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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral or mandala-like pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text area.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTENTS

IX *Foreword*

- 1 SILVIA MENEGAZZI, *China in 2023: Stimulating Economic Recovery along with Patriotic Education*
- 23 GIULIA SCIORATI, *China in 2023: A «Global-Security-Attentive» Foreign Policy*
- 39 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2023: A year of rising tensions and political polarization*
- 65 GIULIO PUGLIESE & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2023: Still walking in Abe Shinzō's footsteps*
- 125 THAN KIŪ, *Hong Kong 2023: The new Chinese province*
- 145 AURELIO INSISA, *Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 Elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign*
- 167 MIGUEL ENRICO G. AYSON & LARA GIANINA S. REYES, *The Philippines 2022-2023: A turbulent start for the New Era of Marcos leadership*
- 187 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI, *Malaysia 2023: A reform agenda overshadowed by identity politics*
- 203 RICHARD QUANG-ANH TRAN, *Vietnam 2020-2023: Covid Pandemic Recovery, Unprecedented Leadership Turnover, and Continued Multilateralism*
- 217 CAROLINE BENNETT, *Cambodia 2022-2023: Securing dynastic autocracy*
- 235 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2023: New conflicts and coalitions reshape war narrative, challenging an embattled junta*
- 259 DIEGO MAIORANO & RAGHAW KHATTRI, *India 2023: Towards the general elections amid rising social tension*
- 301 IAN HALL, *India 2023: Tactical wins and strategic setbacks in foreign policy?*
- 323 MATTEO MIELE, *Nepal 2020-2023: From the Institutional Crisis to New Political Paths*
- 339 DIEGO ABENANTE, *Sri Lanka 2023: Wickremesinghe's first six months between economic recovery and political uncertainty*
- 353 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2023: Multiple crises in the lead-up to the general elections*
- 375 FILIPPO BONI, *Afghanistan 2023: Taliban governance and international isolation*
- 389 GIORGIA PERLETTA, *Iran 2023: Intensified Focus on the Eastward Strategy and Ongoing Fractures in State-Society Relations*
- Special articles*
- 407 ENRICO FARDELLA, *When history rhymes: China's relations with Russia and the war in Ukraine*
- 433 DAVID SCOTT, *The return of the 'Indo-Pacific'*
- 451 *Reviews*
- 479 *Appendix*

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The year under examination was characterised by the Taliban attempts at consolidating control over Afghanistan, following a tumultuous first 18 months in power. Security has overall improved across the country but the equilibrium remains fragile. From a political standpoint, the Taliban have expanded their reach across all provinces in Afghanistan by consolidating the emirate's institutions and governance practices, although internal divisions among the Taliban ranks still persist. To document these dynamics, the paper draws on novel data from the decrees and edicts by the Taliban supreme leader published in May 2023. The international relations of the Taliban regime were characterised on the one hand by the need to establish economic and investment linkages with the outside world to sustain the economy and, on the other, by the desire of the international community to ensure that the Afghan territory does not become a launchpad for other militant groups to operate, both regionally and globally.

KEYWORDS – Taliban government; China-Afghanistan relations; Pakistan-Afghanistan relations; humanitarian crisis.

1. Introduction

In 2023, the Taliban have attempted at consolidating their power across Afghanistan through a series of administrative moves, including the establishment of provincial councils across the country and the improvement of revenue generation. While divisions still persist with the Taliban ranks, particularly between the Haqqani network, which controls Kabul and is strong in the capital and the east, and the Kandahar leadership in the south [Loyn 2023], the hope that many observers, especially in the West, had of a more inclusive Taliban regime did not materialise. In fact, in 2023 there was further evidence of no improvement as far as granting basic rights to women and to the country's non-Pashtun ethnic groups was concerned. From a security standpoint, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) – a branch of the Islamic State active in Central and South Asia - was weakened in strength and numbers but it was still present in the country alongside other groups (e.g. *Al-Qā'ida*). Domestic opposition was weakened internally but it has tried to gain momentum and international support through the so-called Vienna Process for a Democratic Afghanistan. During the 2 meetings held in 2023 (in April and December) activists from many different

backgrounds, ethnic groups and religious affiliations, took part in the event aimed at convening the forces opposing the Taliban [Coffey 2023]. While the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF) was identified as the leading force behind the opposition, the December meeting saw the participations of senior figures from the National Resistance Council for the Salvation of Afghanistan, also known as the Ankara Coalition (including former MP Mohammadi Muhaqeq and former vice president of Afghanistan Yunus Qanuni). Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek Afghan commander and long-time Afghan powerbroker, also sent a personal representative to deliver his message to the attendees. There were also international observers from the US, and European and regional countries [Coffey 2023].

Beyond the domestic realm and the attempts just described at coalescing political opposition to the Taliban rule, the latter's denial of basic rights to Afghan women and girls and their imposition of draconian social rules since returning to power in August 2021 has sabotaged, at least for now, the chances that the United Nations (UN) and other international bodies might recognise their regime. But behind the surface and official pronouncements, there is a growing realisation, especially among regional capitals, that the best way to secure their countries' interests and moderate the Taliban's behaviour in the long term is patient engagement with Kabul, rather than ostracism [International Crisis Group 2024]. There are also geopolitical reasons behind engaging with the Taliban. On the one hand, the region is trying to insulate itself from Western sanctions on Russia, Iran and Afghanistan, as well as the prospect of further economic restrictions on China. In particular, Moscow and Beijing are keen to promote the regional economy as a buffer against pressure from the West [International Crisis Group 2024]. On the other hand, regional countries are eager to develop some form of economic engagement with Kabul as a way to try and incentivise the Taliban into behaving less erratically.

To unpack the domestic and international dynamics of Afghanistan in 2023, the article proceeds as follows. The ensuing section (section 2) looks at the domestic politics of the Taliban regime, with a focus on the edicts and decrees issued by the Taliban supreme leader. These offer significant insights and, to the best of the author's knowledge, it is the first time that they are analysed in an academic publication. Section 3 dives into the socio-economic dynamics that characterised Afghanistan in 2023. In section 4 the foreign policy of Afghanistan is analysed. In particular, the article details the approach of China, Pakistan, India and Russia to the Islamic Emirate. Some final conclusions are laid out in section 5.

2. Domestic Politics: how do the Taliban rule?

In May 2023, the Taliban decided to published a number of decrees, edicts and instructions of supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada. The

documents were originally produced from 2016, when Akhundzada became leader, to the spring of 2023. Published and translated into English by the Afghanistan Analysts Network, the collection represents a particularly useful tool to shed light on the governance of Afghanistan under the Taliban, an area often neglected in scholarly and policy analyses on the country. What is the Taliban's vision about the Emirate's functioning? How has this materialised in 2023?

Before diving into analysing some of the decrees and answering these questions, it is important to briefly outline the key concepts discussed in the documents and which reflect the Taliban's approach to governance, namely: 1) sovereignty is established through the implementation of Sharia; 2) the country's leadership is chosen by a select Islamic shura, or council; 3) all branches of government are subject to the authority of the emir; and 4) basic rights are defined/limited by Sharia as interpreted by the emir/leadership [Thier 2020: 2].

Such an approach to governance and state organisation is clearly opposite to that outlined in the currently suspended 2004 Constitution. The latter is primarily modelled around Western notions of sovereignty belonging to the people and the division of legislative, executive and judicial powers. In addition, while the 2004 constitution codified the ground rules and norms that would regulate political and social life in Afghanistan, the Taliban have primarily ruled by issuing decrees, without providing an overarching constitutional framework. With these distinctions in mind, it is worth highlighting some general themes that run through the 65 decrees published, as they provide some relevant insights into the organisational and administrative guidelines and priorities, and how they played out in the year under examination.¹

First, administrative corruption was high on the agenda of the Taliban leadership. According to data from Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), between 2005 and 2021 Afghanistan averaged around the 168th place out of 180 countries in terms of perceived corruption. It is therefore not surprising that the Taliban leader issued a number of decrees specifically addressing this point. They included a ban on double salaries (2022); a provision that revenues must be collected transparently and then «to avoid irregularities and chaos» must be handed over to the Ministry of Finance, with no independent spending of them (2022); the establishment of a National Procurement Commission (October 2022); a ban on state officials and employees to participate in bids to gain contracts for building materials or mines (2023) [Clark 2023]. In early 2023, the Taliban leader issued three further decrees on anti-corruption and nepotism; they prohibited the de facto officials from participating in government contracts (on 12 March),

1. The full list of decrees, including their English translation, is available at: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2023, 'Decrees, orders and Instructions of Taleban supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada', 15 July.

employing their sons and relatives in institutions under their responsibility (on 18 March), and regulating government land distribution, lease and sale (on 20 March) [UNAMA 2023b: 4]. These anti-corruption efforts seem to be effective, given that between 2022 and 2023 Afghanistan moved from 168th to 152nd place in the abovementioned Corruption Perception Index, 16 places down from the position recorded for the years 2005 and 2021.

A second key theme in the edicts and decrees revolved around the organisation of security services. Ensuring loyalty from within their ranks and the security of the new regime were two key priorities for the Taliban, especially considering the threats coming from other militant organisations in the first few months of the new regime. To this end, a number of orders were issued aimed at clearing the ranks from corrupt or disloyal elements, and ensuring those who failed vetting could not join other services. In 2021, a new body, the Military Commission, was set up with the task of purging the Emirate's security forces of «undesirable and corrupt people» [Clark 2023]. This was followed in 2022 by an order to the security services to register «mujahedin» with biometrics taken and positions and salaries specified. Later that year, a very long and detailed decree set out the duties of another new body, the Security and Screening Commission, also with a mandate to purge [Clark 2023].

A third strand of edicts and decrees focused on the administration of the state and on ensuring a proper functioning, alongside a recalibration, of the structures that the Taliban inherited from previous administrations. Rules were imposed on which ministries were to report to which deputies to the acting prime minister; departments and courts were relocated; the duties of various government bodies were defined; the stages legislative documents were to go through were indicated; finally, the Supreme Court was ordered to send its decisions to the leadership. Regarding local governance, the establishment of provincial ulama shuras (councils) was completed by the end of 2023 in all 34 provinces, thereby increasing the local conflict resolution capacity. None, including those in the predominantly Shia-populated provinces of Bamyan and Daykundi, included Shia or female members [UNAMA 2023a: 3].

An overall assessment of these edicts reveals that the emir's micro-management of governance appears the result of perceptions of rampant disobedience, to which he is responding by issuing ever-harsher edicts [Watkins 2023]. Such a view is corroborated particularly by what was noted above regarding the establishment of ulema councils in every province, as they seem to function as the emir's eyes and ears across the country. But while dissent against the emir's agenda is real, dissenters are not a cohesive force working towards the same objectives, which will make it difficult for them to organise [Watkins 2023].

Some of the harshest edicts during the period under examination were directed against women, whose conditions dramatically deteriorated

following the return of the Taliban. The latest manifestation of this came in September 2023, when the national examination authority announced the results of the country's annual university entrance exam. None of the participating 84,234 high school graduates were female. Before the Islamic Emirate took power, girls had won first place in the entrance exam for two years [Abdal 2023, 4 September]. While there were signs of women-led resistance to the Taliban rule,² it should not come as a surprise that from a Gallup poll in July 2023 emerged that only 11% of Afghan women were satisfied with the freedom they have to choose what to do with their lives. This is the lowest result that Gallup has ever recorded in any country and population [Nusratty and Ray 2023, 10 November]. From an economic standpoint, the interim Taliban administration's restrictive policies on women's education and work will further lower Afghanistan's growth prospects, to which the analysis turns in the next section.

3. *Socio-economic dynamics: limited growth and lack of social inclusion*

The Afghan economy is likely to display no or very modest growth in 2023, after contracting by 26% since August 2021 [World Bank 2023]. However, the Taliban's overall management of the economy has been more successful than what many predicted it would be following their takeover [Byrd 2023]. Revenue collection was very effective and it accounts for nearly 60% of state revenues. Part of this success was due to the fight against corruption which, as we have seen in the previous sections, was one of the key aims of the Taliban leadership. From a socio-economic standpoint, according to the World Bank's *Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey* (AWMS) there are signs of a small improvement in the welfare of Afghan households compared to the months immediately following the Taliban takeover. While in the period October to December 2021, 70% of households reported lacking enough income to satisfy basic needs, this percentage reached 62% in the latest available measurement April to June 2023. Along similar lines, the share of households reporting acute food insecurity declined from 50% in the fall of 2021 to 40% in the spring of 2023 [World Bank 2023: 22]. Despite these limited improvements, poverty projections show that 48.3% of the population was to be considered poor as of April-June 2023. This means that half of the Afghan population, or 20 million people, is currently poor. Despite its international isolation, Afghanistan receives approximately \$3 billion annually in foreign humanitarian aid. Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis saw a rapid deterioration in the second half of 2023, owing to two main developments: 1) four 6.3-magnitude earthquakes which struck Herat province in a

2. See for instance: Fetrat, Sahar, 2023, 'Bread, Work, Freedom—Afghan Women's Two Years of Resistance', *Human Rights Watch*, 16 August.

span of eight days and directly impacted 275,000 people; and 2) Pakistan's decision to repatriate undocumented Afghan refugees in the country, which according to the latest estimates totalled around 1.3 million people [Security Council Report, December 2023]. According to a report published by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 350,000 people have returned to Afghanistan since the announcement, with the number of people arriving at border crossings «exhausted and in need of emergency assistance» continuing to grow.

4. *Foreign policy*

Afghanistan's foreign policy under the Taliban regime was largely in the wake of previous years. The Taliban regime, which still lacks any form of international recognition, has primarily been looking to boost its trade relationship as well as to attract investments. Evidence of this came in early 2023, when the Taliban announced the establishment of an investment consortium including Russian, Iranian and Pakistani companies, and also stated that China had expressed readiness to invest in mining and other economic projects, including lithium mining and economic infrastructure [UNAMA 2023b]. On their part, regional countries have continued looking at Afghanistan through a security prism, in order to ensure that the emirate's territory does not become a launching pad for militant groups willing to attack outside of Afghanistan's borders. The outside world's view of Afghanistan is best epitomised by the remarks of then Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, who advocated for international cooperation in building professional security forces that would enable the Afghan Taliban, as he put it, to counter the «alphabet soup» of terrorist groups still in the country [Dawn 2023, 18 February]. The sections that follow provide an overview of the Taliban ties with key regional countries, including China, Pakistan, India and Russia.

4.1. *China and Afghanistan: cautiously deepening ties*

China has moved cautiously on Afghanistan, being careful not fill the vacuum left by the US, while simultaneously making an important political move by being the first country to nominate a new ambassador to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover [Pantucci 2023, 15 September]. To decode Beijing's approach to Afghanistan, the framework provided by the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) – perhaps the two most recent and important articulations of China's foreign policy vision since the BRI [Sciorati 2023] – may be a useful starting point.

With regards to the GSI, the concept paper highlights the importance of promoting dialogue through multilateral forums and organisations

(e.g. the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), as well as of using mini-laterals in promoting cooperation and stability. On this point in particular, the concept paper highlights «the role of coordinating and cooperative mechanisms such as the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan [...] to promote regional and global peace and stability» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022]. As evidence of this approach, in May Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Motaqi alongside Minister of Commerce and Industry Nooruddin Azizi, participated in the fifth trilateral meeting with the foreign ministers of Pakistan and China, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Qin Gang respectively. The concluding joint statement noted how all parties wanted to advance political engagement, counter-terrorism cooperation and trade, investments and connectivity under the trilateral framework [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023].

As for the GDI, the framework identifies «digital security» and «connectivity» among its priority areas [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021]. Evidence of both is clearly discernible in China's engagement with Afghanistan in 2023. As far as digital security is concerned, there were reports about the Taliban's plan to improve the camera surveillance system in Kabul in a partnership, yet to be confirmed, with the Chinese tech giant Huawei [Yawar and Greenfield 2023, 25 September]. The plan, similar to one the US mooted before its withdrawal in 2021, consists of upgrading and increasing camera surveillance across the capital in order to improve security. China's involvement, even if not yet confirmed at the time of writing, is in line with Beijing's development of «smart cities», both in mainland China and abroad [Hillman 2021; Boni 2019].

With regards to connectivity, the Taliban leadership has been keen since returning to power, and in 2023 in particular, to signal its desire to boost the country's connectivity with both China and the wider region. In October, the Afghan Minister for Foreign Affairs attended the third Trans-Himalaya Forum in China. During the event, he reiterated the potential of Afghanistan to become a node of economic connectivity. On the side lines of the Forum, the Chinese minister for Foreign Affairs of China, Wang Yi, stated that China was willing to help Afghanistan to develop its relations with neighbouring countries and to join regional economic cooperation, simultaneously soliciting counter-terrorism measures from the Taliban [Zhen 2023, 6 October]. Later that month, Afghan Minister for Commerce and Industry Nooruddin Azizi joined the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing and requested the formal integration of Afghanistan into the BRI. Afghanistan's most direct way in would be by joining the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the US\$ 26 billion infrastructure investment focussed on Pakistan. Although Pakistan Railway and state-owned China Railway Eryuan Engineering Group have signed a Memorandum of Understanding and issued construction tenders for the

construction of a rail line between Karachi and Mazar-e-Sharif (northern Afghanistan) [Business Recorder 2023, 1 May], the prospects of Afghanistan's inclusion have been mooted for years [Boni 2022; Boni 2023b] and they remain slim. The challenging relationship between Islamabad and Kabul, to which the analysis turns in the next section, represents the main hurdle in the prospects of extending the CPEC to Afghanistan.

4.2. *Pakistan: dealing with the TTP*

Islamabad's relationship with Kabul continued to be a complicated one. The euphoria which accompanied the return of the Taliban in 2021 soon left space to a series of issues that came to characterise the bilateral relationship. Amongst, the one that has become particularly thorny was the role of the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an anti-Pakistan Taliban faction, whose attacks intensified significantly in 2023. In January 2023, for instance, the TTP conducted an attack against the police headquarters in Peshawar, capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It was the deadliest attack ever on police in the country [Ahmed 2023]. The tense relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban is perhaps best epitomised by the unusual remarks from the Pakistani PM, during a press conference in early November. On that occasion, then PM Anwar ul-Haq Kakar voiced his country's unprecedentedly open criticism of the Taliban regime. He noted the support that the Taliban leadership was providing to the TTP, a decision that, according to the then Pakistani PM, had contributed to a significant increase in violence in Pakistan, with 2,867 Pakistani fatalities since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 [Raza 2023, 9 November]. Lamenting that, despite Pakistan's requests, «no actions were taken against the anti-Pakistan groups», he lashed out at the Afghan leadership claiming that «in a few instances, clear evidence of enabling terrorism also came forward» [Raza 2023, 9 November]. Both the statement and its timing are significant, as they came following Pakistan's decision to repatriate undocumented Afghan refugees [Mir 2023]. More generally, the decision over the Afghan refugees in Pakistan as well as Kakar's criticism should be contextualised within a wider set of measures that Islamabad has implemented to pressure the Taliban leadership to reconsider and eventually end its support for the TTP. These measures included reducing trade ties by either banning or imposing tariffs on the import of Afghan goods prone to smuggling [Rana 2023, 4 October], as well as not advocating the Afghan Taliban's case at the international level [Yousaf 2023, 9 November].

On its part, the Taliban leadership appeared unlikely to bow to these pressures and take any major steps against the TTP. The Taliban main concern since returning to power has been to keep the internal cohesion, even at the cost of angering foreign powers. As such, they are concerned about how their ranks would react to efforts to crack down on the TTP. In addition, there is ideological proximity between the Taliban stance vis-à-vis the Pakistani state and that of the TTP. Hibatullah Akhundzada – the Taliban

supreme leader – has deemed Pakistan’s constitution to be un-Islamic, just like TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud [Ahmed 2023].

Despite potential prospects of growing cooperation between the two sides given their closeness between 2001 and 2021, the relationship between Islamabad and Kabul in 2023 was dominated by lack of trust and security predicaments. Both would benefit politically and economically from a more functional interaction, but 2023 was the year in which neither of these materialised.

4.3 India’s growing ties with the Taliban

India’s relations with the Islamic Emirate’s leadership have witnessed a modest, yet constant and sustained, engagement throughout 2023. Considering the virtually non-existent ties between the two parties when the Taliban returned to power in 2021, developments in 2023 pointed to the growing realisation on both sides that some form of engagement will be necessary and potentially beneficial. Aid and humanitarian relief efforts were one of the areas in which India sought to make its presence more visible in Afghanistan. In March 2023, for instance, New Delhi delivered 20,000 metric tonnes of wheat in partnership with the World Food Programme [Kaura 2023]. Importantly, they used for the first time the Iranian port of Chahbahar, in which India has invested since 2016 and that could represent an important resource for India to bypass Pakistan in its relations with Kabul [Boni 2023a]. Along similar lines, India’s union budget for 2023-24 also made a special provision for a US\$ 25 million development aid package for Afghanistan. On the political front, India’s Ministry of External Affairs, under the aegis of the India Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC), invited Afghan government officials to attend a four-day virtual course on Indian legislation and business climate. In addition, in May 2023, Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), meeting in Goa, India, agreed to resume convening the SCO’s Afghanistan Contact Group, which had been suspended following the Taliban takeover. Finally, on 24 November, the embassy of Afghanistan in New Delhi, which had been led by diplomats loyal to the pre-Taliban government, was permanently closed. The Taliban announced that they were going to reopen the Embassy with their own diplomats.

Despite the growing engagements just documented, there were a number of limitations in the prospects for a more comprehensive partnership between Kabul and New Delhi. From a value-based perspective, not only India has always opposed the Taliban regime, but it has been one of the countries that has more vocally expressed its hope for a more inclusive governance in Afghanistan. On 7 March, for instance, special envoys of the India-Central Asia Joint Working Group on Afghanistan announced support for an inclusive government in Afghanistan, human rights and women’s rights, counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance. While this line of

argument is repeated at virtually every meeting between the Taliban and a foreign delegation, it is something that is seen in Kabul as emanating from the West, and India's embrace of this narrative alongside its increasingly close ties with the US [Torri 2022] places it in a difficult position vis-à-vis the Taliban regime. In addition, the fault lines between the two sides are also religious, with the Taliban leadership considering India the land of Hindus. According to former Afghan Minister of Education Mirwais Balkhi, the majority of the Taliban sees India as a Hindu majority land that has always suppressed Muslims and that, as such, should be fought against [Balkhi 2023].

Overall, the leaderships of both India and the Islamic Emirate have made some incremental steps to collaborate, but the prospects for a more comprehensive partnership remain slim.

4.4. *Russia's engagement with the Islamic Emirate*

Moscow was one of the countries that has more proactively engaged with the Taliban leadership since their return to power. More generally, Russia, alongside China and Pakistan, was among the countries that had never really stopped engaging with the Taliban even during the years of the Afghan Republic. Russia is now reaping the benefits of this years-long engagement. The drivers behind Moscow's approach to the Taliban during 2023 were primarily two-fold: first, Moscow sought to use the Afghan market and the leverage offered by economic cooperation with the Taliban regime as a way to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions; second, Russia's decision to boost the Afghan economy following Western sanctions and the freezing of assets, represented an important symbolic point for Russia, as part of its self-narrative of a rising power, allied with the Global South [Suleymanov 2023]. Russia's economic engagement with Afghanistan was mostly visible in the oil sector. According to Taliban officials, Afghanistan has increased Russian oil imports from 246,000 tons in 2022 to more than 710,000 tons between January and November 2023, with an overall oil trade over US\$ 300 million. [Dawi 2023, 21 December] This was a win-win for both, as Russia found a market for its oil supplies and it managed to avoid Western sanctions, and Afghanistan found a vital lifeline for its energy supplies. From a diplomatic standpoint, in September 2023 Russia hosted in Kazan the annual meeting of the Moscow format on Afghanistan. The forum, established in 2017 as a way to bring together Afghan representatives and those from key regional countries, included China, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as members and Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye³ and the United Arab Emirates as guests. The Taliban were represented

3. In December 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ordered the use of the term Türkiye instead of Turkey to better represent Turkish culture and values. The change of name was accepted by the UN in June 2022.

by a delegation led by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The ensuing «Kazan Declaration» acknowledged the Afghan de facto authorities' efforts to combat drug-related crimes and terrorism and the overall security improvement in Afghanistan, while expressing concerns about restrictions on female employment and education and calling for efforts to forge a broad-based, inclusive government [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023].

5. Conclusions

In 2023, the Taliban's agenda revolved around establishing their own governance structures at the local level, while simultaneously regulating the functioning of the institutions that they have inherited from the Afghan Republic. The denial of basic rights to women and ethnic minorities, while receiving the condemnation of the international community, including the Taliban's closest international partners, has remained a defining feature of Afghanistan's social setup. The Afghan economy overall stabilised but the poverty figure placing nearly half of the Afghan population at poverty level provides a snapshot of the living conditions and of the Taliban's uphill battle in managing a country always on the verge of economic and humanitarian collapse. It is therefore not surprising that while the organisation of domestic governance was the priority, internationally the Islamic Emirate's leadership sought to attract investment and obtain economic cooperation with countries in the region. Almost invariably, regional powers have moved very cautiously on their relations with the regime in Kabul, falling short of recognising the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, but also exploring potential avenues of cooperation to keep the country afloat. The last thing that these countries want is an Afghanistan out of control, which becomes a fertile ground for terrorist organisations, ranging from Al-Qā'ida to ISKP, to launch attacks abroad. Security guarantees in exchange for some form of economic cooperation was the dominant pattern of 2023 and it is likely to remain one of the key drivers to understand the international relations of Afghanistan under the Taliban.

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