

Terrorism Monitor

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Is Myanmar's Military Junta Quashing the Insurgency Through Domestic Crackdowns and Regional Outreach?

Jacob Zenn

Since Myanmar's February 2021 military coup to overturn the democratically elected victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the junta has experienced widespread resistance from multiple regions of the country (mmtimes.com, February 4, 2021). However, the military appears to be succeeding on the regional front in avoiding sanctions and receiving legitimacy. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) current chair, Cambodia, hosted Myanmar's military generals for discussions with ASEAN intelligence officers about the establishment of an ASEAN Military

Intelligence Community (irrawaddy.com, March 18). This occurred at the 19th ASEAN Military Intelligence Meeting (AMIM-19) held on March 17 and indicated Myanmar was not an "outcast" in ASEAN, despite its military crackdown on protesters and regional and ethnic militias that oppose military rule.

This meeting in Cambodia marked a change in ASEAN's position towards Myanmar's military rulers. The junta leader Min Aung Hlaing was banned from the annual summit of ASEAN leaders in October 2021 and all Myanmar military junta representatives were banned from attending the summit of ASEAN foreign ministers held as recently as in February 2022 (mizzima.com, March 17). It is probable that at least military and intelligence officials in ASEAN are more open to working with the junta than other diplomats in the region.

Another key regional backer of the military junta is China. Beijing appears to welcome Myanmar's declining international status because it forces Myanmar to become closer to China (irrawaddy.com, March 16). In contrast, during Myanmar's democratic opening its diplomatic relations with the West were steadily improving, especially when then secretary of state Hillary R. Clinton visited the country (amnesty.org, November 29, 2011). Despite growing closer, since taking power, the military junta has sought to limit its reliance on China by buying Russian arms for their counter-insurgency operations. As Russia continues its war in Ukraine, however, this is set to change and may force Myanmar into a closer military relationship with China (asia.nikkei.com, February 9, 2021). Beijing may also benefit from Myanmar's walk-back on democratization because it means China itself is less likely to become an isolated non-democracy in an otherwise democratizing Southeast and East Asian region.

On the domestic front, Myanmar is not only suppressing the militias' insurgency through force of arms, but is also taking over the judicial system. Instead of trying opponents of the junta who have gone on strike in the regular courts, for example, the junta has set up military tribunals in prisons. This assures such protesters will be prosecuted and convicted in prison and be unable to continue their resistance to the junta. Lawyers, moreover, have not been allowed access to the prisoners to defend them (frontiermyanmar.net, March 17).

Lastly, the junta is taking the unusual step of soliciting support from nationalist Buddhist monks and also training these monks in how to use firearms. These "military-backed monks," however, are not necessarily local to the villages where they are placed, but brought to different areas of the country by the military (rfa.org, March 14). Even though these monks may not, therefore, receive local support, the military's exploitation of monks as well as

of the judicial system reflects how the junta is broadening its counter-insurgency beyond the military focus. After more than one year of conflict, there appears to be no end in sight to the fighting, but the junta, to the chagrin of much of the international community and numerous citizens in Myanmar, appears to be shoring up its hold on the country, politically and militarily.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Ayemen Al-Zawahiri Speech Fails to Counter Islamic State's New Caliph Announcement

Jacob Zenn

Less than two weeks after Islamic State's (IS) March 10 announcement of its new caliph, Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, al-Qaeda's leader, Ayemen al-Zawahiri, released a new audio speech (alarabiya.net, March 10). Unlike the significant attention given to IS's caliph announcement in both mainstream media and IS propaganda outlets, al-Zawahiri's speech went under the radar, with little mainstream or jihadist attention to it. This contrast demonstrates that while al-Zawahiri is alive and remains al-Qaeda's leader, he lacks the charisma to galvanize jihadists' attention towards al-Qaeda even while IS's own leadership has been in turmoil and transition.

Al-Zawahiri's speech appears to lack any mention of current events, so it was unclear whether the video was current or recorded several months earlier. The purpose of the video was *dawa* (proselytization) and he discussed the history of Islam, challenged the theories of atheism, communism and capitalism, promoted the righteousness of Islam, and mentioned thinkers ranging from Malcolm X to Egyptian academic, Abdel Wahab El-Messiri, who were notably not jihadists ([Twitter/@minaallami](https://twitter.com/minaallami), March 21). His

avoidance of an explicitly jihadist tone comes at the same time the most successful al-Qaeda-allied group, the Taliban, is distancing itself from overt jihadism. This suggests that al-Qaeda and its allies' future success may depend on minimizing the violent rhetoric of al-Qaeda's past and focusing more on diplomacy and intellectualism.

Such an approach has already been employed by the formerly al-Qaeda-allied Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in northeastern Syria, which now is officially organizationally separately from al-Qaeda (mei.edu, June 24, 2021). It has attempted to appear as a 'normal,' albeit authoritarian, state actor in areas that it controls in Syria. Al-Qaeda's Sahelian affiliate, Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), still engages in asymmetric warfare, but has tended to avoid attacks specifically on foreign interests, except for on mines and kidnappings, and remains open to negotiations for autonomous jihadist rule and is loyal to the Taliban (aljazeera.com, October 19, 2021). JNIM could possibly follow the Taliban and HTS path in the future.

In contrast to the unheralded video from al-Zawahiri, IS's announcement of the new "caliph" received great fanfare from all of IS's provinces, which, in turn, led to widespread international media reporting on it (Telegram, March 14). Nevertheless, Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi himself is unable to be any more of a "public" figure than al-Zawahiri because, as the announcement of his appointment indicated, security reasons necessitate his remaining in hiding. Thus, although his becoming "caliph" inspired IS provinces more than al-Zawahiri's video inspired al-Qaeda affiliates, it does not appear that either of these leaders will dramatically influence the operations of either group.

Further, it is speculated that IS's new caliph may have obtained his position amid internal divisions with IS (aawsat.com, March 2). This could make it more difficult

for him to unite IS at a time when it is no longer holding territory in the heartland of Iraq and Syria. It may require a highly skilled leader to keep IS fighter morale high, and it remains to be seen whether Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi will become such a leader.

At the organizational level, however, it appears he may already be having an impact. For example, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which previously included Nigeria-based "Boko Haram" and Sahel-based "Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS)," for the first time is now claiming attacks in the name of "ISWAP" and a separate new "Islamic State in Sahel Province," the latter referring to what previously was ISGS ([Twitter/@SimNasr](https://twitter.com/SimNasr), March 23). Evidence suggests the two groups had virtually no overlap and that this will result in more provinces statistically existing under the new caliph's leadership. Moreover, IS's renewed focus on attacking Israel could also reflect the new caliph's strategy (jpost.com, March 28).

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

ISKP's Continued Interest in India

Jasminder Singh and Rueben Dass

Introduction

In March 2022, Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) highlighted the story of Najeeb al-Hindi, the group's latest recruit from the southern Indian state of Kerala, from its latest flagship publication, *Voice of Khurasan*, (Hindustan Times, March 11). The decision to feature an Indian in this publication reveals ISKP's continued interest in attracting Indians into its ranks, the continued flow of fighters into Afghanistan from India, and the increasing importance given to Indians with regards

to their roles within the group. This is significant if the trend continues, as there will be a possibility of seeing more Indians becoming active operatives of ISKP, which would then have implications within and beyond India and Afghanistan.

Indians in ISKP Suicide and *Inghimasi* Attacks

At the height of IS' power in Iraq and Syria, the estimated number of Indians in IS was less than 200 members (economictimes.com, June 25, 2019). Some of them, however, have since joined ISKP in Afghanistan since its formation in 2015 by making the trip directly from India and also from other countries in the Middle East, such as Iran ([The Hindu](http://TheHindu.com), August 28, 2021). Unlike previous reports which have noted that Indians were given only menial tasks within the group in Iraq and Syria, the ISKP experience for Indians has proven more meaningful ([The Straits Times](http://TheStraitsTimes.com), December 1, 2014). In Afghanistan, Indian ISKP recruits have been given active combatant roles in major attacks and have been chosen as suicide bombers, including, for example, Najeeb al-Hindi, Abu Khalid al-Hindi, and Abu Rawaha al-Hindi.

Najeeb is the latest example of an Indian ISKP operative who was given an active role in a major attack. His story was featured in four pages in the second issue of the *Voice of Khurasan*. It noted he was a 23-year-old engineering student from Kerala and had successfully made *hijrah* (migration) from India to Afghanistan to join ISKP despite an array of difficulties. He was said to have been awaiting to attain *shahadah* (martyrdom). The highlight of his story was the sacrifice that Najeeb made to leave his newly wedded wife on his wedding night to volunteer himself for the *inghimasi* (guerrilla-style attack where the chances of survival are low) operation in which he was killed in Afghanistan.

Najeeb was not the first Indian to have been featured in IS publications. In June 2020, another Keralite, Abu Khalid al-Hindi, was featured in IS' main newsletter,

al-Naba. Like Najeeb, he made *hijrah* to join ISKP in Afghanistan and desired martyrdom immediately. Abu Khalid was chosen as part of a four-man *inghimasi* team that attacked a Sikh temple in Kabul on March 25, 2020 ([The Hindu](http://TheHindu.com), March 28, 2020). He was said to have blown himself up, killing and wounding sixty people.

In October 2020, Abu Rawaha al-Hindi was also featured in the *Voice of Hind* magazine. A medical doctor from Kerala, he joined ISKP and carried out a suicide attack on the Jalalabad prison in Afghanistan on August 2, 2020 ([The Print](http://ThePrint.com), November 13, 2020). Another two individuals suspected to be from Kerala also took part in the same operation.

Several similarities existed in the portrayals of Najeeb, Abu Khalid and Abu Rawaha in these IS publications. All were stated to have actively participated in combat and high-profile suicide or *inghimasi* attacks and were portrayed as individuals with extreme religious devotion and zeal. Further, they sacrificed all worldly pursuits in search of martyrdom. This may represent ISKP's attempt at attracting more Indians to join the group.

Why South India?

Although it may surprise some observers, southern India has seen the [greatest](http://TheHindu.com) number of IS-related arrests in the country ([The Hindu](http://TheHindu.com), September 16, 2020). Tamil Nadu and Kerala are the hotspots, as opposed to the conflict-ridden areas of Jammu and Kashmir in the north. For example, in 2019, a 20-member joint Tamil Nadu and Karnataka-based IS cell calling itself "Al-Hind" had planned to establish an IS *wilayah* (province) based in South India and plotted the killing of Hindu government officials ([Hindustan Times](http://HindustanTimes.com), October 3, 2020).

One reason for South India's jihadist concentration is IS' continued efforts at attracting South Indians through social media. IS' various media channels continue to release propaganda targeted at South

Indians with materials translated into South Indian languages, such as Tamil and Malayalam ([ANI News](#), August 12, 2021). IS has also exploited local issues in South India to recruit and garner support, such as the recent anti-hijab controversy in Karnataka ([The Week](#), March 15).

Ideology has also played a role. As opposed to carrying out violence locally like militants in Jammu and Kashmir owing to the indigenous nature of their conflict, South Indian IS operatives have been attracted to the utopian idea of living under IS' Caliphate and carrying out attacks abroad ([ORF](#), October 15, 2019). Further, apart from online radicalization, offline radicalization involving physical links to radical preachers is also a reason why South Indians are joining IS. For example, radical Indian preacher Abdul Rashid Abdullah was among the main recruiters for IS in Kerala and authored sermons that led many Indians to leave the country and join ISKP in Afghanistan ([The Print](#), November 21, 2019).

Radical Islam in Kerala has also been linked to the Popular Front of India (PFI), an Islamist organization which has been banned by some Indian states ([The Print](#), February 24). Several madrassas exist in Kerala that were found to be preaching Wahhabism ([SSPC](#), October 30, 2021). A number of individuals who have been linked to these madrassas and the PFI have joined IS previously ([Deccan Chronicle](#), November 2, 2017).

The final reason is linked to diasporic communities and international connectivity ([ORF](#), October 15, 2019). South India has maintained long-term ties with the Middle East and especially the Gulf countries, with many people, especially from Kerala, making their way there for employment. As Indian IS members have mostly come from diasporic communities, many have capitalized on being in the Middle East to use those countries as a stepping-stone for traveling to the conflict zones where IS operates, such as Syria, Iraq and

Afghanistan ([The Print](#), February 17; [The Indian Express](#), February 11, 2017).

Conclusion

Ever since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, its main rival, ISKP, has been revitalized in the South Asia region. Although primarily engaged in low-scale assassinations and IED attacks, the group still has the propensity to carry out high-profile suicide bombings as evidenced by the 2021 Kabul bombings and the March 2022 attack on a Shiite mosque in Peshawar. The case of Najeeb al-Hindi highlights that there are still South Indians among the ranks of ISKP members and the group has interest in recruiting more.

Owing to the large number of Keralites and Tamils overseas, the threat is not just localized to India. For example, Singapore has identified and deported several South Indian IS members in the past ([Deccan Chronicle](#), September 19, 2017; [The Indian Express](#), March 24, 2014). Kerala's links with foreign terrorists also surfaced when reports suggested that some of the perpetrators of the 2019 Easter attacks in Sri Lanka, including its mastermind Zaharan Hashim, had visited Tamil Nadu prior to the attacks and had links to individuals in Kerala ([The Hindu](#), April 28, 2019). Conversely, Abdul Rahman Al-Logari, who was the 2021 Kabul Airport suicide bomber, was initially sent to Delhi to carry out a suicide mission that failed ([Republic World](#), January 2).

As a result, Indian and other nations' security agencies must remain vigilant and constantly work together to mitigate this growing threat.

Jasminder Singh is a Senior Analyst with the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include religious extremism, counter-terrorism and

political violence in Southeast Asia and South Asia.

Rueben Dass is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include terrorism and counter-terrorism in Southeast Asia; Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) terrorism; and the use of technology and unconventional weapons by terrorist groups.

Geopolitical Rivalries and Competition for Access and Influence in the Horn of Africa Increase Instability

Michael Horton

The competition between regional and global powers for access to—and influence in—the Horn of Africa is intensifying. The Horn is Asia’s and the Gulf’s door to Africa’s vast natural resources. While great powers’ growing interest in the Horn may lead to greater development in the region, the battle between rival states also threatens to further destabilize the region.

On top of this, the ongoing war in Ukraine has amplified extant inflationary trends in global commodity markets. Gulf States, which have already invested in vast tracts of farmland in various African nations, are keener than ever to secure alternative sources for food. The same concerns apply to China, which notably opened its first foreign military base in Djibouti in 2017 ([al-Jazeera](#), August 1, 2017). China has long recognized the importance of Africa’s vast underdeveloped natural resources. After two decades of investment and the clever use of debt, China’s influence now spans the entire continent. It is the Horn of Africa, however, to which the Chinese and,

increasingly, regional powers attach particular importance.

Securing Influence with Weapons

Ethiopia and Somalia are the two countries on the Horn where the competition for influence and access between regional powers has markedly increased. The war in Ethiopia, which pits the government against multiple separatist groups, has provided China, Turkey, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with an opportunity to enhance their influence through the provision of weapons and expertise. The Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) provided by Turkey, Iran, and the UAE likely saved the government of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed from being defeated by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) ([al-Monitor](#), January 21; [al-Jazeera](#), December 10, 2021; [The Africa Report](#), January 25, [Garowe Online](#), August 18, 2021). The armed UAVs manufactured in Turkey, Iran, and China were fundamental to turning back the TPLF’s southward advance toward the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa ([Terrorism Monitor](#), November 5, 2021).

Using weapons to buy influence is nothing new. However, the types of weapons and the provision of armed UAV’s by regional powers like the UAE and Turkey to Ethiopia is something of a departure from previous policies. China has long favored the use of debt and investment to weave nations into its ever growing web of client states. The Gulf nations, meanwhile, traditionally use investment and aid to secure influence. Turkey is an exception, especially in the Horn, where it has engaged in a muscular foreign policy in Somalia. Turkey has invested heavily in Somalia, where it has its largest foreign military base at Camp TURKSOM ([Daily Sabah](#), April 5).

In March, China delivered military aid to the government of Somalia. The aid, which included armored personnel carriers (APCs) and surveillance drones, is ostensibly for the government to fight against al-Shabaab ([All Africa](#), March 19).

[1] The overt delivery of military aid to Somalia by China is yet another sign that competition for influence and access is increasing in the Horn, and specifically Somalia. With its long coastline, ports, and potentially abundant on and off-shore oil and gas, Somalia's importance will only grow. Yet, the involvement of multiple regional and global powers in Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa also suggests that instability will increase as rival powers back favored political parties and rebel groups.

Somaliland Bucks the Trend

The autonomous but unrecognized Republic of Somaliland is uniquely an outpost of stability in the Horn. Unlike Somalia, Somaliland has eschewed foreign involvement in its internal affairs. Instead, the government of Somaliland has encouraged investment by numerous states, most notably the UAE, all the while maintaining its neutrality. As an example of its commitment to neutrality, in 2019 the government of Somaliland's president, Muse Bihi Abdi, revised an agreement with the UAE that would have seen the UAE build a military base near the port city of Berbera ([Garowe Online](#), March 4, 2020). However, rather than a military base, the UAE and Somaliland agreed on the construction of a commercial center.

Somaliland is also one of the few African nations that has stood up to Chinese influence. Rather than give into lucrative offers of aid and investment from China, Somaliland is focusing on developing closer ties with the US, the UK, and the European Union ([al-Araby](#), March 28). Furthermore, Somaliland even risked significantly angering China by exchanging ambassadors with Taiwan ([Somaliland Chronicle](#), July 5, 2020).

At a time when regional and global rivals are determined to secure access to diminishing resources, Somaliland's neutrality should be a model for the region. Yet, Somaliland, like the rest of the nations in the Horn, faces an array of challenges

that range from drought to youth unemployment. Without considered support, the Horn's one remaining bastion of stability could fall as rival powers exploit divisions to advance their own agendas.

Outlook

The battle between nation states for natural resources will continue to drive interest in the Horn of Africa. The Horn has been plagued by decades of instability, which is now on the rise yet again with the notable exception of Somaliland. This comes at a time when US interest in the Horn appears to be waning and newly assertive regional powers like Turkey and the UAE are increasing their level of involvement in the Horn.

Ethiopia and Somalia both face acute and growing internal divisions. Rival states can and likely will exploit these divisions to secure footholds. Ironically, the competition for access and influence in the Horn may ensure that instability rises to a level that prevents the development of the region's natural resources. At the same time, rising instability will continue to provide terrorist groups like Somalia based al-Shabaab with opportunities to expand their areas of operation.

Michael Horton is a fellow for Arabian Affairs at the Jamestown Foundation. Horton has completed in-depth field based studies on a range of subjects and issues related to security and development in the Middle East and Africa for the public and private sectors. He has briefed senior members of the U.S. National Security Council, the U.S. State Department, the British Foreign Ministry, British Ministry of Defense, as well as members of the British Parliament and U.S. Congress. Michael is a co-founder of Red Sea Analytics International (RSAI).

[1] Author interview with in-country analyst, April 2022.

India and the Taliban: Is a 'Soft Power' Opening Emerging?

Sudha Ramachandran

On February 22, a convoy of 50 trucks carrying a consignment of 2,500 tons of wheat set off from India via Pakistan to Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. The consignment, which is the first of several consignments, will see India deliver 50,000 tons of wheat to Afghanistan in the coming months ([India Ministry of External Affairs](#), February 22). Since December, India has also delivered four consignments of emergency medical assistance to Afghanistan. Unlike the wheat consignments which are being transported overland, the medical assistance is being flown to the war-ravaged country ([India MEA](#), January 29).

India's humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people provides New Delhi with a toehold in Afghanistan. This is an important milestone in its relations with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. When the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan on August 15 last year, India's influence in that country shrank, especially as India has neither extended diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime, nor retained a diplomatic presence in Kabul. Worse for India, its relations with the Taliban over the past 25 years have been hostile. In these circumstances, New Delhi's humanitarian outreach directly to the Afghan people could provide it with an opening to engage official Taliban representatives while it supports the Afghan people through the crisis.

However, how long India's humanitarian outreach can continue is a moot point since Pakistan is uneasy with New Delhi's interaction with the Taliban. Pakistan has raised obstacles to the aid transiting its territory and its apprehensions are unlikely to go away soon as Pakistan's own relations with the Taliban have come under strain in recent months.

The Decline of Indian and Rise of Pakistani Influence in Afghanistan

Between 2002 and the Taliban's return to power last year, India had strong ties with Afghanistan. It had built significant influence in the country, not just in government circles but among an array of politicians across ideologies and ethnicities, as well as civil society organizations and ordinary Afghans. Indian infrastructure and development projects, training of civilian and military officials, and extension of scholarships for Afghan students in India earned it public goodwill ([Indian Express](#), August 29, 2021).

However, this all changed with the Taliban's return to power. What made the situation particularly difficult for India was that it had failed to cultivate contacts among Taliban leaders; indeed, by the time it reached out to several 'moderate' Taliban leaders, Kabul had already fallen to the Taliban ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 16, 2021). Given the vulnerability of its nationals to Taliban attacks, India evacuated them and shut down its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's power grab in Kabul prompted political commentators to point out that "New Delhi lost its grip in one fell swoop" ([Dawn](#), September 19, 2021). The Taliban victory, moreover, was also a strategic victory for Pakistan. It now had a friendly government in Kabul and had achieved its long-standing ambition of securing strategic depth in its future confrontations with India.

Pakistan's clout in Kabul has been on display repeatedly in the months since the Taliban returned to power. In early September 2021, in a brazen display of its influence, Pakistan's then-intelligence chief, Lieutenant Gen Faiz Hameed, flew to Kabul reportedly on the invitation of the Taliban to resolve infighting among Taliban leaders over ministerial portfolios ([India Today](#), September 4, 2021). The interim administration that was announced soon after included leaders like Sirajuddin

Haqqani and Amir Khan Mottaqi, who are known to have close ties with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 6, 2021; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), January 2022). Leaders like Abdul Ghani Baradar and Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, in contrast, who had been functioning out of the Taliban's Qatar office for several years and thus out of Pakistan's grip, were reportedly in touch with Indian officials and were allotted less influential positions.

Problems in Pakistan-Taliban Ties

Pakistan's 25 year-long support of the Taliban was expected to pay off once the insurgent group came to power. It was expected that the Taliban, in the context of its continued dependence on Pakistan due to global isolation, would avoid ruffling Islamabad's feathers. That expectation, however, has not materialized on at least two issues: the two countries' border dispute and the Taliban's relationship with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban. On both issues, the Taliban has openly defied Pakistan.

Between December and February 2021, Taliban fighters repeatedly clashed with Pakistani security personnel along their disputed border known as the Durand Line. In addition to damaging stretches of the fence that Pakistan erected along this border, the Taliban even briefly detained seven Pakistani paramilitary forces near Paktika province ([Terrorism Monitor](#), February 8).

Pakistani officials sought to downplay the clashes ([Dawn](#), December 25, 2021). However, the Taliban signaled an inflexible position. "We will not allow the [Pakistani] fencing anytime, in any form.... There will be no fencing anymore," Mawlawi Sanaulah Sangin, a Taliban commander in eastern Afghanistan stated ([Tolo News](#), January 5).

As for the Taliban's ties with the TTP, there were expectations in Islamabad that the

former would act against the TTP and deny its fighters sanctuaries on Afghan soil. Pakistan even handed the Taliban a list of "most wanted [TTP] terrorists" based in Afghanistan in August last year ([Express Tribune](#), August 23, 2021). However, the Taliban has failed to rein in the TTP or halt its attacks on Pakistani targets from Afghan soil. While it did encourage talks between the Pakistan government and the TTP and mediated between the two, when the month-long ceasefire ended and the TTP accelerated its violent campaign against Pakistan, the Taliban did not criticize these attacks. Given the ethnic Pashtun solidarity between the Taliban and the TTP, their long history of co-operation, and the fact that the TTP provides the Taliban with strategic leverage over Pakistan, the Taliban is unlikely to snap ties with the TTP ([Terrorism Monitor](#), February 8).

Taliban Overtures to India

Within weeks of its capture of power in Kabul, Taliban leaders began reaching out to India. On August 31, Stanekzai, who was subsequently appointed the Taliban deputy foreign minister, met India's Ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, at the Indian Embassy in Doha. The meeting, which was the first ever public contact between the two sides, was reportedly "on the request of the Taliban side" ([India Ministry of External Affairs](#), August 31, 2021). Taliban officials also reached out to the Indian government to resume commercial flights between the two countries and provide visas for Afghan students to resume their studies in India on Indian scholarships ([Hindustan Times](#), September 29, 2021). The Taliban have also requested India to reopen its embassy in Kabul and resume its development projects in Afghanistan ([Economic Times](#), September 2, 2021).

Engagements at higher levels have also been initiated. In October, Indian diplomats met Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi at the Moscow Format Consultations, hosted by Russia. Indian and Taliban officials held a closed door meeting at the sidelines of the

consultations, where India offered to provide Afghanistan with humanitarian aid ([The Hindu](#), October 21).

India's Humanitarian Aid

Of all the interactions between India and the Taliban regime in recent months, it is their engagement on the transport of wheat to Afghanistan that has been more than simple one-off talk and is likely to continue for several months ahead. For several months Pakistan refused to allow India overland access to Afghanistan and then opposed Indian trucks traversing its territory. Throughout this period, Indian and Afghan officials found themselves on the same side, trying to persuade Pakistan to come on board the initiative. The deadlock was eventually broken with Pakistan allowing Afghan trucks to carry the wheat from the Wagah checkpoint on the India-Pakistan border to Afghanistan ([The Print](#), February 23). With several more wheat consignments scheduled to head to Afghanistan via Pakistan, India-Taliban engagement on transport of the wheat will continue. In addition to providing Indian and Afghan officials opportunities to engage, India's supply of humanitarian aid will revive public goodwill in Afghanistan.

It is significant to note that while India has not recognized the Taliban government, it plans to persist in its provision of development aid to Afghanistan -- as it did in previous years. India's recently announced 2022-2023 budget has allotted \$26.74 million to the Ministry of External Affairs as development aid for Afghanistan. While this year's allotment is less than the \$47 million allotted to Afghanistan under the Ashraf Ghani government in last year's budget, it is on par with the revised allocation made last year. Indian officials have said this will go towards old projects, humanitarian aid, and scholarships ([Indian Express](#), February 2). This bodes well for the revival of scholarships and other soft power initiatives that India has extended to Afghans in the past.

India and the Central Asian Countries

In recent months, India has also stepped up its diplomatic ties with Afghanistan's neighbors with an eye on developing a regional approach to engaging the Taliban. In November, it hosted the Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, which was attended by top security officials from Russia, Iran, India and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) ([First Post](#), November 10, 2021). Meetings among the foreign ministers and then the National Security Advisors of India and the CARs followed in Delhi soon after, culminating in a virtual summit in late January that saw the leaders of these countries set up two Joint Working Groups, one relating to Afghanistan and the other relating to Chabahar Port in Iran ([Asian Affairs](#), March 2022).

India's heightened engagement of the CARs aimed not just at improving trade with the region but also drawing on their support to engage with the Taliban. Like Afghanistan, the CARs are landlocked. Their trade with India is being obstructed by Pakistan's reluctance to allow overland transit. India has been rallying the CARs to use the route through Chabahar port via Afghanistan and Iran to boost trade ([The Print](#), January 27). The CARs and India, therefore, will have to work together to persuade the Taliban to facilitate this access. Stability in Afghanistan is essential for such trade to grow, and India will be hoping to get the CARs, Afghanistan, and Iran on board to enable such stability.

All these Indian efforts and initiatives indicate that the Indian government is keen to engage the Taliban and is preparing the ground for such engagement. Its security interests, as well as economic ambitions in Central Asia have been hit hard by the loss of a friendly government in Kabul. Establishing a relationship with the Taliban, however small, is seen to be necessary to protect New Delhi's interests.

Conclusion

While India's humanitarian aid has provided it with a foothold in Afghanistan, it is too early to see this as a breakthrough in Indian-Taliban relations. There are many obstacles ahead. For one, any Indian initiative that revives its influence and presence in Afghanistan, even minimally, is bound to draw Pakistani ire and prompt it to press the Taliban to desist from such engagement. There may be strains in the Pakistan-Taliban relationship but theirs is a long-standing connection that is symbiotic and mutually beneficial. The Taliban will not risk a rupture at this point on the question of engaging India.

India, too, remains uneasy about dealing with the Taliban, given its hardline Islamist ideology and proximity to Pakistan. Although calls for reopening the Indian diplomatic mission in Kabul are growing in its security establishment, it will adopt a cautious approach on the matter and maintain a minimal presence due to security concerns. There is nevertheless ample scope for co-operation between India and the Taliban. Afghanistan is in dire need of infusions of food and medical aid and India has the capacity to provide such support. Besides, the health and nutrition situation in Afghanistan has assumed alarming levels under Taliban rule. India has considerable experience in running projects in these areas in Afghanistan and should explore the possibility of reviving them.

The main source of India's power in Afghanistan has been its soft power. While the Taliban is likely to block important elements of India's soft power—such as Bollywood movies and music, which are immensely popular among the Afghan people—there is no reason for the Taliban to reject India's work in the fields of education, health and nutrition.

Dr. Sudha Ramachandran is an independent researcher and journalist based in Bangalore, India. She has written extensively on South Asian peace and conflict, political and security issues for The Diplomat, Asian Affairs, and the Jamestown Foundation's Terrorism Monitor and Militant Leadership Monitor. She can be contacted at sudha.ramachandran@live.in