hitherto relatively absent in the EAOs decades-long fight with the military, has been to successfully highlight their achievements and also the brutalities inflicted upon the country by the military. Multiple websites, blogs, news sources, and social media profiles and handles, either run or supported by them, continue to amplify such incidents. As a result, every single incident of violence gets reported and is read by the world. These possibly are among the reasons for the continued condemnation of the junta and imposition of sanctions by a number of countries. Statements by the UN and its human rights experts have condemned the junta's attacks on schools, civilians, and its attempts to establish a 'digital dictatorship'. Although none of the countries have recognized the NUG, there is enough evidence that the networking capacities of the PDFs and their supporters have ensured a steady unofficial flow of resources for their war efforts.

### **A Long-road Ahead**

A lethal combination, however, does not necessarily become a winning combination. The PDFs and the EAOs face two drawbacks as they challenge a militarily superior adversary. First, in spite of the violence and human misery, Myanmar is not a priority for the international community. The resolve shown by Russia and China in protecting the junta and supporting its war-making capacities is hardly matched by the sanctions imposed by countries like the US, UK, Australia, etc. The ASEAN has struggled to frame a unified policy on Myanmar.

Secondly, the opposition's war against the military is still localized, although of late it seems to have expanded into the Shan state as well. However, a considerable number of EAOs continue to remain rather indifferent to the happenings. The junta has been trying and partially succeeding in driving a wedge between the nearly two dozen EAOS, which operate in the country. On the other hand, there is little evidence that the multiple PDFs are working under a unified strategy directed by the NUG.

To succeed, the opposition would need external logistical as well as diplomatic support on a sustained basis. This too has to be matched by pressure on the military junta gradually crippling its attempt to normalize structural violence and assault on democracy. The 'Burma Law' enacted by the US could potentially unveil such a future.

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### **END NOTES**

<sup>iii</sup> Data till 23 December 2022.

(Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is the Director of Mantraya. This policy brief has been published as part of Mantraya’s ongoing “Fragility, Conflict & Peace Building” project. All Mantraya publications are peer-reviewed.)

## MANTRAYA POLICY BRIEF#43: 30 NOVEMBER 2022

# The Rise of Islamic State’s Khorasan Province

BIBHU PRASAD ROURAY

### ABSTRACT

The Islamic State’s Khorasan Province (ISKP) is on an ascent in Afghanistan. Its violent attacks targeting both the Taliban members and the civilians belonging to the minority communities have continued, despite ‘measures’ taken by the Islamic Emirate. Not only has the group spread its presence into a large number of provinces, but it has also effectively replaced the Taliban as the prime terror formation in the country. This does not bode well for the region and the world.



### Anti-ISKP Measures

On 15 October, the Taliban government’s General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) arrested two men from the eastern Nangarhar province. The GDI said that the arrested, identified by their first name, Bilal and Hamza, were members of the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province (ISKP) and were responsible for broadcasting, recruitment, and organising terror activities using anonymous identities on social media platforms—Telegram and Facebook.

Nearly a month later, Taliban soldiers carried out an overnight raid on a suspected ISKP hideout in Kabul’s Khaikhana, a predominantly ethnic-Tajik populated area, and killed five people. In an announcement made on 13 November, the Taliban identified those killed as responsible for past minor bombings in the capital. They also said that the group of men was planning a bigger attack.

A similar raid in October in Kabul had claimed six ISKP militants' lives. On 22 October, the Taliban spokesperson claimed that the killed militants were involved in two major attacks in recent weeks- one on Wazir Akbar Khan mosque in Kabul city on 23 September and the other on Kaaj Institute education centre, a tutoring institute in which 53 people, most of them girls and young women, were killed on 30 September. No group had claimed responsibility for either attack.

### **Steady Rise**

While the Islamic Emirate would prefer to label these as successes against the ISKP and measures that have contained the group's activities, these very incidents point to the contrary. In November 2022, the UN mission in Afghanistan noted in a report that the ISKP is now present in nearly all the provinces of the country. Repeated incidents indicate its presence even in Kabul.

The SITE group has estimated that ever since August 2021, the ISKP has carried out 224 attacks within Afghanistan, of which 30 can be considered significant. This includes the 26 August 2021 suicide bombing at the Kabul airport that killed at least 185 people including 13 U.S. service members; and several other attacks after that. While the Kabul airport attack can be blamed on the chaos following the collapse of the civilian government and the Taliban takeover, which the ISKP took advantage of, recent incidents underline the growing potential of the group to carry out attacks on the soft as well as the hard targets.

A roadside mine explosion hit a bus carrying Taliban administration employees belonging to the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development in Kabul early on 2 November wounding seven people. Although no group claimed responsibility, the blast was believed to have been carried out by the ISKP. On 27 October, an attack by gunmen on a vehicle in western Afghanistan's Herat province killed five medical personnel employed by Taliban security forces. The ISKP, in its Telegram channel, claimed responsibility for the attack.

### **Expansion Strategy**

Actions lay bare the apparent strategy of the ISKP. In 2015, the group started small in Afghanistan. Fighters loyal to Islamic State first appeared in eastern Afghanistan, and in the subsequent years continued to make slow inroads into other areas. They were gradually bolstered by Pakistani and Afghan cadres, many of whom belonged to TTP, the Taliban, the LeT, and outfits from Central Asian states. Before the Taliban takeover, the ISKP's strength was estimated to be 1500 to 2200 cadres strong, based mostly in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. However, hundreds of cadres who escaped during the fall of Kabul rejoined the group adding to its formidability. The ISKP's criticality to the overall strategy of the parent Islamic State is clear from recent logistical assistance provided to it by the latter. The UN estimates that the ISKP was given US\$500,000 by the IS core sometime in late 2021, in a renewed bid to strengthen the group.

The ISKP reckons that violence over an expanded landscape is critical to its expansion. While it has been able to carry out sustained violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in recent times it has made efforts to do the same in Central Asia. The challenge for it, however, is the absence of any infrastructure in those countries. To overcome this, it seems to be using Afghan territory.

In April, it fired 10 rockets at an Uzbek military base in the border town of Termez, from a launchpad in Hairatan, a border town in the northern Afghan province of Balkh. It was the first strike by the terrorist group against the Central Asian nation. The terror group also released a photo and video of the projectiles to back its claims. Uzbek officials denied any rockets had landed on its territory, but representatives of the Taliban regime later confirmed that an attack had occurred. On 7 May, the ISKP claimed to have fired seven rockets into Tajikistan targeting its armed forces. Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security as well as the Taliban refuted the claims and said that only bullets were shot across the border during fighting between Taliban forces and fighters with the ISKP. These contentious attacks or at least the claims around them are seemingly part of the ISKP's strategy of broadening its appeal in Central Asia. The group could be seeking to capitalize on perceptions that the Taliban government is a Pashtun ethno-nationalist organization rather than a bonafide Islamic movement. There is a sudden spur in the ISKP's propaganda material in the Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz languages.

### **The Road Ahead**

The continuing rise of ISKP challenges the authority of the Taliban Islamic Emirate. However, to assume that the latter will put all its energy into fighting it could be a mistake, for two reasons. Firstly, for the Taliban, dealing with the ISKP may not be the most important agenda. It has to deal with varied issues such as the lack of international legitimacy

for its regime, violence perpetrated by the resistance movements, and also the demands by various domestic groups for flexibility in its rigid ideology.

Secondly, the Taliban and ISKP relations are complex. Sanaullah Ghafari a.k.a. Shahab al-Muhajir remains in charge of ISKP ever since his appointment in June 2020. Little is known about Ghafari, but he is rumoured to have been an al-Qaeda commander or a former member of the Haqqani network. The Haqqanis, occupying influential ministries in the Taliban government, are still believed to be maintaining nexus with the ISKP. Therefore, while a section of the Taliban could be wishing to decimate the ISKP, influential elements within the government, could actually be protecting them. Since the Taliban has refused any external assistance to deal with the ISKP, its capacity to deal with the latter will always be limited.

This state of affairs could have significant security implications for South Asia and beyond. Through its uninhibited growth, Afghanistan could turn into a launch pad for the ISKP's operations in other South Asian countries.

*(Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is the Director of Mantraya. This policy brief has been published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Fragility, Conflict & Peace Building", "Islamic State in South Asia", and "Mapping Terror and Insurgent Networks" projects. All Mantraya publications are peer-reviewed.)*

## **MANTRAYA ANALYSIS#61: 26 OCTOBER 2022**

# **Emerging Faultlines within the Taliban: Implications for Afghanistan & Pakistan**

**SHANTHIE MARIET D'SOUZA & BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The continuing closure of girls' schools in Afghanistan, in spite of the promises made by the Taliban, is one of the many issues which have brought deep factionalism among the former insurgents. The Kandahar-based conservatives have been able to dominate so far. However, it may only be a matter of time, before power equations between the conservatives, the Haqqani network and the minority pragmatists change.*



*(Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Baradar Mullah Baradar (centre) with a group of Taliban officials in September 2021. Image Courtesy: Al Jazeera.)*

## Introduction

The Taliban captured power in Afghanistan in August 2021. The 'Islamic Emirate' has more or less resembled the regime the group had established between 1996 and 2001. Its policies towards girls, women and minorities have remained mirror images of the earlier regime, and so are its linkages with global and regional terror groups. This runs counter to the expectations that Taliban 2.0 could be a reformed version of its earlier avatar. A major part of this is linked to the deeper fractures among former insurgents and the current domination of the conservative hardliners within the group over a minority of pragmatists, who favour moderating the group's worldview in hopes of achieving international recognition and economic assistance.

## Divisive Issues

The common objective of unseating the civilian government and driving away the foreigners (infidels) had kept factionalism within the Taliban-led insurgency under wraps. However, fissures started showing up immediately after the capture of Kabul. The hardliners were emphatic that the military muscle of the Taliban was instrumental in the victory, whereas the moderates saw this as a triumph of a prolonged period of peace negotiations with the United States (US).

Thereafter, forming of the cabinet brought the Haqqani Network (HN) and the moderates into a fistfight situation. Guns were reportedly fired during the meeting in the Argh (Presidential palace) and an injured Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar went underground for several weeks, fueling speculations that he might have been killed. Baradar subsequently confirmed his well-being through an audio message, before reappearing in person. He reportedly refused the security cover provided by the Ministry of Interior and chose to employ his own guards.

The 31 July 2022 killing of al Qaeda chief Ayman al Zawahiri was another episode bringing to light the schism between policy and publicity-seeking statements of the group. Zawahiri reportedly lived in a house reportedly owned by the Haqqani group in Kabul's Shirpur locality, not far away from the Argh. The Taliban further embarrassed themselves with a statement feigning ignorance and deniability of Zawahiri's presence in the country.

While these episodes have been in the realm of Apocrypha, the policy over girls' education confirms the existence of multiple factions within the Taliban and the deep divisions between them. In March 2022, the Islamic Emirate decided to overturn its own decision to open the girls' schools by an overnight ban. It highlighted the lack of teachers and school uniform issues for its revised decision. The UN had previously agreed to pay the salaries of the teachers. As girls turned up the next morning at their schools, they were told to go home. In spite of subsequent promises by the Taliban the same month that plans for opening the schools are afoot and will be [implemented soon](#), the indefinite ban continues.

## The Kandahar Council of Mullahs

The centre of the ideological power of the Taliban regime is located in Kandahar, whereas Kabul merely hosts nominal political power. Taliban Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada is based in Kandahar, and so also his inner circle, the Rahbari-e-Shura, which so far has exercised extreme control over the Islamic Emirate's policies. They are relatively unconcerned about the outrage different hardline edicts cause domestically as well as globally.

Prominent members of the inner circle [include Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani](#). Haqqani, unrelated to the Haqqani Network, was a close aide and confidante of the former Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar. Other prominent members of the circle are acting Prime Minister Hasan Akhund; Mullah Nur Muhammad Saqeb, acting minister of Islamic affairs (Hajj and Awqaf); and Sheikh Khalid Muhammad, minister for the propagation of virtue and prevention of vice. Acting Prime Minister Akhund is ideologically against girls' education. Taliban sources have described him vowing not to ever allow girls to attend schools in Kandahar province.

On 21 September, 68-year-old Habibullah Agha, a staunchly conservative judge during the first regime of the Taliban between 1996 and 2001 and a member of Hibatullah Akhundzada's inner circle, was named the [new education minister](#) in a reshuffle announced by the government. Agha replaced Noorullah Munir, who was in charge when the government announced the reopening of girls' schools in March. Munir was downgraded to head of the Central Directorate of Education. Agha told the media, "I will act according to the instructions given by the supreme leader."

Incidentally, the majority of the Haqqani Network represented by Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, Khalil Haqqani, the Minister of Refugees; and a member of the Taliban's Qatar office Anas Haqqani, had supported the opening of girls' schools, but reportedly decided to maintain silence fearing more divisions emerging within the group. Whether such subservience could be indefinite, however, remains a question. Hibatullah Akhundzada's continued installation of loyalists and moves to centralise the administration could create fissures between Kandahar and the Haqqani Network. In August 2022, the Taliban released a video of the Haqqanis plotting a suicide attack against the US troops in 2010. There are multiple ways of interpreting this move. It could be a statement of defiance vis-à-vis the US by a confident Taliban leadership. Or, it could be the Taliban's attempt to undermine the Haqqanis by pointing at their past deeds.

There is a realisation across all the factions which allows for sufficient cohesion to avoid more serious leadership differences is the simple determination to retain the hold on power. After all, at present, the greatest threat to the regime's survival is possible internal dissent.

### **Long Shadow over Pakistan-Taliban relationship**

Since coming to power, numerous decisions taken by the Islamic Emirate have displeased Pakistan. Issues such as Islamabad's move to fence the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (Durand line) and the statement of the Pakistan Prime Minister expressing his concern about the safe haven Afghanistan provides to terrorists have ruffled the Taliban's feathers. On occasions, differences have gone beyond verbal umbrage to armed contestation involving the deaths of security force personnel belonging to both countries.

In September 2022, at least [three Pakistani soldiers were killed](#) after the Taliban intervened to stop the Pakistan army from building a security post at their border, in Paktia province on the Afghan side and Pakistan's Kurram region. An unspecified number of Taliban fighters too got killed. Similar clashes between forces of both countries had taken place earlier in the Spin Boldak in Kandahar province. In October, the Pakistan Army resorted to mortar firing across the border after movement by some local Afghans from villages near the border to the Pakistan side. The Afghan side registered their protest saying that these movements are within the ambit of a bilateral agreement. In September, Pakistan's foreign ministry [wrote to Kabul](#) asking it to locate and arrest Pakistan's Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) chief Masood Azhar, who it had sought refuge in Afghanistan. Taliban rejected the claim.

[Reports from the field](#) have indicated that Taliban leadership could be growing suspicious of the Pakistani move to sabotage the Islamic Emirate politically and diplomatically. It has increased vigil around the Pakistan missions in the country to neutralize any such attempt and curtail suspicious persons' movements around Pakistan's embassy in Kabul and the consulate in Jalalabad.

The Haqqani Network is closer to the power centres in Pakistan. In November 2021, the interior minister of the Islamic Emirate, Sirajuddin Haqqani played a key role in establishing a truce between the TTP and Islamabad, which unfortunately lasted only for a few weeks. The Haqqani network was once described by former US Admiral Mike Mullen as a 'veritable arm of the Pakistani ISI', and it remains so. Hence, any power imbalance in favour of the Kandahar Shura is bound to inconvenience Islamabad. In the medium term, Islamabad would like the balance to be restored and the Haqqanis to be given preeminence in running the government. Nothing short of that would benefit Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan.

### **Options for the Pragmatic Moderates**

As opposed to the reclusive and hardline old guard, the younger and pragmatic Taliban leaders feel the necessity to engage with the world and gain legitimacy. The most well-known faces of the 'moderate' faction are deputy prime minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the movement's founders and Deputy Foreign Minister Sher Abbas Stanikzai. Baradar had voiced support for all girls to return to school. There are others too. Abdul Salam Zaeef, one of the group's founding members and long-term Taliban diplomat, has criticised the ban, [insisting](#) that girls should return to school "as soon as possible". It needs to be mentioned that while members of this group are flexible, their moderation in itself could be equally conservative. For instance, they might be willing to allow girls to attend secondary schools but insist on a curriculum that rules out anything but a heavily religious education, or set conditions for attendance that severely limit the number of girls who can actually enrol.

However, the challenge for the moderates possibly is the lack of numerical strength and influence. The 'moderates' somewhat stand in between the Kandahar and the Haqqanis and realise that undermining Kandahar would merely

mean the pendulum swinging towards the Haqqanis. It's not a win-win situation for them, for now, and even in the future.

Ill health and possible demise or incapacitation of some of the old guard too may open up small windows for reforming the Taliban. Prime Minister Akhund's poor health has been reported on multiple occasions. In March 2022, Akhund did not meet Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during the latter's day-long trip to Kabul. However, the possibilities of a change in guard due to incapacitation are extremely remote. Taliban are good at not disclosing the death of their leaders to avoid any leadership struggle and consequent loss of control over their cadres.

The option for the pragmatists, therefore, is to work silently, as any attempt to rock the boat could endanger their own existence. Unnamed moderate Taliban officials have told the media that they sometimes resist the edicts passed by Kandahar and ignore them, without bringing much attention to themselves. However, such a silent revolution has its limits and is virtually powerless as far as big-ticket attitudinal changes to bring back girls to schools are concerned.

## **The Future Trends**

The future, therefore, appears quite bleak for the girls, who hope to return to school. The current domination of the conservative bloc within the Taliban can be expected to continue in the short and medium term. While the Islamic Emirate is yearning for international recognition, the old guard could be considering the same a matter of right and not a privilege granted by the international community in return for policy revisions. They could be willing to play a waiting game hoping for certain countries to see the wisdom in not just engaging the de facto rulers of Afghanistan, but accepting them as de jure. Embassies of several countries including India are operating in Kabul. China and Russia never fully closed their embassies.

Earlier, the American CIA held discussions with the Taliban about cooperation against Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP) and al Qaeda, but the Taliban refused to come on board. They had also rejected a request to allow a residual anti-terrorism force in the country. On 8 October, the CIA negotiated with the Taliban head of Intelligence in Doha, possibly on counter-terrorism. The Taliban claimed that it was able to extract a promise from the US side that the latter would not fund any anti-Taliban resistance group within Afghanistan. Such claims appear highly doubtful. In Doha, a few months back, the US discussed with the Taliban the means to funnel the US\$3.5 billion in frozen assets in a fashion that could contribute to economic stability but would bypass the Kabul government coffers. No agreement resulted from the meeting. Nevertheless, such rounds of engagement could assuage the Kandahar-based elders that the world continues to need them more than the opposite, and they could manage with the absence of formal recognition or legitimacy for some more time. This does not portend well for Afghanistan and the region at large.

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***(Dr. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza is the President and Founder of Mantraya. Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is the Director of Mantraya. This analysis has been published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Mapping Terror & Insurgent Networks" and "Fragility, Conflict, and Peace Building" projects. All Mantraya publications are peer-reviewed.)***

## **State of Play: Lashkar-e-Taiba in Kashmir**

**BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Terrorist violence in Jammu & Kashmir is decreasing. And yet, terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) continue their attempt to reverse the gains made by the security forces. Backing from the state sponsors in Pakistan, geopolitical changes in Afghanistan and support from the alienated population in Kashmir are among the multiple challenges New Delhi faces.*



*A security personnel stands guard near the spot of the grenade attack by militants at Srinagar In June 2021) (Image Courtesy: PTI)*

### **Introduction**

The year 2022 began well for the security forces in Kashmir. On 3 January, policemen in civvies gunned down Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) 'commander' Muhammad Saleem Parray inside the famous Mughal garden Shalimar in Srinagar. Parray was involved in a number of killings in 2016.[1] Hours later, in the nearby Gusu area of Harwan, a Pakistani militant Hafiz alias Hamza was killed. Hamza was earlier involved in the killing of two policemen in Bandipora and had shifted his area of operation to Harwan.

These militants are among the 70 LeT cadres/ commanders who have been killed in 2022 (till 4 October). While at least 68 LeT cadres had been killed in 2021, another 48 lost their lives in 2020. These killings, part of the enormous security efforts put together by New Delhi to reduce terrorist violence in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), have also led to a significant reduction in terrorism-related incidents. The number of hideouts and modules of the LeT busted has continued to rise, posing not just logistical and existential challenges to all the terrorist formations, including the LeT.

At the same time, however, terrorism is far from over in J&K. Among multiple terror groups operating in J&K, the LeT is clearly the most dominant. Data on killed terrorists in 2022 prove the point. Of the 167 terrorists killed (till September), 70 belonged to the LeT and its affiliate, The Resistance Front (TRF). Nearly 33 per cent of all terrorism-related activities in J&K has a LeT connection. This group, in particular, is leading the most violent counter to New Delhi's stabilisation efforts.

### **Local Uprising versus Pakistan-backed Terror**

Like the past years, LeT's operations in J&K have been based on two strategies.

Firstly, the group is continuing to project militancy in Kashmir as a local uprising. Local recruitment, training of a section of these recruits in terror camps in Pakistan and sending them back to Kashmir for terror activities have been the established pattern in this regard and it continues. For the past couple of years, however, the LeT has tried to act through the TRF. Using this frontal organisation, the LeT has tried to deflate focus away from itself, on the one hand. On the other, the TRF's violence, mostly through the local cadres, adds to the spatial spread of terror activities. Not surprisingly, the TRF's activities almost parallel that of the LeT, although both organisations, according to the security forces, remain operationally indistinguishable.

Secondly, the LeT continues to use its better-trained Pakistani cadres to increase the level of violence. In the past, such insertion of 'foreign terrorists' has been sought to be limited, with prominence given to the local recruits to carry out the bulk of the violence. However, completely giving up on Pakistani cadres has never been an option for the LeT. Local cadres, on the other hand, have often failed to match the expectations and have been neutralised far too easily, mostly due to their lack of experience and lack of adequate training. As a result, the Pakistani cadres have remained almost fifty per cent of the active terrorists in the Valley.

It, however, is clear that the LeT's success in either of these strategies is dwindling. A noticeably decreased recruitment of local cadres has made the task of replacing those killed in security force operations difficult. Although no disaggregated data for LeT is available, overall data on the recruitment and killing of terrorists in Kashmir underlines the point. According to the Jammu & Kashmir Police, in the current year (till September), 89 local youths joined various terror groups, whereas 120 local cadres were killed in the same period. This shortfall reflects in the number of active local terrorists in J&K, which has come down to only 60.

This has constrained the LeT and other terror groups to push the Pakistani cadres already present in the Valley to take a more active and direct role in perpetrating terror activities. An example of this trend is the killing of Pakistani LeT cadre, Manzoor alias Haider alias Hamza, in a brief shootout in the Hazratbal area of Srinagar on 10 March. An associate of LeT commander Mehran, Manzoor was active in the Valley for the past six months. He was killed by a police team while attempting to overpower an armed guard at the Hazratbal shrine and snatch his weapon. In normal circumstances, such an operation would have been assigned to a local recruit of the LeT.

The outcome of the increased exposure of terrorists like Manzoor to security force operations has resulted in a spike in the death of Pakistani terrorists in 2022. In the first nine months of the year, 47 of them have been killed, which has resulted in a decrease in active foreign terrorists to about 80.[2] Further, the increased success of security forces in preventing large infiltration attempts from across the border has made LeT's task of maintaining a sizeable number of better-trained Pakistani terrorists in the Valley difficult.

### **Recycled Militants, Terror Modules and Online Recruiters**

The failure either to recruit locally or manage the infiltration of Pakistani cadres or local cadres trained in Pakistan has led to the LeT to devise a new strategy of relying on surrendered and released/mainstreamed terrorists to perpetrate terror. At least two such incidents confirm this trend.

On 28 and 29 September, **low-intensity** blasts took place within 8 hours of each other on two buses in the Udhampur district, which injured two persons. Investigations led to the arrest of a surrendered Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) militant, Mohamad Aslam Sheikh on 1 October. Sheikh revealed that he had been contacted by a Doda (in Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa)-based Pakistani handler named Mohammed Amin Bhat alias Khubaib on social media.[3] Prolonged interactions and promises of monetary help motivated Sheikh to join the LeT. He was asked to travel to the Dayala Chak area, along the Samba Kathua axis, near the international border to pick up a consignment consisting of three sticky bombs and four IEDs, delivered using a drone. Sheikh collected them from the designated location, took them home, and planted two IEDs on the buses. The rest of the explosives were recovered from his home.

On an earlier occasion in February 2022, the LeT had used Abdul Qayoom Dar of Larow Kakapura in Pulwama district, a former militant who had been previously arrested after a shooting incident in 2018. Dar, after his release in August 2021, was under the watch of Pulwama police. Early this year, he quietly moved out of the village and joined the LeT. Dar was shot dead during the nightly operation on 18-19 February in Chermarg village in the Shopian district, after he fired upon and killed two army personnel.<sup>141</sup>

This trend brings to the fore the logistical role being played by terror modules across the state, 111 of which have been busted in 2022 (till September) alone. Such modules, typically consisting of two to seven persons and operating in close contact with their Pakistan-based handlers, not only arrange for SIM cards and other logistical support for the militants, but receive arms, ammunition and explosives, mostly dropped by drones, and subsequently supply them on demand to the terrorists. Modules, for long, were perceived to be only terrorist sympathisers with only a peripheral role in the violence. However, that perception has changed with arrests confirming them as integral to the conduct of violence in the Valley.

In addition, Pakistan-based handlers continue to use social media to get in touch with potential recruits and convince them to join terrorism. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), on 4 October, identified and proscribed 40-year-old Pakistani national Habibullah Malik alias Sajid Jutt as the key radicaliser and recruiter of Kashmiri youths on behalf of the LeT. Believed to be based in Kasur (Pakistani Punjab), Malik is associated with LeT-backed TRF. He is believed to have been able to create a network of hardcore militants. He has also masterminded multiple terrorist attacks in the Valley including an attack on Indian soldiers in Bhata Dhurian, Poonch in October 2021. He is also involved in the drone dropping of arms and communication systems in the Jammu region for terrorists.

## Outlook

In spite of improvements in the security situation, terrorism remains a challenge to the Indian government's efforts of establishing stability in J&K. Groups like the LeT continues exploiting the facilities extended to them by their state sponsors in Pakistan. While New Delhi insists that sympathy for such groups within J&K has decreased, it remains sufficiently high to result in local youths opting for a career in terrorism. Post-August 2021 developments in Afghanistan and the LeT's continued linkages with the Taliban remain force enablers for the group, which believes that constant tweaks in strategy would not only add to its survivability but reverse the dip in its capacities in J&K. For New Delhi, therefore, the challenges are multiple. While maintaining a force-centric pressure on the LeT, it has to deal with both internal as well as external factors that the group is benefiting from.

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## End Notes

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**(Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is the Director of Mantraya. This analysis has been published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Mapping Terror & Insurgent Networks" and "Fragility, Conflict, and Peace Building" projects. All Mantraya publications are peer-reviewed.)**

## **The Killing of Ayman al Zawahiri: Impact on al Qaeda-linked Terror Groups in Africa**

**BIBHU PRASAD ROURAY & SHANTHIE MARIET D'SOUZA**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Following the killing of al Qaeda (AQ) chief Ayman al Zawahiri in Kabul on 2 August 2022, the possible impact of neutralizing a leader on the group as well as its affiliates and franchises elsewhere has become a matter of intense debate. It has been argued that the death of Zawahiri, considered to be only an ideological figurehead with little influence on its activities worldwide, will sink the organization even further. However, in Africa, the AQ-affiliated groups seem to be implementing a strategy, outlined by Zawahiri in 2011, to the fullest and have transformed the region into the group's most formidable operational theatre.*



(File Photo of al -Shabaab in Somalia, Image Courtesy: New York Times)

## Introduction

Some of the recent terrorist activities in Sahel, Somalia and Ethiopia prove that notwithstanding Ayman al Zawahiri's death in August 2022, little respite can be expected from the violent actions of the al Qaeda (AQ) affiliates. States in the African continent will not only have to enhance their counter-terror capacities to be able to succeed in containing the spread of terror but will also have to bury their differences and work towards 'unity of effort' in dealing with AQ-inspired terror.

## The Zawahiri Model

In 2011, after taking control of al-Qaida in 2011, following the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad (Pakistan), Zawahiri sought to reverse the group's strategy of carrying out spectacular strikes against the West. Instead, he directed AQ's regional commanders to seek gains locally, without being distracted by attempts to attack international aviation or bomb European cities. Stressing on the legitimization of violence, he underlined the need to choose targets carefully, and emphasised building grassroots support, he had told that 'the grievances of marginalised communities could be exploited, particularly where the government was weak or predatory'[1]. He favoured building strong ties with local actors through collaboration and even intermarriage. A scan of the terrorist landscape in Africa over the years demonstrates that the strategy may have been implemented successfully in the continent by the AQ affiliates.

## Sahel: Spectacular Terror Attacks

Mali remains the epicentre of the Jihadist conflict in the Sahel, repeatedly witnessing terror attacks carried out by groups affiliated with the AQ, with increasing sophistication. On 7 August, 42 soldiers were killed and 22 others injured in an attack involving drones, car bombs and artillery near the town of Tessit in the Gao region. Later that day, five police officers were killed when extremists attacked a police station in the town of Sona, near the border with Burkina Faso. On 8 August, militants belonging to the AQ-affiliate alliance Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Support Group for Islam and Muslims, GSIM or JNIM) claimed responsibility for the attack. The JNIM indeed remains central to late Zawahiri's strategy.

Previously, on 22 July, the AQ-affiliated Katiba Macina (KM) group claimed a deadly suicide attack using two vehicle-borne bombs in a strategic garrison town Kati near the Malian capital. At least one soldier was killed. Kati is the heart of the Malian military establishment. It is also in the proximity of the residence of the head of the ruling junta Assimi Goita and the powerful defence minister. In more than a decade of insurgent warfare in Mali, AQ had never struck any target of such significance nor so close to the capital, Bamako.

The KM claimed the attack in an online statement and said, "If you have the right to hire mercenaries to kill defenceless innocents, then we have the right to destroy and target you."<sup>2</sup> The attack on the base in Kati underlined the tenacity of the organisation in Africa and elsewhere despite decades of intense pressure from a US-led counter-terrorist campaign and fierce rivalry from a breakaway faction that became the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The KM group is a part of the JNIM, whose ground-level influence continues to expand into Mali and Burkina Faso. Niger too is affected.

## Terror Spillover: Somalia, Ethiopia and Beyond

Somalia-based al-Shabaab, which is linked to AQ, in a significant strategic shift, carried out two unprecedented cross-border attacks in Ethiopia, in late July and early August, killing dozens of Ethiopian security forces. The group reportedly penetrated as far as 150 kilometres into the Ethiopian territory. The group, in its media outlet Radio Andalus, claimed to have killed at least 187 Ethiopian regional forces and seized military equipment in its attacks. Ethiopia's internal instability due to the war in the northern Tigray region since late 2020 and other ethnic fighting has made the country more vulnerable to such attacks.

While al-Shabaab controls large rural areas in the southern and central regions of Somalia, it has reportedly trained several thousand fighters for its 'Ethiopian command', consisting mainly of Somalis and Oromos inside Ethiopia. There is an additional possibility that al-Shabaab could join hands with the separatist Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), an armed opposition group active in Ethiopia. OLA has been designated by the Ethiopian government as a terrorist organisation. The consequences of al-Shabaab establishing a stronghold in south-eastern Ethiopia could be serious for peace and security in the region.

The group's fighters would be well placed to strike deeper into Ethiopia, Kenya and even as far west as Uganda. Over the years, Al-Shabaab has carried out several high-profile deadly attacks in Kenya. Although the last major attack

dates back to 2019, several small attacks have been carried out in Lamu county, which borders Somalia in 2022. For instance, in January, suspected al-Shabaab fighters in Lamu fired at a convoy carrying judicial officials with bullets, injuring several people.

### **Counter-terrorism (CT) Campaign: Weak, Divided and Dissipated**

In Somalia, the al-Shabaab is under pressure after a renewed counter-terrorism push by the country's new government. The CT efforts have been beefed up after the US redeployed 500 troops in the country, who had been withdrawn by former President Donald Trump. Somalia's previous president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, had avoided major confrontations with al-Shabab. But new president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has said his government will go on the offensive against the group. This seems to be a factor in al Shabaab's attempt to carry out across-the-border attacks in Ethiopia, a country the terror outfit considers an enemy. Ethiopia has deployed troops to Somalia as part of the African peacekeeping force. Ethiopia's CT response was believed to be robust before the July 2022 attacks.

A joint operation by Ethiopian Defence Forces (EDF) and the Special Forces of the Somali Region (SDF), after the al-Shabaab's second operation into Ethiopia in early August 2022 has reportedly led to the killing of more than 800 members of the terror group. The killed included three senior al-Shabaab leaders, including Fuad Muhammad Khalaf, with a bounty of US\$5 million by the US government. Ethiopian officials have claimed that about one hundred members of al-Shabaab have also been captured. However, it is clear that Ethiopia will have to deal with the threat posed by al-Shabaab repeatedly. Over time, such attacks may increase in frequency and lethality.

However, the lack of unity among the affected countries in the Sahel region with regard to CT operations is a significant reason behind the terrorist upsurge. In July 2017, five nations of Sahel—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger—initiated the G-5 mission<sup>[9]</sup> and showcased it as an unprecedented example of cooperation in one of the world's troubled regions. The idea was to create a joint military force that would go hand in hand with development projects. G-5's eight battalions comprised about 5,000 troops. They were based in their own countries, with the exception of a 1200 personnel-strong Chadian battalion deployed in Niger. They were tasked with coordinating operations in the hotspot border areas.

However, the G-5 force, largely financed by the European Union (EU) and its operations supported by France, has achieved meagre results. Chronic underfunding and disparate political will among member countries and regional politics, led to its decline. Mali has undergone two coups in two years, and there have been military takeovers in Burkina Faso and Chad. French control over G-5 and Paris' connections with Chad is seen as problems by Mali's military junta, which has deployed paramilitaries linked to the Russian private security Wagner group in its CT operations and also as instructors for the Malian Army. In 2021, Chad was meant to hand the G5 presidency over to Mali but did not— a move Bamako interpreted as French interference. Niger has also alleged that since the creation of the G5, there have been no joint operations between Burkina Faso and Mali, let alone between Niger and Mali.

In April, 1200 Chadian soldiers based in Niger left in secret for the Chadian capital N'Djamena. In May, Mali announced it would leave the group over a dispute with France, forcing all the force's commanders to abandon their base in Bamako and relocate to the Chadian capital N'Djamena. Niger president, Mohamed Bazoum, announced in May, "The G5 is dead", although Chadian President Mahamat Idriss Deby is trying to organize a meeting to maintain the relevance of G-5.

### **Future Trends**

It is therefore clear that in spite of Zawahiri's death, the AQ-affiliated groups in Africa would continue to reimpose the strategy outlined by the leader in 2011. For the time being, their focus remains on Africa and certainly not the region beyond. But this could change with emboldening successes in the smaller theatres. The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban combined with the availability of ungoverned spaces in South Asia may provide further impetus to these groups. With particular reference to the Sahel, the lack of unity among the countries in their CT campaign could benefit the JNIM group. In the months to come, the affected countries will have to face the challenge of continuously diverting their own resources to meet the evolving threat, but also strive to elicit cooperation from other like-minded countries.

## End Notes

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## MANTRAYA POLICY BRIEF#41: 23 AUGUST 2022

# India’s Leap of Faith in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan

SHANTHIE MARIET DSOUZA

### ABSTRACT

*Within a year of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, India’s policy towards the country has shifted from detachment to reluctant engagement. However, the June 2022 decision to reopen its embassy in Kabul has been fueled mostly by hope, multiple overtures from the Taliban, and the changing geopolitics in the region. India has to guard against becoming a tool in the search for legitimacy by the Taliban.*

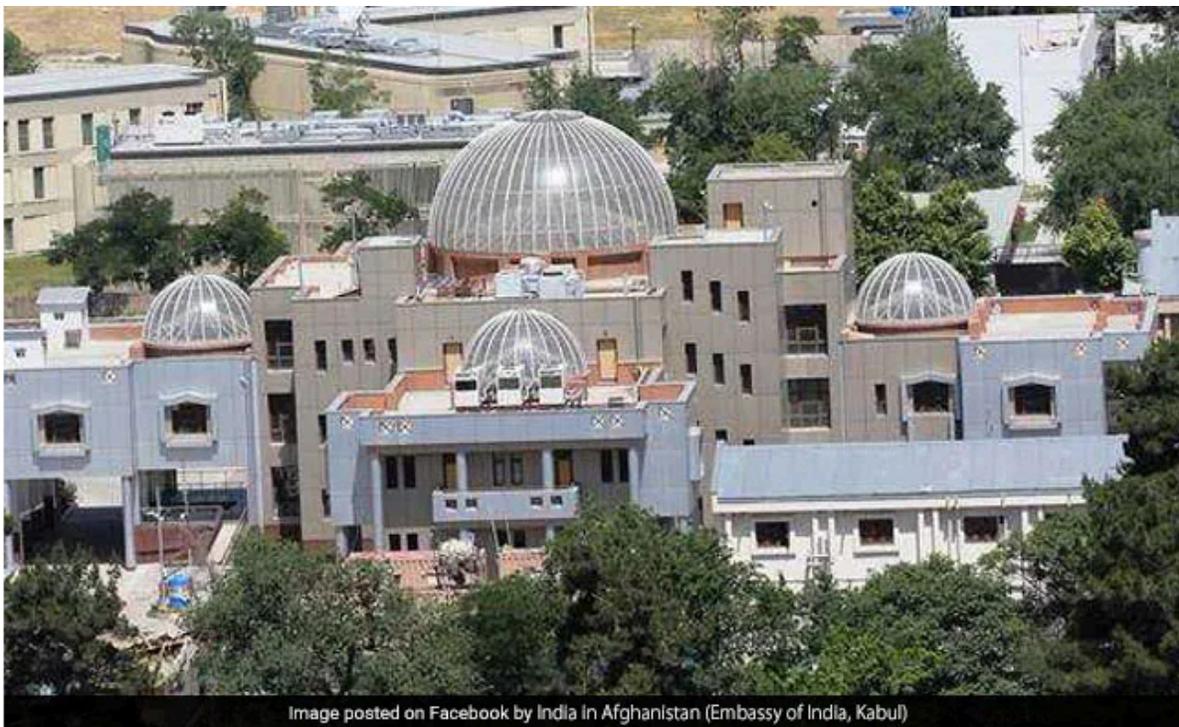


Image posted on Facebook by India In Afghanistan (Embassy of India, Kabul)

On 12 August 2022, India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar [confirmed](#) that a team of diplomats, except the ambassador, have returned to Afghanistan, as part of the country's focus on maintaining a people-to-people relationship with Afghanistan. The diplomats are part of the small "technical team" who had been deployed to Kabul on 23 June in order to resume India's diplomatic presence and humanitarian activities in Afghanistan. India's embassy in Kabul is now fully functional with local Afghan staff. The Taliban have [welcomed](#) the 'return', assuring both safety and immunity for the diplomats.

India's move came 10 months after the Indian embassy personnel were compelled to leave as a result of the Taliban entering the capital city on 15 August 2021 — incidentally celebrated as India's Independence Day — thus abruptly ending a two-decade-long partnership that saw US\$3 billion in Indian aid pledges to Afghanistan. The Taliban have claimed that they provided [safe passage](#) to the Indian diplomats and citizens during the evacuation. This summer's resumption of diplomatic activities came about shortly after negotiations between the Taliban and the Indian government. In June first week, a team of officials, headed by an MEA joint secretary visited Kabul and held talks with Taliban officials.

India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) [clarified](#) that the decision to reopen its diplomatic mission in Kabul honours the "historical and civilizational relationship with the Afghan people" and will specifically "closely monitor and coordinate the efforts of various stakeholders for the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance." Clearly, New Delhi had overcome its months of indecision and chosen to be present "where the action is," rather than continuing to watch from the sidelines.

India's dramatic policy U-turn has been fueled mostly by hope, multiple overtures from the Taliban, and the changing geopolitics in the region rather than a vision for the long-term stabilization of Afghanistan. Months after the Taliban takeover, New Delhi in various international forums spoke of the need to recognize the threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, push for the establishment of an inclusive government in Kabul, as well as ensure the protection of the rights of Afghan girls, women, and minorities. India also followed up by trying to advance a regional consensus on these issues, involving mostly the Central Asian states.

Neither India's regional effort nor the absence of international recognition seems to have pressured the Taliban regime to moderate its worldview and policies, however. Notwithstanding token gestures such as donating money to [repair the Gurdwara](#) damaged during an attack carried out by the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban remains the replica of the regressive regime that ruled the country in the 1990s. Worse still, the 31 July killing of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul, in an American drone attack, underlined that the Taliban are either unwilling or incapable of severing their ties with terrorist groups.

Rather than pursuing a detached policy or idealistically seeking to transform the Taliban from within, India has apparently chosen to prioritize its presence in Kabul and redevelop political and diplomatic leverage over the one-year-old Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Such presence, in addition to facilitating India's efforts to deliver humanitarian assistance, may help it to monitor anti-Indian terrorist activities by groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which mainly operate out of neighbouring Pakistan. Even more importantly, the Indian mission will be better able to keep tabs on the conduct of China and Pakistan — currently among the greatest benefactors of the Islamic Emirate.

Recent [statements by India's security establishment](#) have underlined that the situation in militancy-affected Kashmir has returned to "near normalcy," meaning that New Delhi is relatively confident about its ability to manage conflict spillover into Kashmir even notwithstanding the turbulence emanating from nearby Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is clearly apprehensive of a developing Chinese-Pakistani nexus that could undermine Indian leverage in Kabul while effectively encircling India from the north.

At the same time, deploying only a "technical team" to Kabul remains a safe and easily reversible policy option for India, without any obligation to upgrade it further. It is low-hanging fruit for the Taliban to grab, in return for intensifying their bilateral engagement and recognition of New Delhi as a key player in Afghanistan's future. New Delhi still underlining that 'normal' diplomatic ties with Afghanistan are yet to resume. Jaishankar [did not meet](#) Taliban Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi during the SCO summit in Tashkent in July.

To some extent, India's new posture towards the Taliban displays vulnerability. The conclusion that external factors have compelled India to 'come around' is not easy to brush off. That won't be lost on the Taliban and is certainly not a good tool for complex negotiations in the future. In its search for relevance in Kabul, New Delhi might end up

becoming a tool in the Taliban’s elusive quest for legitimacy rather than bringing about any transformational change for the people living in the conflict-ridden country.

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## **MANTRAYA ANALYSIS#59: 06 AUGUST 2022**

# **Myanmar Military’s Annihilation Strategy: The Future of Democracy**

**BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Ongoing armed contestations between the military junta in Myanmar and the civilian armed groups demanding restoration of democracy are nearly a year and a half old. The military’s initial assessment of quelling the opposition swiftly has been proved wrong. Pitted against a determined opposition of PDFs and EAOs, the junta has resorted to a strategy of annihilation, supported by countries like Russia and China. On the other hand, the unfolding of events and endemic violence perpetrated by the junta is being watched rather helplessly by the international powers and regional and international organisations, with periodic condemnations and little else. The junta fancies its chances of eventually crushing the opposition and democracy in the country.*

### **Introduction**



*(A protester holding a National League for Democracy (NLD) flag in Yangon, in 2021. Image Source: Reuters)*

*Tatmadaw* (Myanmar's military), which rules the country in the name of the State Administrative Council (SAC), does not shy away from drawing red lines. These include how much democracy will it allow flourishing, how much curtailment of its own power will it tolerate, and how much expression of dissent can it condone. It's every action, ever since it reluctantly started loosening its control over the political process in the early 2000s, has been guided by considerations of survivability. While nearly a decade of experiments with democracy had raised hopes for further progress, it was evident that the growth of liberal democracy in the country would not only be constrained but could be reversed the moment the *Tatmadaw* perceives a danger to its paramountcy. Hence, the February 2021 coup that upended the results in the 2020 parliamentary elections and the ruthless stabilisation project undertaken since then by the Junta are parts of its strategy to remain relevant, powerful, and the ultimate arbitrator of Myanmar's body polity.

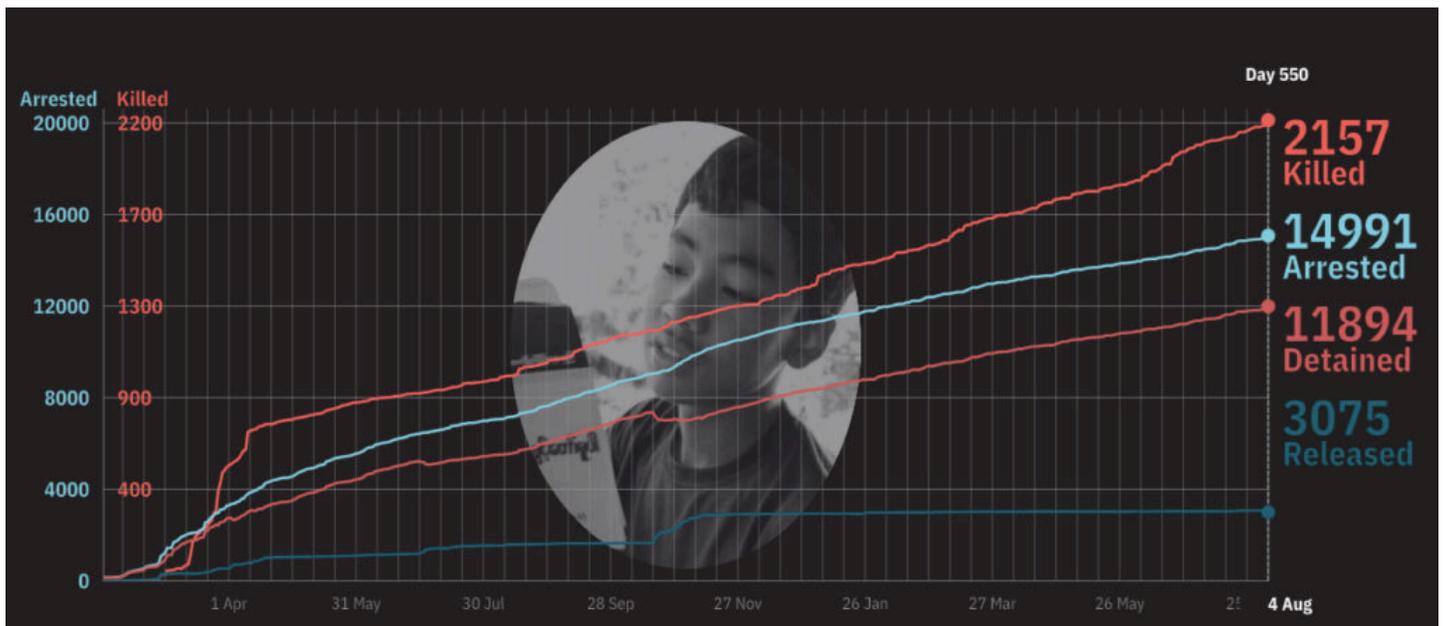
On 25 July, the *Tatmadaw* executed four democracy activists, after they were sentenced to death in a closed-door trial. All four, including activist Ko Jimmy and former member of parliament Phyo Zeya Thaw, had been convicted of 'terrorism', a phrase the junta has conveniently used to describe activities centered on restoring democracy in the country. While these executions, the first in at least three decades in Myanmar, can be considered a new low in the *Tatmadaw's* war on the pro-democracy activists and have evoked shock and anger across Myanmar and have been condemned by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and several countries, such sanctioned annihilation of dissenters need to be contextualized within the *Tatmadaw's* age-old strategy of quelling dissent.

The future of democracy in Myanmar, therefore, remains linked with the *Tatmadaw's* capacity to orchestrate violence as well as its perceived sense of impunity. While the *Tatmadaw's* history is replete with waging unending wars against its own people, past months have demonstrated that such capacity to target the opposition can falter unless reinforced by external sources. This analysis attempts to bring to focus the multiple sources behind such strength which fuels the *Tatmadaw's* annihilation strategy. It also underlines the strengths and vulnerabilities of the opposition. The analysis argues that as long as the SAC continues to be empowered by external sources, it will fancy its chances of getting away with mass-scale human rights abuses and may even succeed in crushing democracy in Myanmar permanently.

## **Endemic Violence**

Since orchestrating the coup on 1 February 2021, the *Tatmadaw* has implemented a two-prong strategy against pro-democracy politicians and civilian activists. One of these is political and legal. 14970 people, including politicians and activists, remain in detention for opposing the military's seizure of power, according to the rights group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).[1] 117 people, including two children, have been sentenced to death. Of them, 41 have been sentenced in absentia. A large number of legal cases pertaining to accusations of corruption and electoral fraud have been filed by the *Tatmadaw* in courts against former state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, where she gets periodically convicted with multiple sentences. The strategy of targeting Suu Kyi, former ministers and office bearers of the deposed civilian government, and her several colleagues from the National League for Democracy (NLD) seem to be to drive them to a point of political redundancy.

The macabre and grotesque, however, continue to take place on the second level. The wrath of the military has been unleashed on the hundreds of People's Defence Forces (PDFs), the civilian armed resistance groups country and some of the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) in the periphery, who have trained them. In the initial months, soldiers of the *Tatmadaw* were in charge of the campaign against the PDFs and the EAOs. Subsequently, however, mostly to fill in the vacancies by deserting soldiers and police personnel, a large number of militia groups have been created by the *Tatmadaw*. As a result, *Pyusawhtis* (paramilitary militias) and the shadowy *Thway Thauk Apwe* pro-military groups have become an integral part of the official scorched earth policy. The military has also recruited a large number of *Anghar-Sit-Thar* (hired soldiers), paying them a monthly salary of approximately US\$100. These groups, consisting of disposable and largely untrained fighters, have not only economized the military's war efforts but with a mandate to burn villages, loot, kill and torture civilians, and rape women, have wreaked havoc in the EAO-dominated areas, which shelter many PDFs.



(Image Source: Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. Data till 4 August 2022)

In a conflict-ridden country, where ground-level reporting is either difficult or largely unverifiable, Planet Labs and Google Earth images bear testimony to vacated and burnt villages. On rare occasions, deserter soldiers have narrated how they were ordered by their commanders to round up and kill innocent people. The military has supplanted its ground-level weakness by using attack helicopters to open aerial fire. Such unceasing hostility has resulted in the internal displacement of 700,000 and mass casualties. A group of open source researchers tracking human rights abuses, named Myanmar Witness, has verified more than 200 reports of villages being burnt between September 2021 and May 2022 in the north-west Sagaing and Magway region, allegedly in retaliation for their support to PDFs and the National Unity Government (NUG), the shadow government of the ousted civilian administration. The increasing intensity of such attacks is clear from the fact that 146 of these incidents have taken place between January and May 2022.<sup>[2]</sup>

In December 2021, nearly 35 people including a child were killed after army troops deliberately set the people in the trucks on fire using gasoline as an accelerant in Kayah state, suspecting them to be the sympathizers of the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF), an insurgent group which has pledged support to the NUG. In July 2022, at least 10 villagers were killed during a military raid on a village in the Sagaing region.<sup>[3]</sup> Scores have been killed in unreported night raids, secret assassinations and targeted annihilations. According to the United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet, “over 30 percent of over 2,100 people killed since February 2021 have died in military custody – most as a result of ill-treatment.”<sup>[4]</sup> The junta’s intention of silencing even an iota of protest in the most depraved manner is no longer a matter of debate.

### Junta’s Sense of Impunity & Specter of Civil War

The *Tatmadaw* legitimizes its violent campaign as aimed at the ‘terrorism’ perpetrated by the PDFs and the EAOs, and has vowed to annihilate them.<sup>[5]</sup> It has declared its intention of bringing peace and stability to the country before holding another round of elections to elect a new government. And yet, there is little reason to believe such false claims and assurances, as it continues to extend the state of emergency<sup>[6]</sup> imposed in the country.

The Junta’s manpower strength is unknown, with estimates varying from 250,000 to 350,000. The actual number of combat soldiers is far lower—in the range of 80,000 to 120,000. The National Police force is around 80,000 strong.<sup>[7]</sup> As mentioned earlier, it has been able to add more manpower by enlisting militia members, pro-military groups as well as hired mercenaries. This gives it a tactical advantage vis-a-vis the PDFs and the EAOs. However, the real power behind continuing with its campaign comes from two sources: indifference shown by the regional as well as global powers to the rampant human rights violations by the Junta and the latter’s continuing ties with the military hardware-providing countries such as China and Russia.

Barring repeated statements condemning the Myanmar military, unveiling sanctions against key military figures, and demanding that the democratic process be restored in the country major powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom have done little to bring pressure on the *Tatmadaw*. The United Nations, time and again, has condemned the Junta for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. It has retained Kyaw Moe Tun, appointed by the deposed civilian government, as the Permanent Representative of Myanmar. And yet, preoccupation with the Ukraine war has pushed Myanmar out of the priority list of most major powers.

The 10-member ASEAN admitted Myanmar into its fold in 1997. However, as an organization that uses the ‘consensus’ as an operating principle, ASEAN has demonstrated its concern, aloofness, and helplessness— all at the same time— to Myanmar’s ‘internal issues’. Few months after the coup, in April 2021, army chief Min Aung Hlaing was invited to a specially-convened ASEAN meeting in Jakarta where a five-point consensus to end the violence and help resolve the crisis was agreed on. Upon return home, Hlaing refused to implement it. In response, the ASEAN refused to include Myanmar in its subsequent summits. At the same time, however, Myanmar’s defence minister General Mya Tun Oo participated in the annual ASEAN Defence Ministers’ meeting in June 2022. The ASEAN special envoy, Cambodia’s deputy prime minister and foreign minister, Prak Sokhonn, during his two trips to Myanmar, was denied access to Aung San Suu Kyi. During the June 2022 trip, Min Aung Hlaing reportedly told him that meeting Suu Kyi “was not yet possible” but that it could happen “maybe at a later stage”<sup>[8]</sup>. On 20-21 July, Russia and Myanmar co-chaired the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM)-Plus Experts Working Group (EWG) on Counter-Terrorism in Kubinka, near Moscow. The meeting was boycotted by the US, Australia, and New Zealand, but attended by all ASEAN members.<sup>[9]</sup>

Japan, a member of the Quad along with the US, Australia, and India, has continued training the Myanmar defence forces in its National Defense Academy and the Air Self-Defense Force Officer Candidate School. Australia has suspended military cooperation with Myanmar and redirected foreign aid away from the SAC, as well as throwing its diplomatic weight behind ASEAN’s efforts to resolve the crisis. At the same time, the Australian embassy in Yangon has been accused of spending over US\$525,473 with the Junta-linked Lotte Hotel and Lotte serviced apartments in Naypyitaw since February 2021 coup. In June 2022, the deputy leader of an Australian cross-party committee that scrutinized the country’s political and diplomatic response to the Myanmar crisis termed it ‘constipated’<sup>[10]</sup>. India was among the eight countries which participated in the *Tatmadaw*’s Armed Forces Day celebrations in March 2021. It also ordered the deportation<sup>[11]</sup> of Myanmar refugees who had crossed over into Indian territory. New Delhi hopes to elicit *Tatmadaw*’s cooperation against the insurgents operating in its northeast region, with bases in the Sagaing region. Yet, media reports indicate<sup>[12]</sup> that the *Tatmadaw* could be using the same insurgents against the pro-democracy activists.



*(Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing walk past the guard of honour prior to their talks in Moscow, Russia 22 June 2021. Image Source: Reuters)*

Preventing a full-scale civil war situation in Myanmar and pursuing their own national interests are among the factors, which influence decision-making in individual countries. These may have indirectly added to the strength of the *Tatmadaw* and legitimized its actions. Of more direct assistance to the *Tatmadaw* are China and Russia, who have not only protected the Myanmar military from censorship in the UN on multiple occasions but continue to provide it with military hardware, which ostensibly is being used against the PDFs and EAOs. China's links with the *Tatmadaw* have a long history. In the past years, however, the *Tatmadaw* has attempted to diversify its military hardware procurement sources by reaching out to Russia. SAC Chairman Min Aung Hlaing has made multiple trips to Moscow. In his week-long trip in July 2022, Aung Hlaing met the director general of Russian state energy company Rosatom and signed an MoU to cooperate on skills development in nuclear energy in Myanmar. [13] The development of nuclear energy in Myanmar may be too far-fetched, but the MoU does indicate deepening Myanmar-Russian bilateral relations. Russian support to the Myanmar Air Force (MAF)—by recently providing it with two Su-30 Fighter Jets and a Mi-24P attack and transport helicopter, and also by stationing a technical assistance team in Myanmar to train and assist the MAF —has proved to be a key enabler in the latter's air raids on the EAOs and PDFs.

### **The Opposition: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Challenges**

In early 2022, the *Tatmadaw* chief indicated that he could have underestimated the power of the opposition. Over 200 PDFs operate in Myanmar's urban centres, and Sagaing and Magwe regions. The NUG, to which the PDFs pledge their support, claims control over 15 percent of the country's territory. Combined with another 30 to 35 percent over which the EAOs have dominance, half of Myanmar's territory is effectively out of the purview of the *Tatmadaw*. Attacks, with growing sophistication, are regularly carried out by PDF fighters against the military's regime and its benefactors. The armed resistance has been hailed as a stupendous example of unity among the majority *Bamar* population and the ethnic groups by analysts. Since the February 2021 coup, over 2500 army and police forces have deserted and are reportedly with the opposition. Such assessments and number crunching, while holding a beacon of hope for the pro-democracy-movement, do little to hide its vulnerabilities, mostly at the operational as well as logistical levels.



*(PDF troops attending training in an EAO-held area of Myanmar. Image Source: Myanmar Now)*

The NUG has sought to raise US\$1 billion to sustain its operations including supporting the PDFs. However, without external financial support, it is falling back on innovative methods to raise finances internally as well as from the expat

Myanmar nationals and other concerned persons/entities. Funds collected outside of Myanmar are either being channeled unofficially or through cryptocurrencies into the country, to avoid the Junta-controlled banking system.<sup>[14]</sup> However, as the war continues, the NUG will have to explore other financial sources to sustain its operations.

The European Parliament<sup>[15]</sup> and French Senate<sup>[16]</sup> have recognized the NUG as Myanmar's only legitimate government. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has tweeted support. However, the NUG and the PDFs require material support in addition to such pledges. The *Tatmadaw* uses Russian and Soviet-era choppers not only for maintaining supply lines, troop deployment, and evacuations but also for attacking the PDFs and EAOs. The latter neither have access to any choppers of their own nor have any advanced missile systems to bring down these military flying machines. Unless the PDFs receive significant external assistance, in terms of funds, arms, and expertise, their ability to threaten *Tatmadaw's* position would always remain limited.

To compel *Tatmadaw* to accept their demand, the EAOs and PDFs will have to widen the area of operations far beyond the Sagaing and Magwe regions. Unless the theatre of conflict is expanded, the *Tatmadaw* will not only have the advantage of carrying out focused area operations, but it will also be able to absorb the recurrent, and yet middling damages inflicted by the opposition. So far, the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), are working with the NUG and fighting alongside resistance forces against *Tatmadaw's* troops. Some other EAOs have either unofficially supported the NUG or have remained uncommitted. Extracting active support from a majority of the 20 EAOs operating in the country would be necessary for the NUG in the coming months.

So far, the PDFs have done exceedingly well against the troops. Although figures of fatalities among the troops in attacks by the PDFs may have been inflated, it remains a fact that battlefield skirmishes and surprise attacks have created an atmosphere of fear among the superiorly trained troops. Due to the recurrent attacks on official installations and police stations, Yangon has been labelled as the most dangerous city in Myanmar.<sup>[17]</sup> However, sustaining such attacks, in the long run, may prove to be a challenge. Paradoxically, too much of violence unleashed by the PDFs may also make them unworthy of receiving any assistance from external sources.

### **Two-prong strategy: Tilting the Balance?**

Insurgency movements or armed uprisings against a conventional military force have rarely succeeded without significant external support. Belief in principles and conviction in a cause can prolong the life of such uprisings, but do not add to their winning probability against an adversary pursuing a strategy of annihilation. Insurgency movements of Myanmar have a prolonged history of confrontation with the *Tatmadaw*, stretching over several decades. They have mostly remained undefeated, carving out and ruling over near-autonomous homelands. But for the PDFs, the goal is much larger. Toppling a shadow government of the military or coercing it to send its soldiers back to barracks and restore power to the NLD is a far more difficult task.

Currently, neither *Tatmadaw* nor the armed opposition is willing to accept defeat. International and regional powers, apprehensive of a full-blown civil war situation at the heart of Asia, are averse to materially assisting the NUG and the PDFs. The stalemate, therefore, is a recipe for continued conflict, tilted in favour of the military. In the coming months, the *Tatmadaw* may continue pursuing a two-prong strategy of increasing the scale and sweep of its operations and trying to avenge its battlefield losses by persecuting softer targets, i.e. the imprisoned politicians and the activists. International condemnation of the July 2022 executions of the four activists may prevent further prison executions but will do little to deter *Tatmadaw* from further pursuing its annihilation strategy.

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### **End Notes**

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*(Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is Director of Mantraya. This analysis has been published as part of Mantraya’s ongoing “Mapping Terror & Insurgent Networks” and “Fragility, Conflict, and Peace Building” projects. A shorter version of this article was first published in ‘Conflict Weekly’ of the NIAS, Bangalore on 5 August 2022 under the title ‘Myanmar Military: Annihilation as a Domination Strategy’. All Mantraya publications are peer-reviewed.)*

## **Need and Vision for a Mine and ERW-free Afghanistan**

**SHANTHIE MARIET DSOUZA**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Afghanistan remains most heavily contaminated by landmines as well as explosive remnants of war, the related casualties of which can be counted in their thousands. The country needs sustained international attention and clear benchmarks on demining. After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the dangers of mine action slipping off the radar is a possibility. This has to be addressed immediately in order to prevent the country from returning to endless cycles of violence and destruction.*

### **INTRODUCTION**



Image Courtesy: MENAFN

Marked by over four decades of armed conflict, Afghanistan remains one of the conflict-ridden countries most heavily contaminated by landmines as well as explosive remnants of war. Mine and Explosive Remnant of War (ERW) related casualties in the country can be counted in their thousands. These are a pointer to the fact that this country, despite significant efforts and resource utilization, will need a huge amount of effort supported by the international community to achieve a mine and ERW-free status. Even worse, the prevailing instability and absence of commitment can continue pushing these deadlines indefinitely.

Since 1979, armed conflicts have converted Afghanistan into a war theatre in perpetuity. The anti-Soviet war, followed by the ravaging insurgency as well as the war on terror led to a situation when all the contending parties left behind ERWs as well as Abandoned Improvised Mines (AIMs). So rampant is the problem that, according to an estimate in 2012, nearly 671,000 Afghans live within 500 meters of landmine contaminated areas. This figure may have improved

a wee bit in the last decade, but not much as Afghanistan witnessed cycles of conflict that perpetuated the political economy of the conflict.

Mine and ERW linked casualties have greatly varied corresponding with the progress and pace of demining in Afghanistan. Between 2001 and 2013, the number of casualties fell significantly to a monthly average of 36 but, since then until 2017, this number increased to a monthly average of 180. During 2019, it again decreased to 128 casualties per month, although this was primarily due to the shortage of resources when collecting verifiable data. Out of all these fatalities, only 2 percent of the recent year civilian casualties was due to mines, 43 percent due to ERW and the remaining 55 percent was due to Victim Operated IEDs. Current data from the Afghan State Ministry for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Affairs suggests that landmines have continued to kill or maim more than 120 people every month in the country.

While the Taliban-led insurgency did pose a huge challenge to demining, the effort was also hampered by other factors including lack of prioritization. Though the Afghan government had set up the Department of Mine Clearance (DMC) as a nodal agency, it did not receive adequate attention and resources due to lack of clarity of the mandate and functions of the agency. This was further compounded with problems of ownership and coordination between various departments and agencies dealing with mine action in Afghanistan.

The Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA) comprising of 40 organizations is involved in coordination, clearance, mine/ERW risk education, victim assistance and advocacy. MAPA is funded almost entirely by the international community with minimal financial contribution from the Government of Afghanistan. Since 2001, the government did not make much effort to reinvigorate the DMC and make it the lead agency, nor did the government pay adequate attention to include mine action in the National Priority Programmes (NPP) or the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and the Tokyo donor conference, July 2012.

More than 80 percent of the remaining areas contaminated with landmines and ERW obstruct agricultural areas. This is a major obstacle to development for a country where 70 percent of the labor force is involved in agricultural activities. This explains the slow revenue generation, employment opportunities and economic development pace in the country. During my numerous visits to the provinces in Afghanistan since 2007, I got to hear of many such tragic stories of how mines have maimed and killed family members and made agricultural land unusable that have been the locals' main source of livelihood. As I walked in the countryside, many times I was warned to be careful of stepping onto a mine even in the areas that were marked as safe as those markers could have been shifted by parties in conflict or natural disasters. The incessant conflict kept the warring parties replanting and reusing mines, perpetuating a sense of fear and inaccessibility to livelihood to common Afghans.

During the past 30 years, about 3,323 square kilometers of land have been cleared of mines and ERWs, constituting an average 9 square kilometers per month. Another 606 square kilometers are believed to be still contaminated by landmines. Between August 2022 and March 2023, 26 square kilometers of land will reportedly be cleared in 21 of the country's 34 provinces.

Conflict and other factors have prolonged the deadlines set for achieving complete demining in the country. Initially set for 2013, Afghanistan submitted in December 2012 a request to extend the deadline by 10 years. A 10-year work plan was also submitted, following the granted extension period, which will theoretically make Afghanistan achieve a mine free status by 2023. However, the Taliban capture of power in August 2021 has further complicated the situation. The Taliban in 2022 has estimated that it may take another seven to eight years to have the country completely free from the menace of mines and ERWs. Clearly by then, at the present rate of fatalities, another 11,500 people would have been either maimed or killed in mine and ERW related accidents.

To become mine and ERW free, Afghanistan needs commitment from the Taliban regime at home together with assistance from the international community. Amid ongoing instability since the Taliban takeover of power since August 2021, both financial support and government commitment appear to be missing. The conservative financial estimations to achieve this is in the tune of US\$100 million per year. For such sum to be available, demining needs to be placed within the broad context of both humanitarian aid and assistance, which is one of the priority areas of the international community at present, and the country's long-term stabilization process.

It calls for an immediate well-coordinated strategy by the international community to work towards improving governance, coordination, and greater Afghan ownership of the problem of mines and ERWs. This could possibly be achieved by establishing a new governance structure, which calls for an enhanced Afghan ownership, inclusiveness and accountability towards the Afghan people, the centerpiece of the international effort. The developmental and

governance challenges in Afghanistan by the present Taliban takeover of Kabul remains, and Afghanistan continues to be an ongoing and protracted conflict situation which needs sustained international attention and clear benchmarks on demining.

In addition to security, mine action is a humanitarian and development challenge. In a scenario of competition for limited resources and lack of attention with the time of Taliban takeover and the conflict in Ukraine taking much of the international attention, the dangers of mine action slipping off the radar is not a remote possibility. This has to be addressed immediately in order to prevent Afghanistan from returning to endless cycles of violence and destruction.

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## **MANTRAYA OCCASIONAL PAPER #09: 29 JULY 2022**

# **Use of Air Power: The Missing Link in anti-Taliban Operations in Afghanistan**

*Shanthie Mariet D’Souza*

### **Abstract**

*In July 2021, the ministry of defense of the now deposed civilian Afghan government posted on social media photographs of seven brand new helicopters arriving in Kabul from the United States (U.S.). A few days later, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [told reporters](#) at the Pentagon that the Afghans will “continue to see a steady drumbeat of that kind of support, going forward.” In a matter of weeks, however, the Taliban had captured power in Kabul and had seized much of the weapons and equipment including aircraft left behind by fleeing Afghan forces. While the actual reasons for the swift and bloodless victory by the Taliban are being debated, it can be argued that the lack of adequate airpower support made a critical difference to the capacity of the civilian government and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Had the international community acceded to the repeated demands of the civilian government and forces to build a potent Afghan air force as the mainstay for its anti-Taliban operations, the swift fall of Kabul could have been averted.*



*(Image Source: New York Times)*

## **A Modest Air Force**

Notwithstanding the stated objective to build a large Afghan army, the vision by the international community in general and the U.S., in particular, did not include a potent Afghan air force. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), between 2003 and 2016 the US United States provided Afghan forces with 208 aircraft. A report by the U.S.-based Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) indicated that the Afghan Air Force was operating 167 aircraft, including attack helicopters and planes, at the end of June 2021.<sup>[1]</sup> While a category-wise breakup of the aircraft is not available, only a fraction of them could have been for combat purposes. Immediately in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, about 40 to 50 aircraft had been flown to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan by Afghan pilots seeking refuge. According to the head of the Russian state arms exporter *Rosoboronexporter*, the Taliban reportedly captured nearly 100 Mi-17 Hip helicopters<sup>[2]</sup>, although a large number of them were believed to be not operational.

The ANDSF remained dependent on the air support provided by the U.S., with the latter using its discretion on whether to provide such support to a particular operation or not.<sup>[3]</sup> Reports suggest that such air support to the Afghan forces was available till mid-July 2021. That month, at least four air strikes were carried out on the Taliban, at the request of the ANDSF. Two strikes were meant to destroy military equipment, including an artillery piece and a vehicle, that the Taliban had taken from Afghan forces. And the other two targeted Taliban fighting positions. On most occasions, such air strikes were organised using combat aircraft based in locations in the middle east countries within the range of Afghanistan and also including warplanes aboard an aircraft carrier in the region and fighters and bombers in the Persian Gulf area.

Although the U.S. had assured the continuation of air support to the ANDSF even after the 31 August pullout, such support was to be restricted to operations against the al Qaeda and other terror groups, and not against the Taliban. The fear that an all-out affront on the Taliban using air power could displease the group and the possibility of pulling out of the peace talks may have influenced the U.S. policy decision.

From the perspective of the U.S., the ANDSF had grown over-dependent on air support and was somewhat reluctant to use the available combat aircraft themselves.<sup>[4]</sup> However, this was a simplistic explanation as the AAF was besieged with several problems throughout its existence.

## **Dependency Syndrome**

Notwithstanding the supply of air crafts and helicopters by the U.S., maintenance issues and other shortcomings severely inhibited the AAF's ability to help fend off Taliban advances and support Afghan soldiers on the battlefield. Till the very end, the AAF lacked fighter jets and was dependent on Cessna AC-208 Caravans and Brazilian-made A-

29 Super Tucanos light attack aircraft. A significant part of the AAF's involvement in CT operations was by using helicopters. Not surprisingly, this made the low-flying helicopters vulnerable to the insurgents and others, who had access to mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. For instance, in March 2021, four crew and five soldiers, on board the military MI-17 helicopter of the AAF, were killed after it was shot down in Maidan Wardak province in Central Afghanistan.<sup>[6]</sup> Interestingly, however, the attackers belonged to an anti-Taliban Hazara warlord Abdul Ghani Alipur. Alipur, although fiercely anti-Taliban, was a source of constant trouble for Kabul over killing, abduction, and extortion activities. Separately, AAF pilots, during media interactions, described several instances of their helicopters either being hit by bullets or narrowly missing the incoming RPGs fired by the insurgents.

Maintenance of the entire fleet of Afghanistan's fleet of UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters and C-130 Hercules transport planes remained in the hands of the U.S. and other foreign contractors. According to a *New York Times* report in June 2021, the Afghan military "is heavily reliant on American and other foreign contractors for repairs, maintenance, fueling, training and other jobs necessary to keep their forces operating."<sup>[6]</sup> This meant that the departure of the U.S. forces and the contractors made the trouble-free flying of the aircraft and choppers an impossible task. In April 2021, Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the Pentagon's Central Command, which oversees Afghanistan, told a Senate committee in Washington, "I am concerned about the ability of the Afghan military to hold on after we leave, the ability of the Afghan Air Force to fly, in particular, after we remove the support for those aircraft."<sup>[7]</sup>

While disaggregated data on the total number of contractors for AAF is not available, the SIGAR report of 2020 provides the overall number of contractors, belonging to the U.S., Afghanistan, and other foreign countries. According to the report, 'There were over 18,000 Defence Department contractors in Afghanistan, including 6,000 Americans, 5,000 Afghans and 7,000 from other countries, 40 percent of whom are responsible for logistics, maintenance or training tasks'. Understandably the contractors for the AAF were entirely from foreign countries. The U.S. did not share a particularly high opinion either on the capacity of the Afghan contractors or the Afghan military's performance at undertaking the necessary maintenance work. According to the SIGAR, as of December 2020, the Afghan National Army (ANA) was completing just under 20 percent of its maintenance work orders, well below the goal of 80 percent that had been set. Similarly, the Afghan National Police (ANP) could carry out only 12 percent of its maintenance work against a target of 35 percent.

The answer to the question, 'why did the U.S. fail to invest in making the Afghans capable of maintaining their aircraft?' needs to be contextualized within the larger pattern of international aid and assistance provided to Afghanistan by the international community. Although a huge sum of assistance did flow into the country for two decades, the critical need of enabling the development of local capacities was never factored into those aid delivery mechanisms. Principal reliance on foreign experts and contractors sustained what has come to be known as the 'Phantom aid' phenomenon, which resulted in a large portion of assistance money returning to the donor country through the appointment of handsomely-paid experts, consultants, contractors, and sub-contractors.

A last-minute proposal to retain the foreign contractors servicing the AAF aircraft and let them continue working in Afghanistan even after the U.S. withdrawal and arrange their payment through international assistance to the Afghan government fell through due to the prevailing insecurity and also due to the fears of pervasive corruption and mismanagement. This partially explains the dramatic collapse of the security structure in Kabul in August. Many disheartened and low-morale AAF pilots had little option but to flee to neighbouring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan with their planes and choppers, rather than putting up a fight. On 15 August, the day the Taliban took over Kabul, Uzbek air defence forces intercepted and shot down an Afghan military aircraft after it entered their air space without permission. Two pilots of the plane survived the accident and were sent to a military hospital for treatment. Nevertheless, a statement by the Uzbekistan government said that 46 Afghan aircraft, including 24 helicopters, had landed in its territory. On the same day, 143 Afghan soldiers in three planes and two helicopters landed in Tajikistan.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **The 'Russia' Factor**

For the past several years, the fleet of Russian Mi-17 'Hip' utility helicopters formed the AAF's backbone and was deployed in operations to transport troops, deliver ammunition to the combat troops, and also in evacuation missions. The familiarity of the Afghans with this helicopter combined with their lesser price and easy maintenance and readily available spare parts made the Mi-17, a preferred machine. A fairly large number of Afghan technicians had been trained to maintain them in flying conditions. Considering these factors, the U.S. procured 50 Mi-17 helicopters for the AAF between 2005 and 2012. The purchase was also due to an arrangement worked out by NATO as part of its efforts to foster closer Russian cooperation with the alliance.

However, in 2013, the plan to buy 30 more helicopters ran into opposition in U.S. Congress, which opposed the use of American funds for the purchase of military hardware from Russia. Even the Pentagon's plea to let the deal go through failed. That time, the Defence Secretary, Chuck Hagel, had argued, "Easy maintenance, unsophisticated. We can get it pretty quickly. That's the one they want."<sup>[9]</sup> However, an audit report by SIGAR concluded that providing the rudimentary AAF with 30 more helicopters is imprudent as the latter was incapable of operating and maintaining the aircraft without significant U.S. military support.

To tide over the crisis, the U.S. had the option of procuring second-hand Mi-17s from former Soviet states, several of which are NATO members. However, it decided to supply Afghanistan with the UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters, arguing that by the mid-2030s, it could replace the entire fleet of Mi-17s, and make the Afghans fly and maintain them without the assistance from foreign contractors. Delivery of such helicopters was scheduled till June 2021, when President Joe Biden told a visiting Afghan delegation that the US would provide 37 Blackhawks and two A-29 Super Tucano fixed-wing aircraft to Afghanistan.<sup>[10]</sup>

The switch from Mi-17 to the Blackhawks was never a smooth one for the AAF. Training pilots and maintenance staff on the new machine was a daunting task. The limited number of pilots and maintenance personnel who had been trained only on the Mi-17s could never operate with ease with the Blackhawks. Worse still, with the U.S. drawdown of forces, which also included the contractors, the AAF struggled to keep its Blackhawks operational. By April 2021, the readiness of the Blackhawk fleet had dipped to 78 percent, and in the next three months, to a bare 39 percent.

### Lessons Learnt

Three clear flaws are identifiable in the U.S./NATO approach toward building a capable and independent AAF. Firstly, the AAF was never allowed to have a significant combat role. The U.S., in a bid to control the pace and direction of the conflict, retained that role for itself. Secondly, the AAF's capacities remained sub-optimal due to the U.S.' own compulsions for switching from a predominantly Russian to an American platform. And thirdly, the abrupt and swift withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces, without making any emergency plan to support the AAF, put the final nail in the latter's coffin.

Several years before the fall of Kabul, senior Afghan commanders had underlined the need for the AAF's critical role in anti-Taliban operations, extending its mandate beyond its primary role in providing logistics, troop deployment, and participating in rescue missions. Even as the Taliban continued with their territory capturing spree and marched towards Kabul, calls were repeatedly made by the Afghan military for air support from the U.S. to halt the Taliban offensive. According to a report<sup>[11]</sup>, the Ashraf Ghani government even reached out to India, seeking 'robust air support' to fight the Taliban. It is debatable whether the last-minute insertion of foreign air power would have made any difference to the prospect of the Taliban victory.

However, it is undeniable that the strategic planning of the AAF's evolution had to be around its combat-centric role. While such a project would have required greater resources and effort from the U.S. and NATO countries, it would have added tremendously to the capacities of the ANDSF. As a result, the swiftness with which the Taliban overran the ANDSF's defences possibly could have been delayed, if not prevented. The fact that the Taliban did not have access to combat helicopters and fighter aircraft would have also played on the psyche of its fighters. At one level, this may possibly have led to an escalation of the conflict, with the Taliban leadership and their sponsors seeking counter-measures and possibly, antidotes similar to the Stinger missiles that had defeated the Soviet forces in the late 1980s. On the other, the ANDSF's capacity enhancement with the AAF's support would have made them worthy opponents of the insurgents. The end game in Afghanistan would possibly have been different from what it is today.

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### End Notes

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<sup>[94]</sup> "US Launched Several Airstrikes in Support of Afghan Forces", *Forbes*, 22 July 2021, available at <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/07/22/us-launched-several-airstrikes-support-of-afghan-forces.html>, accessed on 02 December 2021.

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<sup>[98]</sup> "Uzbekistan shoots down fleeing Afghan military plane", *Anadolu Agency*, 16 August 2021, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/uzbekistan-shoots-down-fleeing-afghan-military-plane/2337012>, accessed on 01 December 2021.

<sup>[99]</sup> "Congress fuming over U.S. purchase of Russian helicopters for Afghanistan", *Washington Post*, 12 July 2013, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/congress-fuming-over-us-purchase-of-russian-helicopters-for-afghanistan/2013/07/12/33aecde0-ced0-11e2-8f6b-67f40e176f03\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/congress-fuming-over-us-purchase-of-russian-helicopters-for-afghanistan/2013/07/12/33aecde0-ced0-11e2-8f6b-67f40e176f03_story.html), accessed on 30 November 2021.

<sup>[100]</sup> "US to provide 37 Black Hawk helicopters, 2 A-29 Super Tucano to Afghanistan", *ANI News*, 30 June 2021, available at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/us-to-provide-37-black-hawk-helicopters-2-a-29-super-tucano-to-afghanistan20210630210656/>, accessed on 02 December 2021.

<sup>[101]</sup> Nayanima Basu, "Afghan govt wants IAF support to crush Taliban as fighting worsens across the country", *The Print*, 10 August 2021, available at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/afghan-govt-wants-iaf-support-to-crush-taliban-as-fighting-worsens-across-the-country/712182/>, accessed on 02 December 2021.

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*Mantraya Occasional Papers are peer-reviewed research papers of approximately 5000 words. The themes of occasional papers conform to Mantraya's identified project themes. Researchers are encouraged to submit unsolicited papers to [office@mantraya.org](mailto:office@mantraya.org).*

## **Navigating a Complex Terrain in Afghanistan: Ideological Obduracy of the Taliban 2.0**

**SHANTHIE MARIET DSOUZA**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The Taliban 2.0 today remains strikingly similar to the regime it established in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. Systemic violence against women, minorities and supporters of the deposed government continues to increase across the country.*

### **INTRODUCTION**



(IMAGE COURTESY: [AL JAZEERA](#))

The human catastrophe and economic suffering of ordinary Afghans has not prevented the Taliban from unleashing a regime of retribution that essentially reverses the fragile progress on human security achieved during the past two decades. The international community’s strategy of isolating the Taliban while employing aid and assistance strategically as a tool to bring about change its behaviour has not yielded any tangible results. It is time for a new approach that seeks to directly engage – and gain control over – the insurgent group that now rules Afghanistan.

### **WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

On 28 May, the Taliban [rejected](#) the United Nations Security Council’s call to lift its strict constraints on Afghan women and stated that the Council’s claims were “unfounded”. This was in response to [concerns expressed by Richard Bennet](#), the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, that secondary schooling for girls remains suspended, a strict form of hijab has been enforced and women are denied opportunities to participate in political and public life. In short, the Taliban regime has yet again implemented gender segregation, repression and confining women to their homes.

Discrimination against women is only one aspect of the Taliban's overall policy of reversing the achievements of the past twenty years by establishing a state run according to a regressive interpretation of Islam. The Taliban also continue to persecute members of minority communities and elements associated with the previous regime including troops who served in the Afghan National Army. Media reports suggest this has occurred on a large scale. Where the Taliban regime has been less successful is its project to combat negative media coverage. Although media representatives continue to be harassed and [pressured not to publish anything anti-Taliban](#), print and social media reports detailing such incidents do continue to emerge. While these may be tip of the proverbial iceberg, they do provide an indication of what Afghanistan has been experiencing under the Taliban.

## ENGAGING THE TALIBAN

Notwithstanding [promises made by certain Taliban spokespersons](#), few believed that the Taliban had become a reformed and moderate entity. It was, however, expected that the group's search for international recognition and financial assistance would keep its worst tendencies under check. The hardline stance taken by the Emirate has three implications.

Firstly, it wants to dictate the terms of its engagement with the international community. It is announcing loud and clear that the world will have to deal with it – as a group that professes a particular undiluted ideology and linkages that links it symbiotically with Al Qaeda. Secondly, the Taliban's intransigence points to the domination of the hardliners, led by the Haqqani terrorist organization, over the moderates, who include Mullah Baradar. And thirdly, as the Taliban struggles to establish a modicum of governance within the country, they are adhering to a hard line position in order to retain the allegiance of cadres and commanders. Establishing a purist regime based on Islam and free from any internal opposition has become a new goal for thousands of fighters, who may have lost their sense of purpose following the victory over the United States with some even joining the opposition and Islamic State.

The proposition that the international community can use aid as a bargaining tool with the Taliban might therefore be misplaced. Since the primary drivers of the Taliban worldview are internal, external leverage for change is likely to be limited. In short, the Taliban may not change even if the international community links the flow of aid and assistance desperately needed by ordinary Afghans to some degree of reform. Instead the regime could seek to use its notoriety and the concern of the international community to keep a certain amount of international attention and assistance flowing into the country.

## FUTURE PATHWAYS

The objective would have to be to bring about internal changes and use pressure points to compel the Islamic Emirate to mend its ways. This calls for carefully crafting an engagement strategy that clearly identifies, strengthens and mainstreams the moderates within the Taliban. Such engagement needs to be linked with deliverables on the ground. Isolating the Taliban completely would only empower the hardliners. Every move by the international community should be directed towards establishing an inclusive government in Kabul. An opposition in the form of the National Resistance Front and other such groups are gaining ground within Afghanistan. Any long-term engagement strategy needs to be contingent on the amount of support such groups elicit from the Afghans in building a sustainable political system of their choice.

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## **Nepal: The Political Labyrinth**

*Thomas A. Marks, Ph.D.*

### **Abstract**

*In Nepal, recent political debate has focused intensely upon acceptance of U.S. aid. On 20 June 2022, the Nepali Cabinet appeared to bow to demands that it repel the ostensible American military invasion represented by the State Partnership Programme (SPP), a post-Cold War initiative designed to bring the civilian expertise of the various National Guard programmes in the U.S. states and territories to assist as requested partner democracies. The victory was touted by the left as representing something of a counter-blow against the demise of national sovereignty embodied in the controversial acceptance, just months earlier, of the American half-billion dollar Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant for road construction and hydropower construction in the country. Though grounded more in ideological and personal positioning than reality, the episode provides useful insight into the state of Nepali politics in 2022. Though seldom (if ever) noted explicitly in commentary, it is self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninists who are in charge.*

### **Introduction**

On 20 June 2022, the Nepali Cabinet appeared to bow to demands that it repel the ostensible American military invasion represented by the State Partnership Program (SPP), a post-Cold War initiative designed to bring the civilian expertise of the various National Guard programs in the U.S. states and territories to assist as requested partner democracies. [1] The victory was touted by the left as representing something of a counter-blow against the demise of national sovereignty embodied in the controversial acceptance, just months earlier, of the American half-billion dollar Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant for road construction and hydropower construction in the country. Though grounded more in ideological and personal positioning than reality, the episode provides useful insight into the state of Nepali politics in 2022.

### **Background**

Though seldom (if ever) noted explicitly in commentary, it is self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninists who are in charge. Nepal has a struggling non-communist opposition, represented primarily by Nepali Congress (NC), of which Sher Bahadur Deuba is the head, though NC is torn by factional division. As present caretaker prime minister, Deuba has limited power, because the communists dominate both his coalition and the opposition. That he is in his position at all stems from the bitter personal animosity that has ripped the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) apart. Deuba is a known entity of lacklustre past, goes the thinking of his communist-dominated coalition, who will make no waves in the time remaining until a new round of provincial and national elections is held between November 2022 and March 2023.

Already, it should be clear where MCC and SPP fall into this situation. The programmes may be freebies – in a country which depends upon foreign input for a large slice of its annual budget[2] – but to the hard left, the money is a trap, even as more direct intrusion comes from China but is not commented upon; e.g., ensuring that the country's Tibetans are suppressed by Kathmandu and that it colludes with Beijing in ensuring that increasingly few are able to flee Tibet itself. Ultimately, despite a substantial effort at disruption, to include street demonstrations and inert IEDs placed in public places by Deuba's communist coalition partners, MCC squeaked to acceptance in February (2022).[3] SPP would not follow.[4]

To clarify, MCC assists in development by working to alleviate global poverty. It was stood up in 2004. A country applies for the grant for a specific purpose. Assessments of development potential have long highlighted the central role, for Nepal, of tapping its hydropower potential, which in turn requires power and transportation infrastructure. To address those needs, Nepal asked for the grant in September 2017, it was accepted – and the U.S. then saw the process turned into a political football that went on more than four years. Finally, the U.S. put its foot down – take it or leave it – which convinced the left all the more that loss of sovereignty was afoot. In the extreme version, the left claimed the power generated might be sold elsewhere – which, of course, it would, given the state of Nepal's economy.

Nepali media quite correctly highlighted the various motives of the actors involved and pointed out how little the debate touched upon either facts or national interests.<sup>[5]</sup> It was driven by ideological and personal calculations but went on nonetheless, with too many pretending that serious issues were in play. Leading the charge in the sheer foolishness of discourse, not surprisingly, were the Maoists and certain elements of the larger communist movement embodied in the UML (Unified Marxist-Leninists). Their claim was that the grant compromised Nepali sovereignty and that it was part of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. To disentangle that one took Olympian effort.

MCC is a semi-autonomous development mechanism (see web-site). Indo-Pacific Strategy is a formal document that explains what the U.S. military theater command for “Indo-PACOM” is trying to do with its power.<sup>[6]</sup> Its first stated objective is to “advance a free and open Indo-Pacific.” To assist Nepal – as it has been by the U.S. and the myriad other donors active in the country – to become “free and open” was indeed the nefarious objective. As to motive, it comes as no surprise that the democracies of the world, of which the U.S. is the most powerful, are opposed to the dictatorships of the world, with a mushy “authoritarian” halfway house in-between. Several Nepali political parties, though claiming to be democratic, are in thrall to dictatorship.

The only puzzle is just how it has been possible for some very vociferous Nepalis to claim they want democracy even as they support the opposite. What happened, of course, was that the decline and near-fall of Nepali democracy found its fig-leaf in opposition to MCC.

To examine the situation: All currently available evaluation on the state of the Nepalese polity is negative. The authoritative Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) annual democracy ratings, just released for 2021, place Nepal at 4.41 of 10 (metrics in report), or 101<sup>st</sup> of 167 countries – down from an already low 5.22. The country is categorized as a “hybrid regime” and located in the third tier of four, between “flawed democracy” and “authoritarian” on the scale, and just six slots above falling into “authoritarian.” The highly regarded Transparency International annual corruption perceptions index, in its report issued in January 2022 (for 2021), scored Nepal at just 33 on a 100-point scale (metrics in report), which placed it 117<sup>th</sup> of 167 countries. Amnesty International, in its annual regional review of human rights, issued in early 2021, was equally negative in its assessment, including in its Nepal section (pp.260-62) the blunt charge: “Torture and other ill-treatment were widespread in pre-trial detention to extract ‘confessions’ and intimidate detainees. Although the 2017 Criminal Code criminalized torture and other ill-treatment, no one had been convicted under it by the end of 2020.” Human Rights Watch had just before, in November 2020, issued an equally scathing report, the title reflecting the contents: *No Law, No Justice, No State for Victims: The Culture of Impunity in Post-Conflict Nepal*. Recently, the esteemed scholar of Nepali society and politics Karl-Heinz Krämer, openly questioned whether Nepal could even be called a democracy.<sup>[7]</sup>



*Figure 1: Police seal off area in order to defuse a bomb planted in Pokhara by the Maoists as part of an effort to enforce a general strike (banda) on 14 March 2019. Inset shows the same location during the most recent violent effort to carry out a nationwide strike, 16 November 2021. Pokhara, a large peri-urban valley, is located in Kaski district in the former Western development region.*

The upshot is that Nepal is in a battle for its democratic soul. The challenge comes from half-baked communism still corrupted by violence and extensive extortion conducted in local spaces.<sup>[8]</sup> Unfortunately, Nepal of late has created quite the track record of cozying up to some pretty odious sorts. This gives cause for concern. In foreign policy, when the communists have been the ruling party, they have at times sounded like the marginalized, pro-Maoist Albanians of the Cold War, then Beijing's only ally in Europe, promising liberation for mankind and sponsoring international symposia (held in Nepal) attempting to pursue this line. One of the more egregious such gatherings was the 30-31 May 2018 symposium in Kathmandu that was sponsored by the ruling communist party. All major party figures attended, to include the prime minister and the Maoist leadership. The Ambassador of Venezuela was a keynote

speaker. Subsequently, the Maoists created considerable stir by releasing an official NCP letter supporting Venezuela and condemning U.S. actions against what objectively is one of the more loathsome Marxist dictatorships (albeit terming itself “Bolivarian”) in the world.<sup>[9]</sup> Not to be deterred by sobering reality, the Nepali Maoists, on 26 July 2019 at the “Ninth Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Solidarity to Cuba,” hosted in Kathmandu, lauded “socialism” and Cuba’s efforts to achieve it, demanding an end to the U.S. embargo of the country, yet ignored Cuba’s central role in facilitating the tragedy unfolding in Venezuela. That Nepal is involved at all with such distant, lamentable regimes can only be explained in terms of imagined yearning for communist ideological solidarity even as the quality of Nepal’s democratic governance has declined steadily.<sup>[10]</sup>

Assisting the democratic decline has been China, a dictatorship of Orwellian proportions, which is intelligent enough to pose as a democracy even as it commits genocide.<sup>[11]</sup> In September 2019, several hundred senior NCP cadre of the government and party spent much of a week in an indoctrination session in “Xi Jinping Thought” (i.e., the thought of the present dictator of China), facilitated by 40 cadre from China (to include officials as high as the Chief of the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China). Subsequently, Xi himself, accompanied by a substantial party, visited Kathmandu and signed more than two dozen agreements designed to bind the two countries more closely. This was followed in June 2020 by a second indoctrination session, conducted via internet teleconferencing during the pandemic lockdown.<sup>[12]</sup>

Small wonder, then, that a good bit of head-scratching went on in the two largest democracies with skin in the game, New Delhi and Washington. It was almost as if Nepalis had no knowledge of the astonishing crimes of those with whom they hang out – or worse, simply chose to ignore the matter. India needs a stable, friendly neighbour. China needs a stooge. And the U.S. wants a stable, prosperous democracy. China wants a vote in the UN and a thorn in India’s side. Cambodia is the model, a bought-and-paid-for asset. Central for Nepal, therefore, should be to have a serious discussion as to what it believes in and what it wants to be.

The present fraught state of Nepali democracy highlights the challenge. It is not enough to vote, just as it is not enough to secure voting booths even as the most astonishing crimes occur just outside the perimeters of those voting premises. Countries are not empty vessels. They have systems. A voice in the West who objects to policies or their manner of implementation has a chance to be heard. That is not true of dictatorial systems. That Nepalis representing certain parties claim the opposite rather highlights the point.

This same cabal was loaded for bear when an odd leak of a purported military alliance of sorts, apparently SPP working papers from a 2015 request by Nepal Army (NA) to be a part of the programme (as are e.g. the Maldives and Sri Lanka in partnership with Montana). SPP, in turn, originated in the effort to turn the militaries of the former Soviet empire into more capable entities that could fulfill missions that frequently are tasked to the local forces of democracies, such as disaster response, crisis management, maritime security, and economic initiatives.<sup>[13]</sup> Partnerships with state forces ensure much greater continuity than with regular forces, which not only regularly rotate personnel but are tasked primarily with preparation for combat. With the local US ambassador assuming the lead, and the US providing the funding for address of jointly ascertained needs, the programme was obviously one that would have benefited Nepal. That, of course, was what made it suspicious to the left.

As it was, the communist forces within the ruling coalition, particularly the Maoists, again took the lead in demanding that the American perfidy be opposed. The result was that SPP was rejected by a Cabinet decision, but not before considerable damage to civil-military relations. For the same individuals who had, in fact, backed MCC until it was not in their ideological interests to do so, tried to claim the army (NA) had taken it upon itself to apply for SPP. Reality was quite different. Still, there was little the state could do, and therein lies the heart of this report. Nepal is not a country with a government. Rather, it is a labyrinth of party politics where power, policies, and personalities in which Nepal is the clear loser.

## The Labyrinth of Party Politics



Figure 2: Radical Maoist agitprop being carried out before an audience at Malkot Serapata Narharinath in Kalikot district, 24 January 2020. Inset: Forestry official assaulted on 3 January 2022 in Kailali district for resisting radical forced fundraising (i.e., using violence to obtain “donations.” He has been “blackfaced” as a sign of disrespect. Numerous such assaults have been recorded, with actions often escalating. Actions by the radical Maoists, such as organizing in local space and attacking targets, remain widespread. Radical Maoist agitprop session held 24 January 2020 in Kalikot district. Photo: [Annapurna Post](#), Inset: [Desh Sanchar](#). They occur alongside similar mainstream

*communist activities (both the Maoists and the UML). In form and content, there is little to distinguish these events, save the route demanded for realization of revolution.*

The major error in assessing Nepali politics is to identify the government as an entity representing the country. In reality, it is the tangible expression of rent-seeking every bit as comprehensive as that associated with classic resource curse.<sup>[14]</sup> In the Nepali case, though, the only major resource is the state itself. Thus controlling it is paramount for those seeking enrichment – or simply (to be fair) a good life.

There follows a second reality: political power involves a division of spoils, not of tasks much less responsibilities. It makes no difference whether a Finance Minister, for instance, has requisite qualifications, a subject much discussed in present Nepali media as the country lurches through its latest economic challenges. He is there, because Cabinet positions are allocated on quota to political parties – or, if a single party, to its factions.<sup>[15]</sup> In that sense, one returns to the “bureaucratic polity” model of the late Fred Riggs, wherein he explained, in intricate detail, the manner in which actual politics played itself out within the Thai bureaucracy rather than the constitutive (or representative) system. Nepal may differ in detail but is astonishingly similar in functioning.<sup>[16]</sup>

Deuba, then, is not prime minister in the sense of being leader of a country. He is the representative of a communist coalition. That he has limited power is revealed by the parliamentary math. With a total of 275 seats, and 138 needed for a majority, the ruling coalition has 159: 63 NC; plus 49 Maoists (4 suspended);<sup>[17]</sup> plus 25 ex-UML communists – now officially recognized as the CPN (United Socialists) or CPN (*Ekikrit Samajbadi*); plus 21 People’s Socialist Party, Nepal (PSP-N or Janata Samajbbadi Party), a majority faction of the *tarai* socialists, who themselves have split – with 13 members refusing to commit to the ruling coalition and with ex-Maoists in key leadership positions; plus a lone vote from an independent and otherwise irrelevant party. The tenuous wording of what might seem to be a straightforward list highlights the point: the composition of the parties themselves, hence the coalition’s majority, remains in flux.<sup>[18]</sup>

The UML rump, for example, *Ekikrit Samajbadi*, exists only due to the prime minister’s unilateral and questionable manipulation of rules governing party splits (precisely to achieve his majority). The same is true for the PSP-N. The existence of both is thus being challenged in the Supreme Court. Regardless, what should be evident is that NC is a minority both within a communist dominated coalition (albeit some members calling themselves socialists, a term also used by the communists) and within the parliament itself. In fact, it has been unable to govern, because until 18 May 2022, parliament was physically blocked by the ousted communist UML, which remains the single largest party in the country. Parliament has met only a limited number of times.

Prior to the current crisis, the ruling communists had 191 votes (NCP 174 in coalition with half of the *tarai* “socialists”). Thus, they had more than a two-thirds majority, which allowed, in practice, ruling by decree. This, the communist prime minister, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, did, concerning himself with widespread terrorism only to the extent necessary to force the radical Maoists – those responsible for the numerous bombings and extensive illicit fundraising – to return to the unified communist fold. Attacks upon non-communist actors were acceptable; jeopardizing the communists’ dominant position was not. The pandemic was the intervening variable, because Oli sought to exploit it not only to solidify communist power but his own personal position at the expense of other prominent communist personalities. Those who took most offense and had communist party followings sufficient to allow them to challenge him were Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal *aka* Prachanda and UML stalwart Madhav Kumar Nepal, both of whom had previously served as prime ministers.

It is Dahal who is of central importance to the present situation. He remains the leader of the original and still largest Maoist group within the communist movement of Nepal. It continues to use terrorism *opportunistically* despite having opted to emphasize political action and subversion within the context of Nepal’s flawed democracy. Known for much of its history as the Communist Party of Nepal or CPN(M) – the precise manner in which the acronym is rendered was that of the group – it changed its name to the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M) after the end of the overt conflict. Post-insurgency splintering saw at one point as many as ten Maoist parties in existence. When perhaps half of them returned to the fold, the mainstream altered its name yet again, becoming the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre). Subsequently, on 17 May 2018, it was announced that the party’s electoral alliance with the communists (but not Maoists) of the UML, led by Oli, had resulted in their amalgamation into the restored NCP. As a result of Dahal’s efforts to seize leadership of the NCP, aided by UML anti-Oli dissidents – even as that party controlled the government – a crisis erupted in December 2020.

In January 2021, the party split, with the rival factions mutually “expelling” each other. The situation became even more complicated when a 7 March 2021 Supreme Court decision found that the reunification of the communist movement was legally flawed and thus null. Though the original two parties, the UML and the Maoists, again came into existence, personal differences had already led to line-crossing by individuals. The result has been a situation both chaotic and tense, with the major communist forces fielding paramilitaries, and episodic violence occurring nationwide. Oli was ousted as the prime minister by a Supreme Court decision on 12 July 2021 that appointed the caretaker government.<sup>[19]</sup> Dahal remained head of the Maoist party – now, again, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) – but saw several prominent lieutenants – to include the longest serving Home Minister in the democratic era<sup>[20]</sup> – formally join the communist faction of the UML that was ousted.<sup>[21]</sup>

This maneuvering has not altered local realities or changed the situation there for victims of violence. One of the defining characteristics of the post-conflict years has been the increasing divergence between the formal rituals of national political participation and the local politics of political domination. Leninist political forms result in a reality where obedience is demanded by the central party organs, but decentralization devolves tactical considerations of area domination and violence to local party entities. This creates deniability for the Centre and a sense of empowerment at the local level through widespread networks of cellular action, each of which is replete with offices and the authority to act against party enemies. Little discipline is exercised through the chain of command, with the overriding party factor for evaluation of performance being results – delivery of local domination and the funding necessary to support party operations.

Deniability remains essential to Maoist functioning above-ground, as is ensuring that Transitional Justice cases are not heard.<sup>[22]</sup> The sheer level of atrocity unleashed in local space during the conflict has not yet been comprehended by either national or international observers.<sup>[23]</sup> Regardless of precise count – which is substantial, even using existing data – the Maoists claim whatever occurred is evidence of the repressive nature of the old-order or actually carried out by the state. Rage, they state, was the predictable result when revolutionary impulse emerged. This line of argument has continued to the present.<sup>[24]</sup>

At heart, the issue is as stated above: Nepal, its declared political status notwithstanding, is at best a quasi-democracy. As a self-proclaimed communist state, it seeks to implement what it claims is “21<sup>st</sup> Century Marxism” or “scientific socialism.”<sup>[25]</sup> Maoism is but one thread of this fervently embraced communism.<sup>[26]</sup> That the Maoists reunited for several years with the historically larger, above-ground communist movement resulted from the strategy of Dahal, who intended to use the united front approach to subvert the dominant UML leadership so that the Maoists would control the entire communist party (and the country).<sup>[27]</sup> As Oli has been in poor health, Dahal until recently saw strategic patience as all that was necessary for Maoist victory. Ultimately, he expected subversion (within the communist movement) and terrorism (directed at non-communist foes) to drop leadership of the combined communist forces into his lap. This would allow the Maoists to complete “the revolution” under the façade of democratic process.<sup>[28]</sup>

The wild-card was the issuing of a long-delayed court decision, which, in essence, found NCP to have expropriated as its name the title legally belonging to another party. The resulting chaos had powerful consequences, because all Nepali socio-economic realities (especially distribution of resources and favours) take place within the matrix of party politics. The latter, in turn, are driven by Leninist party forms that are themselves bounded by a complex legal framework which is derived from the equally byzantine post-war maneuvering. The crisis within the NCP saw actions which all but destroyed the foundations of the edifice that had been built.

In a parliamentary system, there is effectively no need for impeachment; rather, the offending individual is ousted from position or party. The offending individual in the crisis under discussion was Oli, who, having brought the Maoists into a reunited communist party and then destroyed the opposition NC, ruled dictatorially. The Maoist plan was to use UML line-crossers – who had been enticed into UML ranks by remunerative party positions of power – to support them in ousting Oli from his own party positions. Dahal would then emerge as not only head of the party but also of the country (i.e., prime minister). With the two-thirds parliamentary position, he would have achieved his long-sought objective and could refashion Nepal at will into a proper communist state modeled on that of China.

As per the constitution, the president, Bidya Devi Bhandari, was to act as the referee in the complex moves that followed. In reality, as a UML placeman of longstanding, as well as an Oli intimate, she connived in a series of increasingly dubious measures designed not only to keep Oli in power but to buy him time to suborn factions within both communist ranks and others, especially the *tarai* socialists.<sup>[29]</sup> The latter, divided into two factions of 17 parliamentary seats each, were themselves a recently reunited separatist force, thus comprised of factions nearly as

antagonistic to each other as those within the communist movement itself. Indeed, as noted, the two premier socialist leaders were ex-Maoists, to include the man who had been the second leading figure during the entire 1996-2006 insurgency, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai.

As the Supreme Court slowly but regularly ruled illegal each of Mr. Oli's measures, the various communist factions readied their paramilitaries for action. For these, too, had split in the same manner as was driving the crisis within the larger communist movement. Oli and Nepal, the main antagonists within the UML ranks, were no strangers to political violence. Both were former Naxalites (proto-Maoists inspired by the first Maoist insurgency in India, that of the Naxalites, so-named, because their struggle emerged from the district of Naxalbari, which borders eastern Nepal). Where they differed from the Maoists was not in rejecting local violence per se but in their refusal to embrace people's war as the route to power. Similarly, Maoist re-entry into the open political scene stemmed not from acceptance of the parliamentary premise but from a decision that the changing political circumstances of 2005-2006 allowed them to offer a united front to the communists (UML) and NC in their ongoing battle against the monarchy. [30] In the event, in May 2008, the monarchy was abolished, and the political parties then returned to battling each other. [31] In that battle, the non-communists had seen the ground slip from under their feet, as revealed when all major communist forces reunited.

### Domination Without Unity



Figure 3: Mainstream Maoist armed strike on 27 February 2022 in Kathmandu, accompanied (Inset) by inert IEDs placed to achieve the disruptive and propaganda effect of actual IEDs – without the possible popular backlash. In the recent violent street actions and bandas called by the mainstream Maoists (in February 2022) – which occurred even as they technically were a part of the caretaker regime – use was made of inert IEDs, strategically planted to disrupt normal life without likelihood of a mass-casualty event. In this sense, as concerns the high-end of terrorism, the practical difference between the various Maoist factions lies only in their willingness to use explosives in public venues.

*All groups continue to attack individuals and groups, and they often coordinate their actions. Main graphic: [The Kathmandu Post](#), Inset: [Koshi Online](#).*

The present situation of communist domination without unity, in a sense, is a return to the historical norm. NCP's recent three years without major schism were an anomaly, because in the past it is largely division within the larger communist movement that has allowed NC to garner parliamentary majorities during the democratic era (1990 to present). These parliamentary majorities, while supported by an at-times strong popular base, were a consequence of a first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting scheme which allowed numerical victory over the divided communist forces.<sup>[32]</sup> This is no longer true, regardless of communist splintering, because the voting system was altered by the 2015 constitution. It is now a mixed FPTP and proportional (i.e., popular vote percentage) system. Ironically, were it not for this reality, NC would hardly exist as a parliamentary party, having been driven from the field by the unified communist campaign in the 2017 election. NC won just 23 FPTP seats in a 275-seat lower house – emerging with 63 total due to proportional representation – and had limited power in the upper house, which represents 7 provinces (it has 10 seats of 59).

This maneuvering does not represent a maturing of post-war parliamentary practice. Rather, it exemplifies lurching from crisis to crisis, with political violence widespread and its perpetrators enjoying all but total impunity. In their public and private statements, all communist parties and forces make clear that their ultimate objective is to produce in Nepal viable “21<sup>st</sup> century socialism,” with internal debates revolving around the tactical benefit in temporarily putting aside the “communist” label, while maintaining the essence of the communist approach and objective. This is classic Leninism, wherein any tactical compromise is acceptable as long as the strategic objective is maintained.<sup>[33]</sup> Even Deuba's communist partners have stated, publicly and privately, that NC remains wedded to a regressive ideology (democracy and the market), and that the U.S. remains the principal foe. Hence, they have allowed the caretaker government to do little save manage response to the pandemic. Dahal, in fact, has publicly made clear – as recently as 24 June – that, for the coalition to continue following national elections, he expects to be named prime minister.

In such circumstances, there will be little change in national or local circumstances. The Maoists, in particular, have actually been strengthened, because they remain willing to bolt even as they leverage their coalition position to the hilt. “Inside,” they are demanding that their present 36 seats be raised to 65 representing the coalition in the upcoming national elections. “Outside,” they continue to use paramilitary violence to attack positions with which they do not agree and to ensure domination of local areas they already hold. Similarly, having enlarged the UML breakaway faction considerably, Nepal is demanding greater effort to strengthen his party's wins.<sup>[34]</sup>

Ironically, for the remaining months of the caretaker term, the partners need each other, because Oli has continued his aggressive efforts to reclaim his position and still leads a mainstream communist UML of 96 parliamentary seats (111 if line-crossers return). Local elections were held in a single round on 17 May 2022, with the caretaker coalition achieving a majority of ward and municipal positions yet only because the communists again split their votes (between UML of both factions and the Maoists). Altogether, the communists held their majority. Local governance is symbolically important but has little power, which derives from the provincial and national elections.<sup>[35]</sup> In all this, the clear loser is the Nepali public. Analytical opinion is all but united in its condemnation of present politics, and my April 2002 fieldwork verified that local cadre were extremely unhappy at national bed-sharing. The dilemma, though, is as it invariably is in Nepal: with a staggering array of challenges buffeting individuals, few in local space have time, energy, or resources to mount resistance in local space. That moment may well come, but not yet.

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## End Notes

[1] Ample description at: <https://www.nationalguard.mil/leadership/joint-staff/j-5/international-affairs-division/state-partnership-program/>.

[2] USAID notes, “Foreign aid is a critical component in Nepal's development. According to the Ministry of Finance's recently published Development Cooperation Report, foreign aid in Nepal accounts for 26 percent of the national budget. “ See USAID, “Nepal's Aid Management Platform: A Tool for Managing Aid in Nepal and Making it More Effective,” 12 July 2021, <https://www.usaid.gov/nepal/newsletter/may-june-2013/nepals-aid-management-platform->

[tool-managing-aid-nepal-and-making-it-more-effective#:~:text=Foreign%20aid%20is%20a%20critical,percent%20of%20the%20national%20budget.](#)

[3] Useful summary, Biswas Baral, “Nepal Ratified the MCC Compact. What Now?” *The Diplomat*, 14 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/nepal-ratified-the-mcc-compact-what-now/>. For demonstrations, Anup Ojha and Shuvam Dhungana, “Anti-MCC Protests Disrupt Road Traffic in Kathmandu Throughout the Day,” *The Kathmandu Post*, 21 February 2022, <https://kathmandupost.com/valley/2022/02/21/anti-mcc-protests-disrupt-road-traffic-in-kathmandu-throughout-the-day>; for inert IED in “A Suspicious Object Found in Front of the Federal Parliament Reads ‘No MCC,’” *Koshi Online*, 28 February 2022 12:02 PM, <https://en.koshionline.com/newsdetails/32068>.

[4] Pranaya Rana, “After the MCC, Now the SPP,” *Off the Record*, Issue 57, 17 June 2022, <https://recordnepal.substack.com/p/off-the-record-057-after-the-mcc>.

[5] See e.g. Pranaya Rana, “Not the MCC Again,” *Off the Record*, Issue 39, 4 February 2022, <https://recordnepal.substack.com/p/off-the-record-039-not-the-mcc-again>; also, Kosh Raj Koirala, “What Happens to MCC Deal is a Big Question as Rival Factions Prevail in Ruling NCP,” *Republica*, 2 May 2020, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/what-happens-to-mcc-agreement-is-a-big-question-as-rival-factions-prevail-in-ruling-ncp>.

[6] Available at: (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>).

[7] This is a position with which I agree. For assessment cited, Karl-Heinz Krämer, “Is Nepal Still a Democratic State?,” *English.khabarhub.com*, 19 June 2021, <https://english.khabarhub.com/2021/19/191404/>. Other sources cited: For democracy, EIU, *Democracy Index 2021: The China Challenge* (London: EIU, 2022), <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/>. For corruption score and ranking, “Nepal Country Report,” <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/nepal>. For human rights, Amnesty International Human Rights Report 2020/21: *The State of the World’s Human Rights* (London: AI, 2021), 262, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/3202/2021/en/>; and Human Rights Watch, *No Law, No Justice, No State for Victims: The Culture of Impunity in Post-Conflict Nepal* (London: HRW, November 2020), [file:///G:/19%20Oct%202020%20backup-ACTUAL%20FILES/1-Downloads%20\(Nepal\)/Nepal-2020/11-Nov%202020/20%20Nov%2020-No%20Law,%20no%20Justice-HRW-nepal1120\\_web\\_1.pdf](file:///G:/19%20Oct%202020%20backup-ACTUAL%20FILES/1-Downloads%20(Nepal)/Nepal-2020/11-Nov%202020/20%20Nov%2020-No%20Law,%20no%20Justice-HRW-nepal1120_web_1.pdf). Useful on the current political crisis is Sambridh Ghimire, “Institutional Collapse in Nepal,” *The Indian Express*, 30 May 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/institutional-collapse-in-nepal-7336977/>.

[8] For discussion, among numerous possibilities in my work, “Back to the Future: Nepali People’s War as ‘New War’,” in Shanthie D’Souza, ed., *Countering Insurgencies and Violent Extremism in South and South East Asia* (London: Routledge, 2019), 109-52; also, “Tenuous Security in the Himalayas: A Focus on Nepal,” in *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia: National, Regional and Global Implications* (London: Routledge, 2021), 63-79. also, “Maoist Miscue: MCC and the Future of the Party,” *The Himalayan Times*, 15 February 2022, available at: <https://thehimalayantimes.com/opinion/maoist-miscue-mcc-and-the-future-of-the-party>.

[9] It ranks near the absolute bottom in the EIU league tables, behind even China (151<sup>st</sup> to China’s 148<sup>th</sup>). The Caracas regime, to be clear, maintains its internal position only through the widespread, brutal use of paramilitary thugs and through support of dictatorships such as Cuba, Russia, China, and Iran. Latest estimates state that nearly 6 million Venezuelans are refugees as a consequence of national collapse resulting from the country’s Marxist policies, and a special UN Human Rights Council investigation has reported there exist “reasonable grounds” to charge the country’s dictatorship with crimes against humanity.

[10] Details (to include photo) in Biparta Thapa, “NCP Chair Dahal Calls for Ending Embargo Against Cuba,” *Republica*, 26 July 2019, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/ncp-chair-dahal-calls-for-ending-embargo-against-cuba/>.

[11] Just as West Bengal was used by the Soviets to launch disinformation, which could then be laundered through other outlets, so Nepal has in recent years proved the ideal platform to plant propaganda under the guise of op-eds or citizen contributions.

[12] Excellent for the model advocated by Beijing is Bruce J. Dickson, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).; also, John Fitzgerald, *Cadre Country: How China Became the Chinese Communist Party* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2022). Also of considerable

value, A. James McAdams, *Vanguard of the Revolution: The Global Idea of the Communist Party* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). My own work on the subject may be found in (among others), *Counterrevolution in China: Wang Sheng and the Kuomintang* (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

[13] Ironically, an entry as mundane and accessible as that of *Wikipedia* is quite accurate, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State\\_Partnership\\_Program](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_Partnership_Program). For semi-official discussion, [https://www.army.mil/article/72048/state\\_partnership\\_program\\_emphasizes\\_building\\_relationships](https://www.army.mil/article/72048/state_partnership_program_emphasizes_building_relationships).

[14] Discussion at Syed Mansoob, *The Resource Curse* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Agenda Publishing, 2018).

[15] For discussion, Ashim Neupane, “How Finance Minister Janardan Sharma is Failing Nepal’s Economy,” *Nepal Live Today*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.nepalivetoday.com/2021/12/20/how-finance-minister-janardan-sharma-is-failing-nepals-economy/>. The subject of the article resigned under pressure on 6 July 2022. He is to be replaced by another Maoist designee.

[16] Fred R. Riggs, *The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu, HI: East-West Center Press, 1966).

[17] At any point in time, the party numbers may not equal the number of seats due to suspensions or expulsions. In particular, at present during the intense intra-communist battle, a number of parliamentarians, having been expelled by their home parties, have had to vacate their seats.

[18] Initially, the coalition could muster but 129 seats: 61 NC (2 suspended); plus 49 Maoists (4 suspended); plus 19 from the split *tarai* socialists (who had 34 total in their party). A majority was achieved by adding 14 ex-UML in the CPN (United Socialists) or CPN, who announced on 27 August 2021 that they would support the coalition. Their status, as noted, remained legally contested, but they were subsequently able to expand their numbers enough to provide the majority as indicated in the text.

[19] The decision stated that an actual head-count of parliamentarians (versus Mr. Oli’s submission of single votes of support “by party”) revealed defections of such scale (i.e., movement between communist factions) as to place a non-communist but minority figure – former prime minister Deuba of NC – in the position of prime minister., because he was nominated by the communist coalition that was opposed to the manner in which Oli ruled.

[20] The current constitution was effective from 18 September 2015, with the first government, that of the communist UML, beginning its term 11 October 2015. The Home Minister, a Maoist, was named 12 October 2015. Thereafter, until the commencement of the caretaker government’s term, the Maoists held the position 1,611 days or 77 percent of the total. For incumbents and tenure (in Nepali): <https://moha.gov.np/>.

[21] As an avowed communist party, the unified NCP had as its ostensible apex leadership body a Standing Committee, which consisted of 45 members, of whom 26 were from the former UML, 19 from the mainstream Maoists. The ruling hand, though, was the General Secretariat (included in the 45 total), structurally was aligned 6 to 3 in favour of the UML but in reality consisting of individuals bitterly divided by ideological leanings, policy differences, and personalities. At the time of the December 2020 crisis, it was divided 5-4 in favour of the Maoists. Most NCP leadership figures of consequence were men, and the General Secretariat was entirely male.

[22] Transitional justice, as both a formal category and a human rights challenge, refers to the measures to be taken in the post-conflict present to address abuses committed during the conflict past. None of the 63,000 case files created (the figure goes to 66,000, when disappearances are included) have been heard, with the government focusing instead upon co-opting the responsible organizations by populating them with placemen. The result has been impunity for perpetrators – overwhelmingly Maoists who remain in local spaces. For general discussion, Yvette Selim, *Transitional Justice in Nepal: Interests, Victims and Agency* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[23] For Nepali Congress alone the toll was staggering, as may be found in a massive compilation of conflict casualties, *Report on Stateistical Record of Conflict Victim in Nepal [sic]*, prepared by the Peace Process and Conflict Victim Monitoring Coordination Committee, Central Office of the Nepali Congress (2008). Apparently, only three printed and bound copies exist. That examined during my August 2018 fieldwork was in English, with what appeared to be 8 pt. font filling every line of both sides of more than 500 pages. The result is tens of thousands of recorded atrocities. On Maoist post-conflict terrorism, see Kanak Mani Dixit, *Peace Politics of Nepal* (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2011), as well as my own work noted earlier.

[24] Though integral to radical left-wing thought, especially that of Maoism, the line of argument is repugnant in its denial of agency and accountability. A very different standard was applied to instances of military indiscipline during

the conflict. Discussion at, Thomas A. Marks, “Miscarriage of Justice: the Major Basnet Case,” *Amalekh*, 28 December 2009, <https://amalekh.wordpress.com/2009/12/28/miscarriage-of-justice-the-major-basnet-case/>. For post-conflict violence, there is complete denial that incidents such as comprise this case even happen.

[25] For details of the ideological approach, Paul Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism: From Engels to Althusser* (London: Routledge, 2008). For the Chinese model and trajectory to power that the Nepali communists seek to emulate, Tony Saich, *From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2021).

[26] This communism is more fervent belief than ideologically sound politics. A well-established body of scholarship deals with the concept of “political religion,” with its constituent analysis drawing upon the affinity between religious quest, with its constant division in search of salvation or deliverance, and totalitarian utopianism. Communism and fascism have been the most widely examined cases. Nepali communism, which beyond all else seeks “development” – a way out of a perennial state of deprivation – has consequently been characterized by extensive splintering and its accompanying violence. Even Nepali Maoism has in the years since 2006 had at one time numerous parties claiming to be the authentic voice of this variant of communism. For relevant treatment of the potential for dictatorial violence inherent to political religion, see Marcela Cristi, *From Civil to Political Religion: The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001); also, Hans Meier, ed., *Totalitarianism and Political Religions: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships*, trans. Jodi Bruhn (NY: Routledge, 2009). For the mindset which reifies ideology as political project, Phillip W. Gray, *Vanguardism: Ideology and Organization in Totalitarian Politics* (London: Routledge, 2020).

[27] “United front” is a fundamental Leninist tactic whereby a communist party joins a more dominant rival, ostensibly to face a common foe or pressing issue. In reality, by allowing the communists into its processes and giving them access to its manpower, the rival (even if formally communist) places itself in a position such that it can be subverted from within. The united front approach historically has been a central element of Maoist people’s war, the strategy followed by the Nepali Maoists. The subject is extensively treated in my *Counterrevolution in China: Wang Sheng and the Kuomintang* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), as well as my “‘The History of Our Sewage Disposal System’: Solzhenitsyn’s Conception of Stalinism as a Necessary Product of Lenin’s Thinking,” *Issues & Studies* 14, no. 5 (May 1978), pp.65-89. It is a central component of the discussion in Thomas A. Marks and David H. Ucko, “Gray Zone in Red: China Revisits the Past,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 32, no. 2 (March 2021), pp.181-204.

[28] This strategy has become the norm for authoritarian polities in the post-Cold War political environment. See e.g. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Particularly apt in illustrating the point are the book’s introductory remarks (e-book, no pagination): “Unlike single-party or military dictatorships, post-Cold War regimes...were competitive in that opposition forces used democratic institutions to contest vigorously – and, on occasion, successfully – for power. Nevertheless, they were not democratic. Electoral manipulation, unfair media access, abuse of state resources, and varying degrees of harassment and violence skewed the playing field in favour of incumbents. In other words, competition was real but unfair.”

[29] It may be noted that the vice president, Nanda Kishor Pun, and speaker of the house, Krishna Bahadur Mahara, are both Maoists, who have been involved in similar activity to support the party.

[30] Reintegration of the Maoists is the premier illustration of teleological thinking in assessments of where Nepali politics now stands. At the key strategy session, held in September 2005 in Chunwang VDC, Rukum, the course of action outlined and agreed upon was understood by all participants to be the embrace of parliamentary democracy as to be a tactic that would enable Maoist organizing in government strongholds (essentially, district capitals and Kathmandu) for ultimate seizure of power through violent mass action linked to then-existing rural domination. The subsequent splits resulted from radical claims of the plan’s betrayal by the mainstream. The debate was not one of violence versus nonviolence but over just how aggressively to proceed. Dahal’s presentation to the Chunwang meeting states as its first military goal of five (translation from the Nepali): “To extensively militarize the party, authority, party members, and people and seek to configure, specialize, and train the People’s Liberation Army to take necessary action in the cities, center, region, districts, and capital” (i.e., to prepare forces for urban insurrection). Original document examined during March 2017 fieldwork in Nepal.

[31] See e.g. Murari Raj Sharma and Bhagirath Basnet, *The Rise of Communists and Fall of Monarchy in Nepal* (Bhaktapur, Nepal: Kathmandu School of Law, 2017).

[32] Tallies in fact frequently produced a communist popular majority. In the 2013 election for the constituent assembly which produced the present constitution, for example, NC dominated in seats won, but its popular tally was 2,421,252 compared to a split communist vote that when combined was 3,682,143 (2,243,477 UML and 1,438,666 Maoist). Once the Maoists became more subtle in their continued use of violence, the UML in 2017 opted for unity grounded in ideological affinity. For comparison between the two major parties, NC and UML, see Krishna Hachhethu, *Party Building in Nepal: Organisation, Leadership and People- A Comparative Study of the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Print, 2002). Excellent on the transition to democracy is Kiyoko Ogura, *Kathmandu Spring: The People's Movement of 1990* (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2001). For background, Krzysztof Debnicki, *Royalists and Populists: Evolution of the Political System of Nepal 1950-1980*, limited edition of *Orientalia Varsoviensia* 5 (Warsaw University Press, 1992).

[33] For modern application, Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, new edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

[34] In the local elections, Nepal (as he has made abundantly and publicly clear) felt his UML rump was slighted in the distribution of "one coalition representative per seat." This allowed the mainstream UML of Oli to gain many lower level positions that Nepal felt his people could have won. He thus expects redress. His desires, though, collide with reality. In the upcoming election, 165 seats of the federal House and 330 in the seven provincial assemblies will be contested. If, as speculated by astute observers, NC reserves 100 seats for its own people, and Dahal's Maoists demand 65, the math dictates crisis. It is noteworthy that in their gambit, the Maoists seek to nearly double their representative numbers without a commensurate increase in actual popular backing. This is quintessential united front tactics (as well as a form a political Russian Roulette, given the consequences of any partner refusing to back down).

[35] Astute commentary at Deepak Thapa, "Impressions From the Election Past," *The Kathmandu Post*, 18 May 2022, <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2022/05/18/impressions-from-the-election-past>. For discussion of ample election violence, Prithvi Man Shrestha, "Festering Political Feud Resulted in Violent Election Day, Observers Say: *The Kathmandu Post*, 15 May 2022, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/05/15/festering-political-feud-resulted-in-violent-election-day-observers-say>.

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## From Bergen-Belsen to Ukraine



**Guest Writer: Heidi Kingstone**

The war in Ukraine and the atrocities committed there, with accompanying claims of genocide and Nazism, have made remembrance of the Holocaust more relevant than ever. We are confronted by perhaps the most serious challenge to the international rule of law since the end of World War II and, unfortunately, we are also confronted with atrocities committed by Vladimir Putin's Russia on a level we have not seen in Europe in the intervening 77 years.

This year's Russian invasion of Ukraine is the most brutal and largest military operation since 1945 and the first time in the twenty-first century that a superpower has unleashed its power on a neighbouring country.

On 8 May, I was starkly reminded of this gruesome reality while attending a double commemoration at the memorial site of the Nazi concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen in northern Germany.



(Photo Credit: Heidi Kingstone)

The ceremony there that day marked the 77th anniversary of both the liberation of that camp by British troops on 15 April 1945, and the end of World War II twenty-three days later.

The British officers and soldiers who entered what almost immediately became known as the “Horror Camp” were shocked by the incomparable human misery they found there. The photographs they took of heaps of dead, naked, skeletal bodies, at least 10,000 corpses stacked and littered throughout the camp, mixed with approximately 58,000 half-dead, starving, and diseased men, women, and children who were themselves no more than skin and bones, mostly Jews but also Roma and Sinti, Prisoners of War, political opponents and homosexuals. The camp is infamous for many things. This is where teenage diarist Anne Frank and her sister, Margot, died from the raging typhus epidemic in February, weeks before liberation.

For decades after, in the UK and elsewhere, Belsen symbolised the enormity of the crimes against humanity that the Nazis had committed.

In 1945, the Russians and the Ukrainians as Soviets were allied with the US and the UK in the war against Nazi Germany. This year, Russian and Belarusian diplomats [were asked](#) by the [Lower Saxony Memorials Foundation](#) not to attend the ceremony at Bergen-Belsen.

As I walked on the landscaped space between no-longer-existing barracks at Belsen, a man stopped to ask if we had any connection to Belsen. My guide was the prominent genocide law scholar, human rights activist, poet and author, Professor Menachem Rosensaft. Yes, he did have a connection, he told the young British man. He was born in Belsen in 1948 after it had become a Displaced Persons camp. Did the young man have any connections asked Professor Rosensaft, which started a memorable conversation? “Yes,” he replied. “My grandfather was one of the ambulance drivers when the camp was liberated.” “Under (Mervyn) Gonin?” asked Rosensaft, referring to Lt. Col. Mervyn Gonin, who commanded the British 11th Light Field Ambulance unit and led the first full medical unit into Belsen just after liberation. “Yes,” answered the young man who returns to Belsen every year. Rosensaft, whose parents were liberated at Belsen, said, “I owe my life to your grandfather. Thank you.”

Originally intended as an exchange camp for privileged prisoners and built to house no more than 8000 prisoners, Belsen was considered, “not that bad,” until the fall of 1944, explained Professor Rosensaft, but as the Red Army moved rapidly westward across Poland, the Nazis embarked on an insane mission. Tens of thousands of inmates of the German death and concentration camps in Poland were taken on death marches and transported to camps in Germany, including Belsen.

During the winter of 1945, conditions became horrific, with close to 60,000 prisoners crammed together. The disease was rife – typhus, tuberculosis, dysentery, inmates were covered with lice, too weak and sick to even turn over to vomit, they urinated and defecated where they lay, and with no lavatory facilities, “the compounds were absolutely one mass of human excreta,” [said](#) Brigadier H. L. Glyn Hughes, the Deputy Director of Medical Services of the British Second Army. In the first week after the liberation, 9000 people died.

Today, mounds of human remains, covered in grass and marked with stone numbers of the number of the dead interred, are scattered on the grounds of what had been the concentration camp. The fields and monuments are surrounded by forests and the sounds of birds. You have to use your imagination to visualise the watch towers, the rows of barracks, the terrified prisoners, and the soldiers in their Nazi uniforms as they transferred into a place where the dead and dying could not be told apart. Over the course of the first three weeks after liberation, the victims had to be buried anonymously in mass graves.

As we drove past what had been the cinema in a nearby Wehrmacht base that housed the camp’s SS personnel – and that became the Belsen Displaced Persons camp – Professor Rosensaft started telling the story of the famous Hollywood actress, Marlene Dietrich, who had left Germany in 1930 and became a symbol of German anti-Nazi opposition, performing during the war for Allied troops. In the summer of 1945, she returned to Germany and searched for her sister. When told she was at Belsen, Marlene Dietrich first thought she had been a prisoner there. What she discovered was that her sister and her husband had run the cinema for the Nazis. Dietrich, who was one of the highest-paid actresses in the world, made sure her sister was looked after, but never publicly acknowledged her existence.

Liberation, as Professor Rosensaft points out, is somewhat of a misnomer. The Germans were terrified that the typhus-ridden prisoners might escape and spread the disease across the Lower Saxony heath. So, they engaged in truce negotiations with the British, turning over Belsen to them on 15 April, but not taking full control over the camp until two days later on 17 April.

It was during these first days that Brigadier Hughes met a young Polish dentist, who had saved many lives during her time in Auschwitz. Hadassah (Ada) Bimko was deported from her home in Sosnowiec, Poland, with her family, arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau on the night of 3-4 August 1943. Her parents, first husband, and five-and-a-half-year-old son were sent directly to their death in one of the gas chambers. Because of her medical training, the notorious SS doctor Josef Mengele, the Angel of Death, assigned her to work in the Birkenau infirmary, where she saved the lives of countless women by performing rudimentary surgeries and sending them on work detail in advance of gas chamber selections by the SS. On 14 November 1944, Ada Bimko, who had studied medicine at the University of Nancy, France, was sent to Bergen-Belsen, where she and a group of Jewish women inmates kept 149 children alive until the camp was liberated.

When Hughes met Bimko, he put her in charge of organising a team of a few doctors and several hundred volunteers from among the survivors to help care for all the camp's wounded alongside the British military medical personnel. Lt. Col. Gonin [said](#) that Dr. Bimko "was the bravest woman he had ever known," and it is with great pride that Professor Rosensaft tells the story of his remarkable mother.

The Holocaust still casts a shadow over the modern world. We live in an age when ethnic, religious, and racial hatreds are again commonplace around the world. "The demons of history have returned," [warns](#) Poland's prime minister in a guest essay for The Economist. "We are witnessing genocide again. In this environment, the West has acted like a frog in water brought gently to the boil. It has not reacted even as Russia has added heat."

Today's Germany is not the Germany of 1933 or 1945. Ukrainians can flee Russian soldiers and find refuge in Poland, the UK, Canada, in the US as opposed to the Jews who found all the borders closed: They couldn't escape. The Jews were someone else's problems, and no one's priority, but today much of the world is united in support of Ukraine; the European Union, the NATO members, and countries bordering on Ukraine have acted appropriately despite the unfolding tragedy. If the mass graves of Belsen have a moral imperative, it is a plea not to let this happen again.

In February 2022, the prosecutor at the International Criminal Court at The Hague opened a case [saying](#) there was "a reasonable basis to believe that both alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed in Ukraine."

We tend to think that genocide is the worst crime imaginable. US President Joe Biden has [accused Vladimir Putin](#) of committing genocide in Ukraine, saying that the Russian president is, "trying to wipe out the idea of even being Ukrainian".

Emphasising the horrific nature of the crimes being committed in 2022 is essential but there is a debate whether what is happening in Ukraine constitutes genocide. Professor Rosensaft is General Counsel and Associate Executive Vice President of the World Jewish Congress, a lecturer in law at Columbia Law School, and an Adjunct Professor of Law at Cornell Law School. He is also the [newly elected chairman](#) of the Advisory Board of the Lower Saxony Memorials Foundation. "The concept has developed that if it's not a crime of genocide then it's not as serious, which is ridiculous," Rosensaft says. "Does it matter if it's a crime against humanity and not genocide?"

In 1941, Winston Churchill [called](#) the atrocities that were perpetrated by the Nazis throughout Europe, "a crime without a name." Viewing atrocities through the prism of genocide may be a victory for Raphael Lemkin, the Jewish lawyer who created the term "genocide" in 1944, but a crime against humanity as defined in the charter of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg is equally heinous. "We do not do the cause of justice any favors by minimizing the severity of crimes that do not follow the narrow legal definition of genocide," Rosensaft argues with conviction.

Genocide is a legal term defined under the legal convention and is thus a narrow term that requires the "intent" to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, religious, or racial group. It cannot be a byproduct. Professor Rosensaft asks, "does it matter? No one has ever said, I feel better knowing that I am being killed because it's 'only' a crime against humanity and not genocide." Prior to 1945, there was no system for prosecuting either of these crimes, which hadn't been codified under international law. Indeed, the Genocide Convention was only adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 and did not enter into force until 1951.

A critical difference between 1939-1945 and today is that while five million Ukrainians have fled their country, they, unlike the Jews of World War II, have found refuge in homes and cities around the world.

Speaking beside the Jewish Monument of Belsen at the commemoration on May 8th, Rosensaft said:

“As we look out at the Belsen mass graves, as we remember the horrors that occurred here more than seven decades ago, we cannot be deaf or blind to the atrocities that are being committed today, in 2022.”

“Once again, civilians – men, women, and children – are terrorized, brutalized, and murdered on a scale and with a ferocity we have not witnessed in Europe since the end of World War II. Once again, corpses are strewn among the living. Once again, mass graves have become the final resting places of nameless victims of barbarity...”

“Still, Ukraine is not the Holocaust, and 2022 is not 1939-1945. To be sure, the killers are still vicious killers, but this time, the world is watching and reacting in real-time.”

The victims of the war in Ukraine were indeed remembered at Belsen this year. Belsen not only symbolises to the world the unimaginable horrors that the Nazis had committed, but its mass graves constitute a warning that the international community ignores at its peril. But, as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky [said](#), “We won then. We will win now.”

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## **MANTRAYA ANALYSIS#58: 05 MAY 2022**

# **Baloch Insurgency: Pakistan’s Moment of Reckoning**

***Bibhu Prasad Routray***

### **Abstract**

*Baloch insurgency is on a resurgence and its widened targets include CPEC projects as well as Chinese nationals in Pakistan. The Pakistani security establishment is under pressure from Beijing to respond decisively to the killing of three Chinese nationals on the premises of the Karachi University on 26 April. And yet, neither a quick military operation, as part of the strategy of annihilation nor an attention diversion tactic in the form of punishment to a few perpetrators of the attack would suffice. A comprehensive solution to the insurgency needs to be found.*

### **The Attack**

Three Chinese tutors were among the four people who lost their lives in a suicide terrorist attack at one of the entrances to the Karachi University on 26 April 2022. A female suicide bomber, identified as Shari Baloch, carried out the blast as the van carrying the victims approached the location, in the proximity of the Confucius Institute in the university. On 29 April, an editorial in the Pakistani newspaper Dawn termed the incident as part of a ‘[new wave of terrorism](#)’ in the country. It said, “While the attacks are mostly aimed at our border regions by religiously-motivated terrorist groups based in Afghanistan, there are frequent reminders that Baloch militancy, too, is on the rise.”<sup>11</sup>

Terming these terror attacks as a wave could be an exaggeration. What is, however, true is that Baloch insurgents are indeed becoming selective in their target selection, which unmistakably includes the Chinese nationals in the country. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a US\$60 billion spoke on Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which passes through the Balochistan province and is accused of being an instrument of exploitation, has become a rallying point for the militants. The Pakistani state’s approach to Baloch insurgency is essentially force centric and has done little to address the factors that feed dissent. With intense pressure from the Chinese to bring the perpetrators to task, the approach could become further skewed.

### **No Longer a low-intensity conflict**

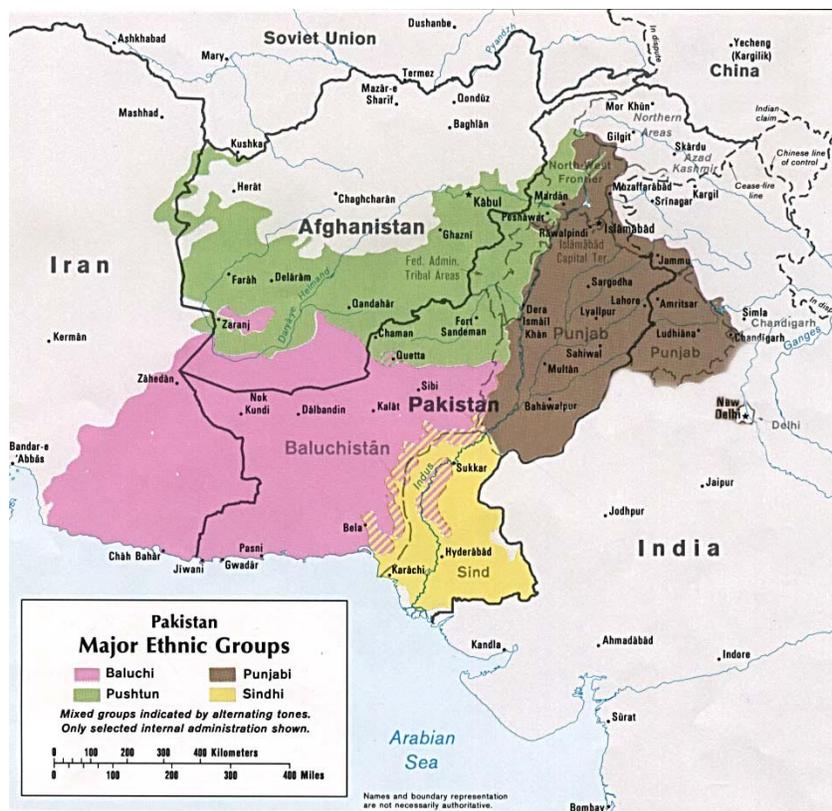
For a number of years, the Pakistani establishment has treated the Baloch insurgency as a low-intensity conflict confined mostly to Balochistan, the country’s largest province by territory. But that seems to have changed, as a spate of attacks that have taken place in 2022 demonstrate.

On 20 January, an explosion ripped through a busy Lahore business district, killing three persons and injuring over 20. The Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA) claimed responsibility for the attack. On the night of 25-26 January, 10 soldiers lost their lives in an attack on a Frontier Corps (FC) check post in the Kech district carried out by the BLA. Two days after the attack, three Levies Force personnel along with a Bugti clan elder were killed martyred in twin bomb blasts in the Sui area of Dera Bugti. On 30 January, 17 people, including two policemen, were injured in a grenade attack in Dera Allahyar town of Jaffarabad district. In February, BLA cadres attempted to attack security forces' camps in Balochistan's Panjgur and Naushki, both of which were repulsed. While the military's media wing said that a lone soldier and four terrorists were killed in these two separate attacks, the BLA claimed that more than 100 soldiers have perished.<sup>[2]</sup>

Among the factors that explain the surge in violence is a gradual move toward consolidation of what was previously a dissipated insurgency. Over the years, insurgent groups have either merged or have formed tactical alliances to put up a united fight against the Pakistani state. For instance, the BNA which claimed responsibility for the attack in Lahore had come into existence in early January 2022, with the merger of the United Baloch Army (UBA) and the Baloch Republic Army (BRA). In 2018, the BLA merged with the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) and BRA to form Baloch Raji Ajoji Sangar (BRSA), or Baloch Nationalist Freedom Movement. Two years later, in June 2020, BRSA formed an alliance with a Sindhī militant group known as the Sindudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA). The BNA has affirmed that it is a part of the BRSA.

These mergers and alliance formations have seemingly demonstrated the willingness of different tribes to put their differences at rest. The BNA represented the 'coming together of the Marri and Bugti, two of Balochistan's largest tribes that historically have not always seen eye to eye'<sup>[3]</sup>. Strategically, this coming together of disparate Baloch groups could be leading to a restructuring of the insurgency. Not only has it beefed up the numbers of the insurgents under a common banner and with common objectives, but it may also have facilitated fine-tuning of the tactics. There is a possibility that the insurgents have a number of suicide attackers available to them. Whereas fidayeen (suicide) attacks have remained a preferred mode for the BLA in the past couple of years, the deployment of a woman suicide bomber in the attack on the Karachi University premises has added a new dimension. Given the success it has achieved, such a strategy could be repeated in the coming months.

### Targeting the Chinese



Map of Balochistan (also written as Baluchistan) and Pakistan. Source: Wikipedia

Baloch insurgency's hostility towards China in general and the CPEC, in particular, is not a secret. The CPEC, which runs through the restive Balochistan province, has clearly added a new purpose to the Baloch separatist insurgency, which has been battling the Pakistani state for years. The separatists accuse both Beijing and the Pakistani government of unfairly exploiting Balochistan's natural resources. The BLA says it attacks Chinese nationals because Beijing ignored warnings not to enter deals and agreements regarding Balochistan before the province had been 'liberated'.<sup>141</sup> The June 2020 alliance between the SRA and the BRSA aims to "liberate" both Sindh and Balochistan and target the CPEC. The BNA too shares the same objectives. The group has claimed that it was formed to "expand Baloch national resistance movement against the Pakistani military's fascism" and also to intensify attacks against both "Pakistan state and its partners (e.g. China)."

In 2018, the BLA expanded its operations and attacked the Chinese Consulate in Karachi, but failed to enter the compound. In April 2021, a suicide attack at a luxury hotel hosting the Chinese ambassador in Quetta killed four people and injured dozens. The ambassador was unhurt in the attack.

Following the Karachi University attack, the BLA has warned of more deadly attacks on Chinese targets. BLA Spokesman Jeeyand Baloch, in a statement, threatened China with "even harsher" attacks unless the country halted its "exploitation projects" and "occupying of the Pakistani state." Prior to the 26 April incident, in 2018, Karachi police had foiled an attack on the Chinese consulate. In 2020, a similar attack had been foiled at the Pakistan Stock Exchange where the Chinese have major investments.

The targeted attacks demonstrate that the anti-China position on the Baloch insurgency has moved far beyond the rhetoric phase. The increasingly emboldened insurgents are not only peeved with the Chinese investments but have attained the capacity to carry out these types of operations. Their targets include the CPEC projects which enjoy security cover, and also the unprotected Chinese nationals like the teachers in the Confucius Academy in Karachi.

## The Response

In the past, the Pakistani military has typically relied on force-centric operations to weaken the Baloch insurgent groups, after every major attack. This time, the pace and intensity of the response are being determined by Beijing. The Chinese foreign ministry has asserted that 'Blood of Chinese people cannot be shed in vain'. Four demands communicated to the Pakistani side by the Chinese include (i) conduct of a thorough investigation into the incident, (ii) apprehension and punishment to the perpetrators 'to the full extent of the law', (iii) initiation of measures to ensure the safety of Chinese citizens in Pakistan, and (iv) prevention of such incidents from recurring.<sup>142</sup> Quite understandably, Islamabad has little option other than fulfilling some of these demands.

Two of these demands can be acceded to with some degree of success. However, fulfilling the last two demands—providing security to the thousands of Chinese personnel working on CPEC projects and others like the victims of the Karachi University attack—would invariably require a comprehensive approach to end the insurgency. The approach has to include, to the extent possible, negotiating with the insurgents to address some of their grievances regarding the CPEC. Needless to say, neither the Pakistani military has any competence or interest in this nor have the Chinese any patience for it. What Beijing could be privately pushing for is a joint strategy of annihilation, similar to the one it implements against the Uyghurs. However, while such a strategy has been quite successful in keeping the Uyghur insurgency under control in Xinjiang, the Pakistani military's capacity to implement a similar strategy in Balochistan is clearly in doubt. Token and diversionary gestures to please Beijing either in the form of an investigation and few arrests, blaming a foreign intelligence agency, or undertaking a quick military operation against the BLA would suffice.

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## Endnotes

<sup>141</sup> "Attack on the Chinese", Editorial, *Dawn*, 27 April 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1687052/attack-on-chinese>. Accessed on 27 April 2022.

<sup>142</sup> "Killed more than 100 soldiers at military camps in Pakistan, claims Baloch Liberation Army", *India Today*, 3 February 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/killed-more-100-soldiers-military-camps-pakistan-baloch-liberation-army-1908300-2022-02-03>. Accessed on 4 April 2022.

<sup>131</sup> Salman Rafi Sheikh, “Baloch militant merger targets Pakistan and China”, *Asia Times*, 29 January 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/01/baloch-militant-merger-targets-pakistan-and-china/>. Accessed on 2 May 2022.

<sup>141</sup> “Factbox: Who are the Pakistan separatists behind attack on Chinese citizens?”, *Reuters*, 26 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/who-are-pakistan-separatists-behind-attack-chinese-citizens-2022-04-26/>. Accessed on 5 May 2022.

<sup>151</sup> “Blood of Chinese people cannot be shed in vain: FM condemns terrorist attack that killed 3 Chinese in Pakistan”, *Global Times*, 26 April 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1260412.shtml>. Accessed on 5 May 2022.

*(Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is Director of Mantraya. This analysis has been published as part of Mantraya’s ongoing “Mapping Terror & Insurgent Networks”, “Fragility, Conflict, and Peace Building” and “China and South Asia” projects. All Mantraya publications are peer-reviewed.)*

## **MANTRAYA POLICY BRIEF#38: 08 APRIL 2022**

# Re-Reviving TAPI: Hardened Obstacles & Challenges for New Delhi

**Bibhu Prasad Routray**

### Abstract

*The TAPI project is in the news, yet again. There have been fresh attempts at reviving the project by all involved parties. The long-stalled project also seems to have been boosted by a China-led initiative. However, to imagine the project being up and running because of these expressions of interest are difficult. Almost all the obstacles that have prevented the project from fruition remain. Worse still, few of them have actually hardened, posing almost an insurmountable challenge to the implementation of the project. Time, therefore, is to bring in fresh and innovative thinking.*

### Introduction



(TAPI Project, Image Source: [Silk Road Briefing](#))

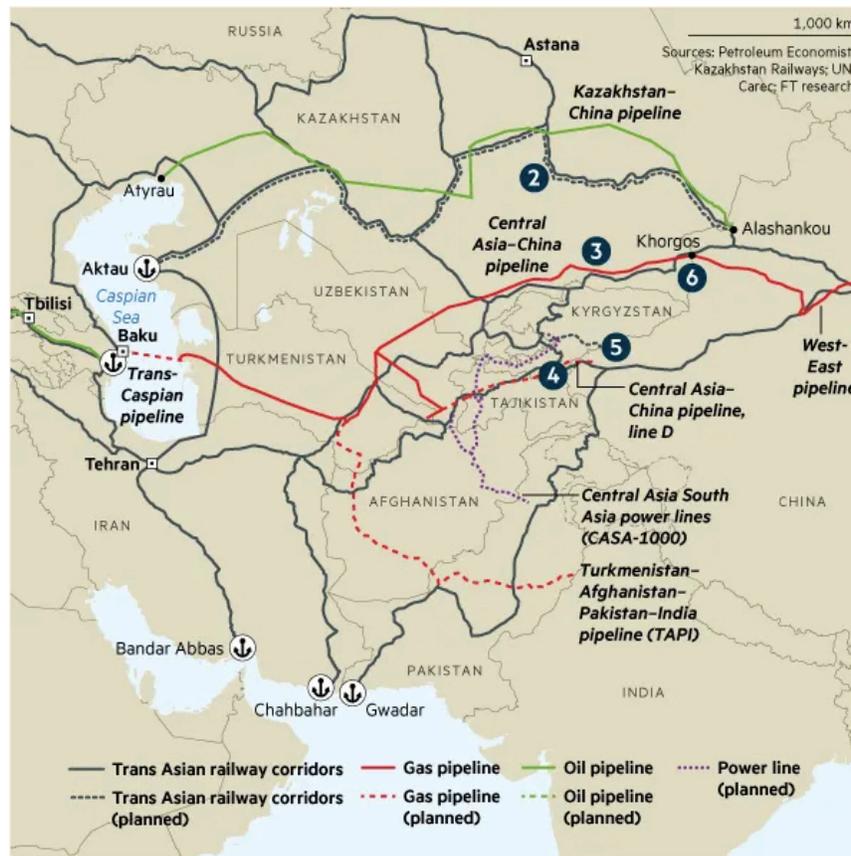
Nearly 27 years back, a natural gas pipeline, Turkmenistan’s Galkynysh gas field, between Turkmenistan and Pakistan was conceived. By 1998, Afghanistan, the transit country, and by 2008, India, an additional end receiver of gas, had joined the project, making it the Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India (TAPI) pipeline project, to be laid over 1800 kilometres. However, over the decades, progress on the project has been bogged down by several factors. Construction in Turkmenistan is reportedly complete. Apart from that, very little has progressed on this US\$9.6 billion project, which would carry 33 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas a year. Whereas instability in Afghanistan is the primary impediment, difficulties in obtaining financing for the project and the state of relations between India and Pakistan too add to the complexity.

### Fresh lease of life?

During his four-day visit to Turkmenistan, the first-ever by an Indian head of state, on 2 April, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind [suggested](#) that issues related to the security of the TAPI pipeline and key business principles may be addressed in technical and expert-level meetings. Kovind’s efforts, however, faced a reality check from India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) itself. Prior to the visit, Sanjay Verma, Secretary (West) in the MEA, had [told](#) reporters in New Delhi that “it is a difficult neighbourhood if you look at the geography. So, in that sense, this itself was a task in negotiating the pipeline”. Earlier, Turkmen President, during the India-Central Asia summit in January 2022, had [underlined the importance of TAPI](#) and had called for its faster implementation.

Kovind’s statement about reviving TAPI came a day after the [joint statement](#) released at the ‘Third Foreign Ministers’ Meeting Among the Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan’, held in Tunxi, in eastern China’s Anhui province on 1 April. Foreign ministers or high-level representatives from China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan attended the meeting. The joint statement referred to Turkmenistan’s promotion of the implementation of TAPI, which will be supported by Islamabad. The move is part of China’s roadmap for the neighbouring countries to help the Taliban-led Afghanistan to start an economic recovery.

### TAPC or TAPIC



(Central Asia-China Gas Pipelines, Source: [Financial Times](#))

The Chinese interest in TAPI dates back to August 2018. That month, a Pakistani official told [Reuters](#) that China is exploring building a spur from Pakistan's territory after the operationalization of the TAPI project. Much of Turkmenistan's natural gas already goes to China through the [Central Asia-China \(CAC\) gas pipeline's](#) Line A, which was commissioned in 2009. Two other pipelines, also parts of the CAC, connect China with gas fields in Uzbekistan (Line B) and Kazakhstan (Line C). The proposed spur from Pakistan through the Karakoram range could act as an alternative to Beijing's plans to build a fourth Turkmenistan to China pipeline (Line D), agreements for which had been signed with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan [in September 2013](#). In 2017, however, the project was cancelled after construction [was stalled](#) in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This explains Beijing's interest in TAPI. Line D was expected to raise Turkmenistan's gas export capacity to China from 55 bcm to 85 bcm per year.

A spur from TAPI would be comparatively easier and more cost-effective than building a pipeline through several Central Asian mountain ranges. China's interest in being included in TAPI is, therefore, understandable. At one level, this can be interpreted as piggybacking or a backdoor entry strategy by Beijing to benefit from an existing project. On the other, China's involvement can possibly infuse some amount of dynamism into the project that has struggled to take off. It needs mention that the 3666 kilometres-long Turkmenistan section of the CAC was built and commissioned in 28 months. Although China may be interested in building only the 'spur', its warm relations with both Pakistan and the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan further incentivize the possibility of moving forward with the implementation of TAPI.

Construction on the project in Turkmenistan began in December 2015, work on the Afghan section began in February 2018, and work on the Pakistani section was planned to commence in December 2018. 617-kilometres of the pipeline will pass through Afghanistan's Kandahar and Herat provinces. In November 2021, Pakistan's Federal Minister for Economic Affairs Omar Ayub Khan said that the implementation of TAPI has been on hold due to the 'situation' in Afghanistan. Khan, however, [promised](#), "After stabilizing the situation, we will be able to return to the issue of construction." Taliban have extended their support to TAPI. In October 2021, acting foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaki, assured, in the presence of Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov, that work will resume. Construction work in Pakistan, where the pipeline will pass through Quetta and Multan, terminating in Fasilka, a district in Punjab (in Pakistan) located near the India-Pakistan border, is yet to be started.

### **Intent and Instability Paradigm**

There is no dearth of intent as far as driving TAPI to fruition among the involved nations. Expressions of intent alone, however, may not be sufficient. Among all the four (or five) nations involved in the project, New Delhi's concerns about the instability in Afghanistan are the highest. Not only that the security of the project in both Afghanistan and Pakistan are in question, but participation in the project may also actually mean directly dealing with, legitimizing and even indirectly funding the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, which will naturally transform into a stakeholder and beneficiary of the project. These are deterring factors for India.

Among all the three countries, India belongs to the 'user only' category, whereas the rest three will rake in additional revenue benefits. New Delhi's anxieties are also rooted in its vulnerability as the gas supply may be subjected to disruption, depending upon the state of Indo-Pakistan relations. The involvement of China and the reality of the Sino-Pakistan nexus may further add to such vulnerability. Not surprisingly, President Kovind underlined the need to address the 'issues related to the security of the pipeline and key business principles' in 'Technical and Expert level meetings'.

### **Way Ahead**

It is difficult, therefore, to conceive the fruition of TAPI, with India included in it, until a truly inclusive and representative government is installed in Kabul. Can that lead to the project going ahead with the exclusion of India, becomes a critical question. With the potential involvement of China and Beijing drawing a substantial amount of gas from the project, the economic viability of the project may not be in doubt. Therefore, India has to tread carefully on its TAPI policy, in spite of its reservations about the Taliban. Secondly, India's 'user-only' vulnerability, however, can possibly be addressed if TAPI can be extended beyond India, to Bangladesh. Dhaka, in 2012, [evinced interest](#) in joining TAPI and has done so repeatedly ever since. Dhaka's energy demand has skyrocketed over the years, forcing it to discover new gas fields or draw additional supply from neighbouring Myanmar. New Delhi's promotion of Dhaka as an additional partner in TAPI would not only bring in extra revenue but may boost bilateral ties. Further, it may further secure the supply through Afghanistan and Pakistan from intentional disruptions.

*(Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is the Director of Mantraya. This policy brief has been published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Regional Economic Cooperation and Connectivity in South Asia" project. All Mantraya publications are peer-reviewed.)*

## **MANTRAYA ANALYSIS#57: 22 JANUARY 2022**

# **Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh: Sweep of Radicalization**

***Bibhu Prasad Routray***

### **Abstract**

*For nearly one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the long wait for repatriation to Myanmar continues to grow longer. While Bangladesh is in no mood to grant them the right to freedom of movement beyond their camps, the unrest in Myanmar virtually rules out the possibility of their return to their homes in the Rakhine state. The impact of protracted lack of access to livelihood avenues and education can be catastrophic for this huge mass of population, which includes about 400,000 children. A steady uptick in the incidents of organized crime, radicalization, and other forms of violence are signs of the dangers that can affect Bangladesh and Myanmar in particular and South and Southeast Asia in general in 2022 if a solution to the crisis is not found.*



Rohingya Refugee Camps, Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh. Image Courtesy: CNBC.

### **Introduction**

Nearly 745,000 Rohingya were driven out of Myanmar into the overcrowded camps in neighbouring Bangladesh in 2016 and 2017. Over the years, hopes of their repatriation back to their home country have continued to fizzle out. Four years and counting in the congested refugee camps sans basic facilities, right to work and pursue education, and freedom of movement, the refugees have primarily depended on the weekly and monthly subsistence assistance from various aid agencies. Over the years, the search for safety that drove the Rohingya to Bangladesh has gradually

turned into desperation, which is now being exploited by criminal and organized crime groups, and also, by the terror outfit, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

### **Killings in Refugee Camps**

On 29 September 2021, 48-year old Mohibullah, chief of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPH), was shot and killed by unidentified gunmen in Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. An influential Rohingya leader, he had been documenting the Myanmar military's crimes against the Rohingya and advocating for the refugees' rights in international forums. The ARSPH has been advocating a moderate line of negotiation with the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmarese military). He had faced death threats in recent years for his work. Bangladesh police have arrested eleven persons for the murder, who reportedly have confessed to their role.<sup>[1]</sup>

Mohibullah's assassination was followed by the killing of seven other Rohingya refugees. On 22 October, unidentified gunmen entered the Darul Ulum Nadwatul Ulama al Islamia madrassa at the Balukhali refugee complex in Cox's Bazar and randomly shot some victims and stabbed others with knives. Several others were wounded. One gunman, whom the Bangladesh police described as a 'Rohingya miscreant' was arrested with a gun, six rounds of ammunition, and a knife.<sup>[2]</sup>

### **An Arrest**

Fast forward to January 2022. In the early hours of 16 January, Bangladesh Armed Police Battalion (APBn) arrested Mohammad Sha Ali from the Noukar Maath area at Rohingya camp-6 in Cox's Bazar's Ukhiya. Sha Ali is the half-brother of ARSA commander Ataulah Abu Amar Jununi. A weapon and an unspecified quantity of narcotics were recovered from him. A Rohingya civilian whom Sha Ali had abducted was rescued. Preliminary investigations have revealed that Sha Ali holds a Bangladeshi national identity card that mentions his permanent address in Chattogram (Chittagong) city.<sup>[3]</sup> On 18 January, the ARSA clarified that Sha Ali, a former 'low-key' member of the group, had been relieved of duties two & a half years ago after being diagnosed with heart disease and suspected of cancer.<sup>[4]</sup>

### **Surge in ARSA's activities**

Sha Ali's arrest comes at a time when the ARSA is reportedly gaining ground in Myanmar. The group has been blamed for a spate of violence in Myanmar that led to the killings of security force personnel in 2016, and which ultimately provided the *Tatmadaw* to start the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. The ARSA has reportedly extended support to the National Unity Government (NUG), formed in opposition to the February 2021 coup in Myanmar. Previously termed as a terrorist group, ARSA joining hands with the NUG in its armed opposition against the *Tatmadaw* may have provided the former and its actions some sort of legitimacy. In November 2021, ARSA claimed to have killed *Tatmadaw* soldiers in three separate encounters in Rakhine.<sup>[5]</sup> At the same time, incidents of ARSA opening fire on villagers in Maungdaw have emerged along with photos and videos of the group's armed cadres training in an unidentified location in the Rakhine state, in social media posts. The evidence seems to suggest that ARSA is a stronger group today compared to its ragtag existence in 2017.

### **Contrasting Positions**

ARSA's force enablers including the location of its ascent to supremacy, however, are a matter of dispute.

In December 2021, Tom Andrews, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, told reporters that he had credible information about the ARSA being involved in kidnapping, abusing, and even killing fellow Rohingya at the refugee camps in Bangladesh.<sup>[6]</sup> The killers of Mohibullah have reportedly identified themselves as ARSA members. Media interviews of several camp inmates too have revealed that the group is active in the camps—spreading fear, enlisting recruits, and eliminating perceived adversaries like Mohibullah. Unlike the ARSPH, which favours the negotiation route for repatriation of Rohingya into Myanmar, ARSA wants to wage an armed assault on the *Tatmadaw*. Not surprisingly, some of the Rohingya refugees killed in the October attack had informed the Bangladeshi and international authorities that their names were on a hit list drawn by the ARSA. Many other Rohingya activists have gone into hiding.

These reports somewhat endorse *Tatmadaw*'s position repeatedly pointing at the refugee camps in Bangladesh as the recruitment and training centres of the ARSA. In fact, reports have emerged that ARSA's intention of using the madrassa at Balukhali refugee complex and the ARSPH's opposition to it led to the killings in October 2021.

Dhaka, however, continues to deny the presence of ARSA in the refugee camps. It fears that acknowledgment of ARSA's presence in Bangladesh would further hamper the prospect of repatriation of the Rohingya into Myanmar.

Bangladesh's foreign minister A.K. Abdul Momen has contradicted Tom Andrew's statement and categorically dismissed speculations of ARSA finding root in Bangladesh.[7] Bangladeshi response follows a typical pattern. It has always been a denial mode about terrorism in the country, be it the al Qaeda or the Islamic State-inspired activities, or that of the ARSA.

### **Camps as trouble spots**

Notwithstanding what Dhaka claims, happenings in the sprawling Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar area tell stories of rapidly sinking levels of security for the refugees and increasing levels of organized crime, narcotics trade, and also that of the activities of the ARSA, involving the inmates and also persons inside and out of Bangladesh.

Close to one million Rohingya live in Bangladesh, most of them in about 34 camps, in the Cox's Bazaar area, near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Waves of anti-Rohingya violence that took place in Myanmar in 1978, 1991-92, and 2016 have brought these people into the country. At one level, the enormity of the refugee problem, which Bangladesh has been forced to deal with, could be simply going out of its control. On the other, the strict restrictions imposed on the inmates by the Bangladeshi government could be forcing them to take desperate measures.

The refugees are forbidden from seeking employment. Few of them set up shops inside the perimeter of the camps. However, security forces periodically dismantle these petty shops that allow inmates to earn some money. Educational institutions that the Rohingya children can access are a handful. Bangladeshi authorities have shut down private schools set up by the inmates themselves, suspecting that these could be promoting radicalization. The ongoing Covid Protocol has added to the miserable plight of the inmates as it has kept most of the humanitarian workers out of the camps.

While the APBn has restricted access of the inmates to the outside world, by all means, its control over what goes inside the camps is lax. Security forces man the camps during the daytime. As the night falls, most of them go back to their barracks. And then the ARSA and organised criminals take over the narrow streets of the camps. Murder, looting, kidnapping of women and children, and drug and sex-related crimes are reported regularly. The ARSA cadres, inmates allege, continue with their radicalization, recruitment, and fund-raising activities. For scores, life inside the camps is akin to living inside a prison, a shackle that they want to break desperately. While the camps are captive recruitment pools for the ARSA cadres, not joining them isn't a matter of choice for some of the inmates. It is in fact becoming a necessity for many. For others who don't want to join the ARSA, it is a hide and seek game within a radius of 26 kilometres, inside which all camps exist.

### **Road Ahead**

There is no shortcut to ending the Rohingya misery. Rohingya repatriation is not a priority for the Tatmadaw, whose control over Myanmar is shrinking every passing day. Although Dhaka would like to describe the Rohingya to be temporary guests, the reality is different. The Rohingya will remain in Bangladesh for foreseeable future, till the authorities in Myanmar agree to their repatriation and guarantee their safety. Given this truism, it is necessary for Dhaka and the international community to develop a mechanism that not only allows the former to gain stricter control over the camps, but at the same time, makes provisions for the wellbeing of the inmates considering their vocational, educational, and emotional aspirations. It is also necessary for the regional countries especially India to be involved in the process, to enhance Dhaka's capacities in this regard. Radicalization of even a fraction of the inmates would have a significant impact on the entire region. And lastly, denying the presence of ARSA in the camps is no longer a viable strategy for Bangladesh. It is time that the existence of the problem is acknowledged and strategies to address it are chalked out.

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### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>111</sup> "5 ARSA members arrested over Rohingya leader's murder", *BD News*, 9 October 2021, <https://bdnews24.com/rohingya/2021/10/09/5-arsa-members-arrested-over-rohingya-leader-s-murder>.

<sup>121</sup> "7 killed in Rohingya refugee camp shooting in Bangladesh", *India Today*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/people-killed-rohingya-refugee-camp-shooting-bangladesh-1867846-2021-10-22>.

<sup>[3]</sup> Muhammad Ali Jinnat, “Arsa commander’s brother carried Bangladeshi ID”, *Daily Star*, 18 January 2022, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/arsa-leaders-brother-has-bangladeshi-id-2941311>.

<sup>[4]</sup> Tweet by ARSA, from the handle ‘ARSA\_The Army’, 18 January 2022, [https://twitter.com/ARSA\\_Official/status/1483470447778103300](https://twitter.com/ARSA_Official/status/1483470447778103300).

<sup>[5]</sup> Press statement by the ARSA, 15 November 2021, [https://twitter.com/ARSA\\_Official/status/1460154007784402945/photo/1](https://twitter.com/ARSA_Official/status/1460154007784402945/photo/1).

<sup>[6]</sup> “UN rapporteur: Rohingya militants kill, abuse refugees in Bangladesh camps”, *Radio Free Asia*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/un-rohingya-12202021171519.html>.

<sup>[7]</sup> Ibid.

**( Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is Director of Mantraya. This analysis has been published as part of Mantraya’s ongoing “Mapping Terror & Insurgent Networks” and “Fragility, Conflict, and Peace Building” projects. All Mantraya publications are peer-reviewed.)**

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