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## THE RETURN OF THE TALIBAN TO POWER AS A FACTOR IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF THREATS AND CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL SECURITY

Rustam B. MAKHMUDOV,

ORCID 0000-0002-1030-2200, rmaxmudov@uwed.uz

University of World Economy and Diplomacy, 54, Ave. Mustakillik, Tashkent, 100007, Republic of Uzbekistan.

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**Abstract.** The article addresses the issue of the emergence of new challenges and threats to the regional security system in Central and South Asia following the return to power of the Taliban movement in August 2021. Among them is the Taliban's active policy in constructing the Qoshtepa canal related to the Amu Darya in northern Afghanistan without coordination with the Central Asian countries, posing a threat to the water, environmental, and food security of extensive areas in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The complicating factor is the deterioration of relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan after 2021, rooted in contradictions surrounding the Kabul-non-recognized Durand Line, which divides the territory inhabited by many Pashtun tribes and clans on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border. An irritant in Afghan-Pakistani relations has been the increased terrorist activities of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) following the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which has resulted in numerous casualties among Pakistani security forces and civilians. Islamabad accuses Kabul of harboring TTP militants on its territory, a claim refuted by the latter. In the long term, a challenge, primarily for a secular Central Asia, may be the Taliban's antimodernist policy capable of influencing the growing post-secular trends in countries located north to the Amu Darya.

**Keywords:** Taliban, Central Asia, Qoshtepa canal, Helmand River, Durand Line, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, Islamist fundamentalism.

### About author:

Rustam B. MAKHMUDOV, Associate Professor.

## ВОЗВРАЩЕНИЕ “ТАЛИБАНА”<sup>1</sup> К ВЛАСТИ КАК ФАКТОР ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ УГРОЗ И ВЫЗОВОВ ДЛЯ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЙ БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ

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МАХМУДОВ Рустам Баходирович, доцент,

ORCID 0000-0002-1030-2200, rmaxmudov@uwed.uz

Университет мировой экономики и дипломатии, Республика Узбекистан,  
100007 Ташкент, пр-т Мустакиллик, 54.

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается вопрос формирования новых вызовов и угроз для системы региональной безопасности в Центральной и Южной Азии после возвращения к власти движения “Талибан” в августе 2021 г. В их числе – активная политика талибов по строительству связанного с Амударьей канала “Куштепа” на севере Афганистана без согласования со странами ЦА, что ставит под угрозу водную, экологическую и продовольственную безопасность обширных пространств в Туркменистане и Узбекистане. Вызовом становятся возникшие после 2021 г. осложнения в отношениях “Талибана” с Пакистаном, в основе которых лежат противоречия вокруг не признаваемой Кабулом линии Дюранда, пересекающей территорию проживания многих пуштунских племен и родов по обе стороны афганско-пакистанской границы. Раздражителем в афганско-пакистанских отношениях стала активизировавшаяся после образования Исламского Эмирата Афганистан террористическая деятельность группировки “Техрик-е Талибан Пакистан” (ТТП)<sup>2</sup>, приводящая к многочисленным жертвам среди представителей пакистанских силовых

<sup>1</sup> The organization is banned in Russia.

<sup>2</sup> The organization is banned in Russia

структур и мирных жителей. Исламабад обвиняет Кабул в укрывательстве боевиков ТТП на своей территории, что опровергается последним. В долгосрочной перспективе вызовом, в первую очередь для светской Центральной Азии, может стать антимодернистская политика “Талибана”, способная оказать влияние на нарастающие постсекулярные тренды в странах, расположенных севернее Амударьи.

**Ключевые слова:** “Талибан”, Центральная Азия, канал “Куштепа”, река Гильменд, линия Дюранда, “Техрик-е Талибан Пакистан”, исламский фундаментализм.

## INTRODUCTION

The Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 significantly altered the geopolitical dynamics of Central and South Asia. Between 2001 and 2021, the regional balance of power was largely sustained by the American military and geopolitical presence, as well as substantial Western financial support to the Afghan government. However, the U.S. withdrawal and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces brought about a fundamental shift in this balance.

The Taliban’s rise to power as an Islamic fundamentalist movement elicited varied and, at times, contentious responses across the region. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Pakistan responded relatively calmly to the group’s return, maintaining diplomatic restraint. In contrast, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Iran initially voiced serious concerns regarding the evolving situation in Afghanistan. The most pronounced reaction came from Tajikistan, which approached the brink of open conflict with the Taliban.

Three years into Taliban rule, it can be stated that no major collapse has occurred in Central and South Asia. On the contrary, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) is gradually becoming a stable factor in regional security and the development of trade, economic, and transportation links. However, this stability does not imply that Afghanistan no longer poses serious challenges to the region. Rather, the Taliban’s return has reshaped the regional security architecture by introducing new types of threats and challenges – some of which may be long-term in nature. These evolving dynamics must now be considered by neighboring countries in their strategic planning.

## WATER POLICY OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

One of the primary challenges posed by the new Afghanistan concerns water security in

Central Asia. In March 2023, the Taliban initiated construction of the Qoshtepa Canal – a massive hydraulic infrastructure project intended to divert water from the Amu Darya to Afghanistan’s northern provinces of Balkh, Jowzjan, and Faryab. The canal is projected to span 285 kilometers in length, 100 meters in width, and 8.5 meters in depth. According to various estimates, the project could divert between 20% and 30% of the Amu Darya’s flow, enabling the irrigation of approximately 550,000 hectares of land [source 1].

By commencing construction of the canal, the Taliban presented the region with a fait accompli. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) lacks formal recognition as a legitimate actor in international relations. Additionally, Afghanistan has historically remained outside key regional and international water governance frameworks. It is not a signatory to the 1992 Almaty Agreement, which regulates water usage among Central Asian states, nor is it a party to the 1992 United Nations Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, which includes Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan among its participants [source 2].

Rather than initiating dialogue with neighboring countries, the Taliban asserted that Afghanistan’s access to the waters of the Amu Darya is a legal right. This position was articulated by Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar during a meeting with Abdulaziz Kamilov, Special Representative of the President of Uzbekistan for Foreign Policy, held in Kabul on March 22, 2023. Baradar stated that Afghanistan is entitled to the Amu Darya’s waters “in accordance with international norms and with full consideration of Afghanistan’s privileges and rights.” At the same time, he expressed confidence that the completion of the Qoshtepa Canal would enhance bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan [source 3].

Following a period of official silence among Central Asian states, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan publicly expressed concern regarding the situation. In his address at the summit of the founding states of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, held on September 15, 2023, in Dushanbe, he remarked: “In fact, a new participant in the water use process has emerged in our region, which is not bound by any obligations to our countries. You know well that the Afghan party is actively building a canal. Its launch can dramatically change the water regime and balance in Central Asia.” He emphasized that Afghanistan holds no formal commitments toward the Central Asian states concerning the use of the Amu Darya’s waters. As a response, President Mirziyoyev proposed the formation of a joint working group to assess the construction of the Qoshtepa Canal and its potential impact on the river’s water regime. Additionally, he suggested initiating dialogue with Afghanistan on regional cooperation regarding the shared use of water resources [source 4].

However, when considering the prospect of a regional dialogue on the Amu Darya involving Afghanistan, doubts emerge regarding the Taliban’s actual – rather than declarative – willingness to engage. There are at least three key reasons that justify such skepticism.

First, the construction of the canal cannot be stopped, nor can its technical characteristics be amended. The first phase of the canal was launched in November 2023, and the Taliban are determined to see the project through to completion [source 5]. In terms of technical design, the project relies on outdated construction methods and materials, which undermine the canal’s efficiency and sustainability as a hydraulic structure. The Qoshtepa Canal resembles a large *aryk* – a traditional open irrigation channel commonly used in Central Asia. As demonstrated by the experience of the Karakum Canal, constructed in the 1950s, such structures are prone to significant water losses. The Karakum Canal, built without protective lining, loses an estimated 18% of its total water flow. These inefficiencies have contributed to severe waterlogging and salinization of adjacent lands [source 6]. The Qoshtepa Canal is unlikely to perform any better in terms of water efficiency.

Second, the Taliban view the Qoshtepa Canal as essential for bringing new agricultural lands into cultivation. An analysis of Afghanistan’s current economic landscape reveals that, in the absence of substantial domestic revenue and foreign investment, agriculture remains one of the few viable sources of foreign exchange. Expanding agricultural production in the northern provinces is also critical for enhancing food security, as approximately half of Afghanistan’s population – around 20 million people – is currently facing acute food insecurity [1]. The economic urgency has been further intensified by the Taliban’s ban on opium poppy cultivation, a policy that has resulted in an estimated \$ 1.3 billion in lost income and the elimination of roughly 450,000 agricultural jobs [2].

Third, the Taliban needs to irrigate large areas of land and create 250,000 new jobs in the northern provinces to solidify their political influence in Afghanistan’s northern provinces, which are predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities such as Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Tajiks – groups that have historically supported political and military factions opposed to the Taliban.

It appears that the Uzbek authorities have recognized a fundamental shift in the regional dynamics of water management, acknowledging the need to adapt to a new reality. This is reflected in the designation of 2024 as “the period of transition to an emergency mode of work on water saving.” The primary drivers of this policy shift are identified as climate change and the increasingly complex management of transboundary water resources. As part of the transition strategy, the government has introduced a program aimed at drastically reducing water losses in agriculture, primarily through the concreting of irrigation canals.

According to official data, 90% of water resources in Uzbekistan, or 46 billion m<sup>3</sup>, are consumed by the agricultural sector. Irrigation of 1 hectare of cotton field requires between 10,000–11,000 m<sup>3</sup> of water annually, which is 2–3 times higher than in countries with comparable climate and soil conditions. This is largely due to the fact that irrigation systems with natural cover lose on average 14 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year, or 36% of incoming water. The highest loss rates are observed in Karakalpakstan (43%), as well as in Namangan (40%), Navoiy (38%), Khorezm (38%), and Bukhara (37%) regions. As

a result, the Uzbek economy incurs annual losses of approximately \$ 5 billion due to inefficient water use [source 7].

It remains unclear how Turkmenistan will respond to the “Qoshtepa challenge”, but it will undoubtedly need to implement substantial reforms to restructure its water consumption system and enhance efficiency. Currently, Turkmenistan ranks among the least efficient water users globally. On average, more than 16,000 liters of water are consumed per person per day – four times higher than in the United States, fifteen times higher than in China, and fourteen times higher than in Russia. Despite being predominantly arid, Turkmenistan consumes more water annually than Germany, the largest economy in the European Union, which benefits from a far more favorable climate [source 6].

In addition to emerging water-related tensions with Central Asia, the Taliban’s relationship with Iran has also become increasingly strained due to disputes over the use of the Helmand River. This conflict has led to periodic armed clashes along the border, sharp rhetoric from officials on both sides, and an overall deterioration in the political climate between the two countries. The Helmand River originates in Afghanistan’s Hindu Kush mountain range and stretches approximately 1,150 kilometers, eventually flowing into Lake Hamun in Iran. As a vital water source, the Helmand is essential to agricultural activity in both Afghanistan and Iran.

The Afghan-Iranian water dispute dates back to the 1940s, when Kabul began constructing dams on the Helmand River to expand irrigated land and promote the sedentarization of nomadic tribes. In 1973, Afghanistan and Iran signed a bilateral treaty on the shared use of the river’s water resources, which allocated 820 million m<sup>3</sup> of water annually to Iran, but it was not ratified [source 8]. In February 2021, during the administration of President Ashraf Ghani, the two countries signed an additional agreement reaffirming the principles of the 1973 accord. Nevertheless, the agreement failed to resolve the underlying disagreements between the parties [source 9].

In recent years, the water dispute has been further exacerbated by a prolonged drought that has severely affected Iran’s agricultural sector and

the ecological health of Lake Hamun. Against this backdrop, Tehran began to assertively demand its allocated share of Helmand River water, while Afghan authorities maintained that insufficient water availability made it impossible to increase deliveries to Iran [3]. This raised suspicion on the Iranian side that the Taliban were unwilling to provide Iran with its allocated share. In May 2023, *IRNA* published images of the Helmand River taken by Iran’s Khayyam satellite showing that the reservoirs behind the Kajaki and Kamal Khan dams were nearly 80% full. This disproved the statements from the Afghan authorities concerning water shortages [source 10]. Besides, in May 2023 Tehran requested permission to send a technical delegation to measure water levels in the Helmand River, but the Taliban refused the request [source 11].

Against this background, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, during his visit to the Sistan and Baluchestan province on the border with Afghanistan, accused the IEA of deliberately withholding Iran’s rightful share of the Helmand River water, despite sufficient availability. He urged the Afghan authorities to take his warning seriously [3]. These remarks marked a significant escalation in the dispute and contributed to a “war of words” that culminated in an armed confrontation along the Afghan-Iranian border on May 27–28, 2023, resulting in casualties on both sides. However, this failed to move the two parties closer to a resolution. The dispute over the Helmand River is thus expected to persist as a major source of bilateral tension, further complicating the geopolitical and economic landscape of the region.

#### ESCALATING PROBLEMS IN RELATIONS WITH PAKISTAN

Current relations between the Taliban and Pakistan are at a particularly complex and tense stage, giving rise to a range of strategic and security challenges. Historically, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence has maintained close ties with the Taliban, offering extensive support during the group’s military struggle against the Northern Alliance. Pakistan was also one of only three countries – alongside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – to officially recognize Muhammad Omar’s IEA. Defeated in 2001, the Taliban sought refuge in Pakistani territory, where they were able to re-

group and launch a nearly two-decade-long guerilla and sabotage war against the Afghan army and the international coalition that supported them. It is widely acknowledged that the resurgence of the Taliban and their return to power was in no small measure a consequence of assistance from Pakistan [4].

The consistency, with which Islamabad provided support to the Taliban, even at the risk of entering into a confrontation with the United States, raises important questions about Pakistan's underlying strategic motivations. This support appears to be rooted in the broader framework of Pakistan's national and regional policy, which has remained largely consistent since the country's founding. It is driven by two interconnected and yet mutually exclusive factors – first, securing strategic depth in its enduring rivalry with India, which it perceives as an existential threat; and second, curbing separatist and nationalist movements among its own Pashtun and Baloch populations. These internal vulnerabilities heighten Pakistan's sensitivity to Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan, which Islamabad views as a potential lever for Delhi's influence in the region.

In order to reconcile the conflicting goals of securing strategic depth and mitigating the risk of Afghan support for Pashtun and Baloch separatism within Pakistan – particularly in potential coordination with India – Islamabad found itself compelled to actively engage in intra-Afghan affairs. This involved both influencing political dynamics in Afghanistan and managing ideological currents among Pakistani and Afghan Pashtuns and Baloch. A central strategy was to shift their focus away from ethno-nationalist aspirations, such as the establishment of a “Greater Pashtunistan” or “Baluchistan”, and instead redirect their ideological orientation toward Islamic jihad. This approach helps explain Pakistan's consistent preference for supporting religiously motivated groups in Afghanistan. In the 1970s, Islamabad backed the Afghan fundamentalist organization “Muslim Youth”, as well as mujahideen factions that fought against the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) from 1978 to 1993 [5]. From 1994 to 2021, Pakistan provided substantial support to the Taliban, a fundamentalist movement dedicated to establishing an Islamic state in Afghanistan.

For decades, Pakistan's policy of ideologically containing Pashtun nationalism proved largely effective. However, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 has presented Islamabad with a complex strategic dilemma. The core of this dilemma lies in the uncertainty surrounding the future trajectory of the Taliban's ideological orientation. Pakistani policymakers remain unable to determine with confidence whether the Taliban will continue to promote a strictly Islamic ideological framework or whether they might incorporate elements of Pashtun nationalism. Even if this nationalism does not manifest domestically, its expression in relation to Pakistan could signal a potential shift in Kabul's foreign policy – possibly including closer ties with India.

It is important to note that, in recent years, many Pashtun nationalists have placed considerable hope in the Taliban, viewing their resurgence as an opportunity to restore Pashtun political dominance in Afghanistan. Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi, a former Minister of Finance and Commerce under the Karzai administration and a prominent Pashtun intellectual, has argued that the fall of Najibullah's government in 1992 marked not only the end of the communist era but also the decline of Pashtun hegemony in Afghan politics. Consequently, the rise of the Taliban generated optimism among segments of the Pashtun population about the potential reversal of this political marginalization [6].

If one assumes that the modern Taliban, as the sole ruling authority in Afghanistan, will increasingly adopt a political realist approach, then it follows that they will seek to strengthen their position in dealings with Pakistan. The Taliban leadership is well aware of Pakistan's long-standing influence over Afghan affairs and appears intent on shedding the perception of being a “Pakistani puppet.” In this context, the instrumentalization of Pashtun nationalism may serve as a strategic resource, alongside the Taliban's connections with jihadist groups operating within Pakistan. The movement's assertive stance on the water disputes with Iran and Central Asian states further suggests that at least part of the Taliban elite is beginning to adopt a realist posture in foreign policy. This shift could have significant and far-reaching implications for regional dynamics, particularly for Pakistan.

The first signs of political realism in the Taliban's actions are evident from its stance on the Durand Line. The toughest statements so far have come from acting Defense Minister Mawlawi Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid, the son of the Taliban founder Mullah Omar. In February 2022, referring to Pakistan's unilateral construction of a 2,600-kilometer wall along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, he said that the IAE would not allow Islamabad to continue building a fence along the Durand Line [source 12]. Moreover, he called it an "imaginary line" [source 13].

In the Afghan-Pakistani border region, the Taliban are already seen as protectors of the Pashtuns. It is to the Taliban that many eastern Pashtuns direct their grievances regarding Pakistan's actions in the border regions – actions perceived as harmful to longstanding kinship and trade ties, as numerous clans and tribes are spread across both sides of the border [7]. The Taliban's reaction often leads to armed clashes between Afghan and Pakistani border patrols, as witnessed in December 2022. Such incidents risk fueling Pashtun nationalist sentiment within the Taliban itself, particularly given that the movement is predominantly composed of ethnic Pashtuns.

Regarding the potential use of jihadist groups as strategic assets against Pakistan, there is growing evidence to suggest that the Taliban may already be doing so – albeit in a covert or indirect manner. A key case in point is Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a terrorist group founded in 2007 by Baitullah Mehsud in Pakistan's federally administered tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. The goal of TTP is to fight against the "pro-Western" government of Pakistan and to establish a form of government based on the principles of Sharia. TTP is ideologically close to the Afghan "Taliban". It was the Pakistani Taliban who was the first to officially celebrate the capture of Kabul by the Taliban in 2021, declaring it a "great victory of the jihadist project". TTP Emir Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud publicly reaffirmed his group's oath of allegiance to Taliban Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada and pledged to continue unconditional support for the Afghan movement [8].

Speaking about the possible ties between the IEA authorities and TTP, experts note the synchronization of the Taliban's rise to power and

the sharp intensification of TTP's subversive and terrorist activities in Pakistan. It is underscored that after August 2021, the TTP has significantly strengthened its organizational structure and military-technical equipment, as well as expanded its local support base in Afghan territory. This has allowed the Pakistani Taliban to intensify terrorist activity in Pakistan's western border areas. Statistics show that the number of attacks announced by TTP more than tripled in 2020 and 2022 compared to the previous two years [9].

In 2023, the statistics of TTP militant attacks did not improve for Pakistan. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province alone, more than 300 attacks took place, for which the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility [10]. Besides, 500 civilians and the same number of security staff members were killed in 2023, which is the highest fatality rate in the country in six years [9].

Over the past two years, TTP has secured a foothold in such strategically important regions of Pakistan as North Waziristan and the province of Balochistan known for its separatist sentiments, where they were joined by four Baloch groups [8].

The growth of the TTP potential is fostered by the inflow of Afghan Taliban militants, who remain faithful to the ideas of jihad, as well as Pakistani citizens who previously fought on the side of the Taliban against US troops and Ashraf Ghani's government, although the new Afghan authorities publicly discourage them from war against Pakistan. Islamabad's attempts to launch a negotiation process with TTP through the intermediary of Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani failed. It is noteworthy that in response to the Pakistani authorities' offer of general amnesty to militants on the condition that they lay down their arms and return to normal life, TTP made a counter-demand to the Pakistani government to establish Sharia law in the country [11]. This indicates that TTP perceives a change in the rules of the game after the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan, and this offers it a unique opportunity to use the "strategic depth" factor [8].

By all appearances, the threat from TTP is becoming a long-term threat for Islamabad, and there is nothing it can do so far, since the IEA "stands aside" from the issue, assuming that it has intra-

Pakistani causes. Islamabad's range of responses is not very broad and may include three key measures of influence on Kabul.

The first measure can be to exert pressure on Kabul through Afghan refugees, whose population was recently estimated at nearly 3 million. Islamabad showed in October 2023 that it was ready to use this leverage against the Taliban. Pakistani authorities ordered 1.7 million illegal Afghan refugees to leave the country by November 1, 2023 [12]. The political motivations behind this move were openly acknowledged. At a press conference, Acting Prime Minister Anwaar ul-Haq Kakar stated, "after non-cooperation by the Afghan interim government, Pakistan has decided to take matters into its own hands" [source 14].

The second measure of impact is to exert pressure on trade operations and transportation with the participation of representatives of Afghan businesses. A significant part of the income of the population of the border regions depends on trade with the eastern neighbor, and Islamabad periodically uses this tool of pressure.

The third measure of Pakistan's impact on the Taliban can be cooperation with the US in the field of security. Islamabad strives to involve the US in its problems with the Taliban and TTP, as evidenced by the visit of Pakistani Army Commander Chief Asim Munir to Washington in December 2023, during which he met senior US military and intelligence officials, as well as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [source 15]. Nevertheless, by all appearances, the US, busy in other areas of confrontation with Russia, Iran, and China, is not yet ready to start a new big "Afghan game". However, it can be assumed that Islamabad will not stop trying to receive American support to increase pressure on Kabul.

#### IDEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE FOR CENTRAL ASIA

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan not only changed the military and political balance of power in the regional security system but also dramatically altered the ideological map of the region. For Central Asia, this means that the entire border space to the south of the country turned into a full-fledged "fundamentalist belt" consisting of Shiite Iran and Sunni IAE.

Moreover, for all supporters of modernization and its next stage, in the form of the fourth industrial revolution characterized by rapid technological transformation and creative disruption, the Taliban's fundamentalism means that Afghanistan in its worldview is once again regressing to the Middle Ages. The Taliban's rise to power also symbolizes yet another failure in the long series of attempts to modernize Afghanistan, spanning multiple efforts throughout the 20th century and into the early decades of the 21st.

As known, the first attempt at modernization was initiated by Emir Amanullah Khan, who, after Afghanistan gained independence in 1919 as a result of the third Anglo-Afghan war, tried to transform the deeply traditionalist society of this country. His efforts failed. The revolt of conservative forces led to the overthrow of Amanullah Khan in 1929 and the establishment of a short-term reactionary power of Emir Habibullah (Bacha-ye Saqao).

The second attempt at modernization was associated with the name of King Mohammed Zahir Shah and spanned from 1933 to 1973. This period is often referred to in Afghan national memory as the "Golden Age". However, this era also laid the groundwork for future instability and three critical fault lines emerged during this time.

First, there were the ambitions of Mohammed Daoud, a relative of the king, who served as prime minister from 1953 to 1964. He overthrew Zahir Shah in 1973, but did not accept the title of king himself, instead becoming President of Afghanistan. This, in fact, opened Pandora's box due to the desacralization of the traditional system of governing Afghan society, headed by the shah as "the shadow of Allah on earth". Second, the growing popularity of leftist ideas, represented by supporters of Marxism-Leninism, who formed the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and its two wings – Parcham and Khalq, as well as adherents of Maoism. Third, the propagation of Islamic fundamentalist ideas as a response to modernization and the activity of leftist forces. Muslim Youth became the vanguard of conservatives.

All three forces were ideologically antagonistic, setting the stage for inevitable power struggles. This tension culminated in the military coup of

April 1978, known as the “April Revolution”, in which the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) temporarily emerged as the dominant force. This event marked the third major attempt at modernization, this time underpinned by ideological alignment with and material support from the Soviet Union. However, the revolution also signaled the onset of a protracted civil war, in which modernist forces were opposed by religious fundamentalists and traditionalists – many of whom operated from rear bases in Pakistan and Iran. Ultimately, it was the fundamentalists who prevailed, culminating in the overthrow of the last PDPA president, Mohammad Najibullah, in 1992.

The fourth attempt at modernization was launched in Afghanistan after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 during the presidency of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani with large-scale financial and technical support from the United States and its allies. Despite criticism of the Afghan political system during that period particularly regarding corruption and its failure to curb the narcotics industry – it is important to acknowledge the notable progress made in the field of education, which is a cornerstone of any successful modernization process.

Between 2001 and 2021, the country’s literacy rate increased from 8 percent to about 43 percent [13]. Prior to 2002, the number of students enrolled in public schools was estimated at 1 million or less, and almost all of them were boys. However, by 2019, more than 9 million children were enrolled in school, of which more than 3.5 million were girls [source 16]. As of May 2021, the number of students in Afghanistan increased to 9.7 million. While significant challenges persisted – such as a shortage of qualified educators, with only 220,000 teachers nationwide in 2021, and marked disparities in teacher training quality across regions – the foundational structure of a national education system had clearly begun to take shape [source 17].

The system of higher education was modernized based upon several universities, some of which were established during the eras of King Mohammad Nadir Shah (Kabul University), King Zahir Shah (Kabul Polytechnic University and Kunduz University), and the PDPA (Balkh, Herat, Kandahar, and Badakhshan Universities). Several public and private universities opened during the pres-

idencies of Karzai and Ghani. However, the Taliban’s return to power jeopardized these fragile achievements. One of the Taliban’s first decisions in 2021 was to ban girls from receiving secondary education, which was motivated by the development of a female dress code and new curricula consistent with “Islamic values” as interpreted by the Taliban.

The Taliban’s ideological approaches to the education system in Afghanistan can be understood by analyzing the statements of some senior officials. In August 2021, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, a member of the Haqqani network, who was the Taliban Minister of Higher Education until October 17, 2022, stated that the people of Afghanistan would continue their higher education in the light of Islamic law [14]. According to Mawlawi Noorullah Munir, who served as Minister of Education until September 26, 2022, “no PhD degree, Master’s degree is valuable today. You see that the mullahs and Taliban that are in power, have no PhD, MA or even a high school degree, but are the greatest of all” [15].

In December 2022, acting Minister of Higher Education Neda Mohammad Nadeem, commenting on his decision to ban women from attending university, stated that “girls were studying agriculture and engineering, but this didn’t match Afghan culture. Girls should learn, but not in areas that go against Islam and Afghan honour” [source 18]. On the issue of equality of men and women, one of the key postulates of modernity, Neda Mohammad Nadeem during a rally at Baghlan University directly stated that they are not equal. According to him, “A male is the ruler, he has the authority, he must be obeyed, and the woman must accept his world. A woman is not equal to a man; however, they (Western nations) have placed her above a man” [source 19].

Another specific feature of the Taliban’s education policy is the network expansion of religious educational institutions. In particular, the IEA government announced plans to build one large madrassa in each province and 3 to 10 jihadist seminaries in each district (*wuluswali*) [16]. Besides, the Taliban created religious police and special Islamic committees in universities to work with students, while simultaneously announcing that they would send 15 thousand mullahs to fight Western ideas, which is seen as one of the most important goals of their rule [17].

The Taliban's antimodernism is evident, and at this stage, they view the education system from the perspective of the priority of masculinity and utility, i.e. training personnel to solve current socio-economic problems. Given that the "jihadist" generation is likely to be in power for quite a long time, one can assume that the course of prioritizing religious knowledge over secular knowledge will be a long-term one. This, in turn, raises the question of the impact of ideological processes in Afghanistan on Central Asia, which is also undergoing complex identification transformations characterized by the strengthening of post-secular trends.

The problem is that the Central Asian region itself does not generate identification models for export, but, on the contrary, is the *object of external identification influence*. Currently, several external identification models are active in the region – Western, Dubai, and neo-Ottoman, as well as Middle Eastern Islamic conservative and fundamentalist models. The ideology of the Afghan Taliban in this ensemble can be considered one of the variations of conservative and fundamentalist models, which, in turn, creates certain prerequisites for its possible impact on the minds of admirers of this type of thinking and values in the countries of Central Asia.

## CONCLUSIONS

The absence of serious opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan implies that their power is becoming a long-term factor in shaping political, economic,

trade, and ideological processes in the vast areas of Central and South Asia and the Middle East. Furthermore, the IEA is trying to develop its own model of integration into these processes as a full-fledged subject, trying to increase its overall potential not only by developing cooperation with other actors but also by obtaining tools to influence them.

One such tool is the control over water resources in relations with Iran and the Central Asian countries, given that such important rivers as the Helmand, Harirud, and Murghab originate entirely within the territory of Afghanistan, while Afghanistan contributes approximately 14.5% of the Amu Darya flow [18]. In relations with Pakistan, potential tools of influence include Pashtun and Baloch nationalism, as well as Islamabad's difficulties in opposing TTP. Obviously, the countries of Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan also possess leverage over the Taliban's political realism, particularly given Afghanistan's heavy reliance on imports of industrial goods and access to regional transit corridors.

With all this in mind, two broad scenarios appear plausible for the future of regional relations with the IEA. The first is a model of pragmatic cooperation. The second envisions a more open and trust-based framework, in which parties acknowledge each other's concerns and seek solutions through bilateral and multilateral dialogue. After three years of Taliban rule, the Taliban and the region remain at a crossroads, and the structure of the entire new regional security system will depend directly on which of these two paths ultimately prevails.

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