

THRESHOLD OR TRAJECTORY IMPLICATION OF TALIBAN'S TAKEOVER ON SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

Full Name: - Akshra Dhanuka

Course and Batch- Bachelors in Global Affairs (2024)

JGU E-mail id : -24jsia-adhanuka@jgu.edu.in

WhatsApp number: - 9306203337

ABSTRACT

Taliban took over Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, after the signing of the Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban. The agreement sets the date for the withdrawal of the US troops and puts a condition on the Taliban to prevent groups such as Al-Qaeda from threatening the security of the US and its allies.

The return of the Taliban has significantly affected Central and South Asia; it has exacerbated tension related to perceived security threats, including border security, the issue of refugees, and humanitarian crises. For instance, the Taliban's return raises severe security concerns for Pakistan as organizations like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISI-K) have increased their operation.

Similarly, there has been an issue of outflow of refugees from Afghanistan resulting from factors like economic collapse, severe restrictions by the Taliban, poverty, and natural disasters. Besides, there has been an issue of drug trafficking, cross-border skirmishes, and increased militancy.

However, the region was grappling with similar challenges before the return of the Taliban to power. This paper aims to delve into the comparative analysis of the Central and South Asian region before the Taliban came to power and after that by using quantitative and qualitative analysis. This paper will address the research gap of the absence of systematic, comparative pre and post August 2021 analyses of threats induced or increased by the Taliban. This will aid in identifying the genesis of the problem and policy gaps in counter terrorism cooperation

and humanitarian response and prevention.

Keywords- Taliban, Central and South Asia, Security threats, Border Security, Refugees
INTRODUCTION

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban returned to Afghanistan after waging an insurgency for two decades. Kabul was unprepared for this drastic change; the country's President, Ashraf Ghani, fled the country, the Afghan military and police didn't take any action to show resistance against the Taliban, and the people of the country were left to their own fate.¹ The collapse followed the signing of the Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the United States in February, which set the timeline for the full withdrawal of US forces in exchange for the Taliban communities to prevent Afghan soil from being used as a base of attack against American attacks.

As soon as the Taliban took over control, it made the Hijab and modesty wear obligatory for women; soon, the Hijab obligation turned into the advice for wearing the Burqa, and hitherto restrictions on women have increased incessantly. With the Taliban's return, inaccurate, dangerous, and bigoted misinterpretations of Islam have also reemerged; they often mix up their tribal norms with Islam, putting restrictions on women's education in the name of Islam and engaging in atrocities against ethnic minorities like the Hazara communities. Another crisis is the Financial one. Before the Taliban, 80% of Afghanistan's national budget was provided by the US. This support was removed overnight, and on top of it, Kabul was hit by drought. The World Bank characterized it as one of the fastest contractions of the world economy. Since 2021, Afghanistan's overall economy has shrunk 30-40%²

Afghanistan lies at the crossroads of Central and South Asia. It shares borders with Pakistan, Iran, China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It also has a narrow boundary with Jammu and Kashmir, a disputed territory between India and Pakistan. Due to Afghanistan's crucial geographical location, the whole region is affected by events there. Unstable and insecure Afghanistan implies a risky and uncertain security environment for the region, and risks of drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and extremist violence heighten.³

¹ Abbas, Hassan. "From Insurgency to Governance: Who's Who in Afghanistan Today?" In *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left*, 72–104. Yale University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1640552.6>.

² Abbas, Hassan. "Taliban.Gov: Policies, Politics and Internal Rivalries." In *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left*, 105–46. Yale University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1640552.7>.

³ Saqib Ullah Khan, Jafar Nazir, and Zahida Jabeen. 2025. "THE AFGHANISTAN FACTOR: ITS

INFLUENCE ON REGIONAL COMPETITION IN SOUTH ASIA". *Journal of Religion and Society* 3 (01):115-31. <https://www.islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/article/view/58>.

Since 2021, cross-border tensions have increased, especially between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan has accused the Taliban of safeguarding the anti-Pakistan elements, which resulted in a hike in terrorism.⁴ As per the UNSC monitoring reports, organizations like Al-Qaeda, the Turkistan Islamic Party, Jammāt Ansarullah, and Ittihadul Mujahideen Pakistan continue to operate in Afghanistan territory, completely violating the Doha Agreement. Simultaneously, there persists the issue of refugees. Pakistan decided to send 1.7 Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan. In 2025 alone, 2,7 million refugees returned or forcibly repatriated to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan. The reverse migration worsens Afghanistan's stability, putting strain on already scarce resources and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.⁵

It is critical to note, however, that these issues have persisted in the region for decades before the return of the Taliban. TTP was attacking Pakistan throughout 2018 to 2021, though at a lower frequency. The Afghan refugee population exceeded 2,5 million before the Taliban takeover. There have been unresolved border issues between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan since the Soviet era, which led to clashes in April 2021. In South Asia, India faced issues like smuggling and illegal migration with Bangladesh. At the same time, there have been severe humanitarian issues. This paper does not address whether the region was stable before 2021, but whether the Taliban's return has structurally transformed their scale, trajectory, and regional capacity to respond to them.

There has been no systematic study to assess whether August 2021 marks the threshold moment in regional security dynamics. This paper attempts to address this gap and marks a difference to what the Taliban's return implies- the point at which threats were not merely continued but qualitatively intensified, or whether it represents an acceleration of trajectories already in motion. This distinction is critical for the policy: If structurally new threats have emerged with the Taliban's takeover, the required policy response differs from one set up for intensified but similar patterns.

⁴ Qureshi, Shayan, Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 and its implications on cross-border terrorism and border security for relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan (January 06, 2024). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4863030> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4863030>

⁵ "Illegal in Own Homes": Afghan Refugees Caught in Pakistan-Taliban Tensions," *Al Jazeera*, October 22, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/10/22/pakistan-speeds-up-expulsion-of-afghan-refugees-amid-tensions-with-taliban>.

This paper delves into the pre- and post-Taliban Era of Central and South Asia to examine how the return of the Taliban has affected the region in terms of Humanitarian crisis, border

security, and migration and argues that Taliban's response has not produced entirely new security architecture but has intensified pre-existing fault lines and while exposing the structural inadequacy of regional counter terrorism and humanitarian cooperation framework.

To analyze this, the paper draws upon threat perception theory and securitization theory. The former theory explains how actors interpret potential security threats based on strategic interests, geographical proximity, and historical relations. Along with it, the securitization theory examines how political leaders make particular issues security threats through political discourse and policy narratives.

These frameworks together seek to explain not only how threats are perceived by the actors, but also how these threats are framed, constructed through narratives, and translated into policy responses. By using these theoretical frameworks, this paper aims to examine whether the Taliban's return to power represents a fundamental transformation of regional security dynamics or if it has intensified long-standing patterns of instability within Central and South Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Afghanistan is one of the major research fields; despite this, there has been no systematic comparative study that assesses how August 2021 altered the regional threat environment across border security, migration, and humanitarian issues in both Central and South Asia. Historically, Afghanistan has been established as a region by scholars like Rubin,⁶ Rashid⁷, and Barfield⁸, whose internal instability is reflected and radiated outwards, producing militant spillover, refugee outflow, and narcotics flows that destabilise the region even before the Taliban's takeover in 2021.

At the regional level, the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Buzan and Waever remains the dominant theoretical framework. South Asia is studied as a security complex involved in the India-Pakistan rivalry, while Afghanistan is regarded as the penetrated state exposed to external power competition.⁹ Though RSCT addresses structural interdependencies effectively, it does not analyse the dynamic threshold effects- particularly the kind of change produced by the Taliban's seizure of power. This limitation can be noted in the most recent scholarship applying RSCT to the post-2021 period, in which the Taliban's return is treated as a shift in internal configuration rather than a potential factor that can lead to transformation in regional threat dynamics¹⁰.

Scholarships on militant diffusion are most relevant to the theoretical grounding for the security dimension of this study. Salehyan and Gleditsch's work on cross-border conflict

transmission showcases that the insurgencies and civil wars are diffused into the neighbouring states through militant recruitment, refugees, and arms transmission, which can be clearly noted in the case of post-2021 Afghanistan.¹¹ Threat escalation is noted in many post-2021 scholarships that study the escalation of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP),

⁶ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁷ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)

⁸ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)

⁹ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 88–120.

¹⁰ Sharma, Puyesh Kant. "Regional Security Complex in South Asia: A Study of the Rise of Taliban in Afghanistan." In *Analysing the Current Afghan Context*, pp. 102-113. Routledge, 2022.

¹¹ Salehyan, Idean, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch. "Refugees and the spread of civil war." *International organization* 60, no. 2 (2006): 335-366.

primarily based upon the United Nations Security Council's monitoring reports.¹² and policy analysis from institutions like The Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point¹³ But it is not situated against the systematic pre-2021 baseline, due to which the Taliban induced intensification cannot be differentiated from the continuation of pre-existing trends.

The topics of displacement, refugees, and migration have been extensively studied in the context of Afghanistan. Afghanistan's decades-long refugee presence in Pakistan and Iran can be studied through Loescher's¹⁴ foundational work on prolonged refugee situations and Castles's work on forced migration and state interests. Post 2021 scholarships examine Pakistan's expulsion of Afghan refugees¹⁵ and the accelerating humanitarian deterioration in Afghanistan under the Taliban's regime. UNHCR and IOM reports provide comprehensive empirical data for the same¹⁶. But in this literature, displacement is treated solely as a humanitarian issue and not viewed through the lens of the security and political environment in which they occur. Additionally, they don't compare the displacement pattern before and after August 2021 within a unified framework.

Thus, the existing literature offers foundational ground for understanding Afghanistan's role in regional instability, mapping of South and Central Asian security dynamics, and the 2021 analysis of individual and specific factors, but an integrated study of all three dimensions is absent studies how the Taliban's takeover has simultaneously and comparatively changed security threats, humanitarian conditions, and displacement dynamics across South and Central Asia against a systematic pre 2021 baseline. This is not just a descriptive gap, but it also helps to examine if August 2021 represents a structural threshold in regional security or an intensification of a pre-existing trajectory. This distinction had direct consequences for the

counterterrorism cooperation framework plan and humanitarian response mechanism. This

¹² United Nations Security Council, "Thirty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," S/2024/92 (New York: United Nations, 2024).

¹³ Seth G. Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan," CTC Sentinel 13, no. 11 (2020); International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan's Security Situation after the Taliban Takeover," Asia Report No. 321 (Brussels: ICG, 2022)

¹⁴ Gil Loescher, Alexander Betts, and James Milner, The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): The Politics and Practice of Refugee Protection, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Pakistan: Mass Expulsions of Afghan Refugees," November 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/08/pakistan-mass-expulsions-afghan-refugees>.

¹⁶ UNHCR, "Afghanistan Situation," Global Focus 2024, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/afghanistan>; IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix: Afghanistan (Geneva: IOM, 2024).

paper attempts to address that gap through mixed-method comparative analysis using Balance of Threat theory and Securitization theory as complementary analytical approaches.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts two complementary theoretical frameworks operating at two different analytical levels. At the material level, Balance of Threat Theory by Stephen Walt provides a framework for measuring if the Taliban's return has objectively altered the regional threat environment, and at the constructivist level, the Securitization theory by Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde explains how states framed, narrated, and responded to those changes through policy in an uneven manner. This paper seeks to explain the gap between the two layers between measurable threat escalation and the policy responses it has or has not elicited.

Walt's Balance of Threat theory is a neorealist refinement of the realist school's balance of power theory, which argues that states align against a state that poses the highest threat and not necessarily the most powerful one. The threat is established by four variables, which include a state's aggregate power, geographical proximity to potential adversaries, the offensive character of military posture, and the aggressiveness of the perceived intentions.¹⁷

When applying to this study, the variables are operationalizable to the available data aggregate capability is measurable through militant group strength assessment and control over territory, proximity to the region is fixed, but its effect changes with governance quality, cross border attacks and troop deployment helps in tracing offensive posture, and aggressive intent can be known through the Taliban leader statement and treaty compliance. If these variables are raised in comparison to pre 2021 levels, the theory predicts that neighbouring states in the region should have intensified balancing behaviour and indulge in alliance making. Where such balancing acts have been absent or fragmented, especially in multilateral frameworks, that divergence in itself is a policy gap that requires explanation.

In addition to this is the Securitization theory, associated with the Copenhagen School, which argues that security threats are not entirely objective conditions but are socially constructed by leaders through political narratives and acts¹⁸. Three structural elements are identified in this framework: a securitizing actor who articulates a threat, a securitizing move such as a speech or policy declaration through which an issue is established with a framed narrative,

¹⁷ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 21–26. For the core argument distinguishing threat from power, Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 3–43.

¹⁸ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 23–26. Ole Wæver, "Securitization and Desecuritization," in *On Security*, ed. Ronnie D. Lipschutz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 46–86.

and an audience whose acceptance legitimises the emergency response. This paper applies the securitization theory framework to explain why Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran have constructed the same threat of the Taliban's return in different ways. Pakistan has established the TTP as an existential challenge to state sovereignty, supported by direct military attack and a historically tumultuous relationship with the Afghan Taliban.¹⁹ Tajikistan has framed the Taliban's takeover through the lens of ethnic irredentism and border insecurity, reflecting concern for the Tajik minority in northern Afghanistan and the vicinity of ISKP activity to its frontier.²⁰ On the other hand, Iran has established a dual securitization where the Taliban is framed as both an ideological rival and a pragmatic interlocutor, while framing Afghan refugee flow as a security and economic burden requiring restraint.²¹ These different divergent construction of narratives helps to understand why shared threat across the region has not produced a coordinated regional response. The securitization theory throws light upon this limitation, but cannot provide a solution on its own because it does not arbitrate whether the underlying threat has materially changed.

These frameworks, together, provide an analytical architecture suited to the paper's mixed methods approach and policy orientation. A measurable baseline is produced by Walt's four threat variables, which can assess the Taliban's impact quantitatively, and the Securitization theory provides the qualitative lens for interpreting distinct state reactions and detecting where the transition from threat perception to coordinated policy has broken down. Thus, the central question is not whether threats increased after the Taliban's takeover, but why states that recognised threats have nonetheless failed to develop an effective multilateral response mechanism, and what is revealed about the structural gap in regional security cooperation through that failure.

¹⁹ Zahid Hussain, *No-Win War: The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan's Shadow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 88–112.

²⁰ Parviz Mullojonov, "Tajikistan and the Afghan Crisis: Security Perceptions and Policy Responses," *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 2 (2022): 215–231

²¹ Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran and the Taliban: From Enmity to Pragmatic Engagement," *Middle East Journal* 76, no. 1 (2022): 45–67.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method comparative research plan combining quantitative analysis of conflict, displacement, and humanitarian indicators with qualitative assessment of state securitization narrative is employed in this paper. The quantitative component is drawn from Walt's four threat variables, which establishes if threat indicators changed across the comparison period, and the qualitative component, directed by securitization theory explain how and why states diverged from what those indicators might predict. The study compares two four periods, 2017-2021 as per the Taliban period, and August 2021-2024, as the post-Taliban period. Quantitative data on military activity and cross-border conflict ARE drawn from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Projection(ACLED), UNSC Analytical support, and sanctions monitoring teams' reports. UNHCR Global Trends and the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix are used for Displacement and refugee data. Humanitarian and economic indicators data are retrieved from the World Bank and UNAMA reporting. Government statements and academic secondary sources are used for the policy analysis of regional frameworks. There is no reliable official data from the Taliban governed Afghanistan after 2021, which remains a limitation.

Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran are the primary states receiving the Taliban threat; these three case studies are selected because of analytical contrast. Pakistan represents a South Asian state that is most directly exposed to militant spillover through the TTP scholarship. Tajikistan is a Central Asian state affected by ethnic irredentism, border insecurity, and ISKP proximity, and Iran is a case of dual exposure- engaged in ideological rivalry with the Taliban, combined with mass refugee pressure. Variety in threat type, geographical position, and policy response across three cases maximises the analytical weight of the comparative plan.

Threat Dimension	Primary Data Source	Type
Security / Militancy	ACLED; UN Security Council Monitoring Reports	Quantitative + Qualitative
Forced Displacement	UNHCR Global Trends; IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix	Quantitative
Humanitarian Crisis	UNAMA, <u>World Bank</u> ; Government sources	Qualitative + Statistical
Policy Frameworks	SCO / CSTO communiqués; state policy documents	Qualitative
Contextual / Background	Academic secondary sources	Qualitative

Analysis

The following analysis is done chronologically across two periods-2017 to 2021 and August 2021 to 2024 to examine how border security displacement and humanitarian conditions in Central and South Asia developed before the Taliban's takeover and how they changed after it, with a focus on Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran, as the primary receiving states.

In the four years before the return of the Taliban to power, there were persistent regional security challenges, and the security environment was strained but not structurally crumbling. Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, though a persistent threat, was notably diluted by Pakistani military operations. According to ACLED data for 2017-2021, there has been a declining trend in fatalities in Pakistan caused by the TTP relative to the peak years of 2009 to 2013.²²In 2015, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province(IS-KP) was established, which conducted high profile attacks within Afghanistan, but its cross-border effect remained restrained due to pressure from US strikes, Afghan security forces, and the Taliban itself²³. If Walt's threat variable is applied to this period, the average capability and offensive posture of non-state actors posed a serious but constrained challenge- geographical proximity to neighbouring states was unchanged, but the aggressive intention measured through cross-border attack patterns was moderated by the internationally recognised Afghan government presence and the US's active counter terrorism posture. There were border tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the Durand line, and between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, but they were sporadic rather than structural.

The humanitarian and displacement conditions of the region during the pre-Taliban takeover establish a critical baseline for the paper's central argument that the Taliban's takeover intensifies already existing vulnerabilities and challenges rather than creating entirely new ones. In Iran and Afghanistan, the population of Afghan refugees will exceed 2,5 million by 2020 as a consequence of four decades of conflict, not a unique situation created in 2021²⁴.

Afghanistan's persistent economic fatality was equally well documented pre-August 2021; the country's financial budget was 80 percent dependent on US funding. Additionally, it has chronic exposure to drought, and its widespread poverty levels were characteristics of

²² ACLED, "Afghanistan and Pakistan Conflict Data 2010–2024," Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, accessed 2024, <https://acleddata.com>. For TTP trend analysis.

²³ Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2023)..

²⁴ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement 2020* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2021), 14–16.

international aid dependent state that preceded the Taliban's governance.²⁵ Furthermore, Gender based discrimination dramatically and drastically intensified post 2021 under the Taliban's governance, but it was not unknown during pre-Taliban times. Taliban shadow governance in rural areas had already put restrictions on women's movement and education in contested territories. This reference point is analytically important because it prevents overstating the causal role of the Taliban's return while still allowing recognition of the threshold effects of August 2021.

As the Taliban returned, it produced an immediate and significant deterioration in the border security environment for Pakistan. Sharp escalation in TTP-attributed attacks from late 2021 onwards can be noted in ACLED data records, with 2023 representing the highest fatality year for Pakistani security forces due to militant violence since 2014.²⁶ Despite repeated attempts of Pakistani diplomatic pressure and border closures, the Taliban showed unwillingness to take any action against the TTP Leadership operating from the Afghan territory. This incident directly changed Walt's aggression intent variable- the post 2021 Afghan government has not merely failed to restrain the anti-Pakistani military but has, in documented cases, facilitated its operational continuity²⁷. In the case of IS-KP, there has been a distinct but equally significant shift. In 2021, IS-KP was largely limited to Afghanistan, but between 2022 and 2024, it conducted or directed attacks in Iran, Russia, Turkey, and Tajikistan, indicating a qualitative expansion of cross-border reach which was absent in pre Taliban period.²⁸

From the securitization theory lens, the distinction between Tajik and Pakistan's response is significant; Pakistan fully established TTP as an existential threat, assembling military operations, closing the Torkham border crossing, and expelling all the Afghan refugees as a security measure. On the other hand, Tajikistan raised its border security posture and stopped all diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, but did not activate collective security mechanisms, indicating that a securitizing move found the domestic audience but failed to translate into multilateral policy coordination- the gap this paper seeks to address.

²⁵ World Bank, Afghanistan Development Update: Setting Course to Recovery (Washington DC: World Bank, April 2021)

²⁶ ACLED, "Pakistan Conflict Data 2021–2023," <https://acleddata.com>

²⁷ International Crisis Group, *The Taliban's Neighbourhood: Regional Diplomacy with Afghanistan*, Asia Report No. 337 (Brussels: ICG, 2024), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/asia-pacific/afghanistan/337-talibans-neighbourhood-regional-diplomacy-afghanistan>.

²⁸ UN Security Council, *Thirty-Third Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, S/2024/92 (New York: United Nations, 2024), paras. 28–33.

The displacement crisis post August 2021 differs from the pre 2021 period both in scale and character. Pakistan expelled approximately 1.7 million Afghan refugees at the beginning of late 2023, and Iran's continuous pressure campaign resulted in the return of 1 million refugees in 2023 alone. This represents a turn in decades of refugees' hosting; however imperfect it was²⁹. These expulsions were framed as security concerns rather than economic ones by both Iran and Pakistan. Afghan refugees were publicly fabricated as a route of militant infiltrations and criminal activity, a securitizing move that mobilized public and political support for mass deportation and the shutting down of humanitarian policy response. The demographic composition of post 2021 displacement reveals a qualitatively new factor, which is gender based persecution. UNHCR 2022-2024 data shows a marked increase in female-headed households, educated youth, and urban professionals among asylum seekers because of the Taliban's restrictive and oppressive policies, including the 2022 secondary education ban for girls, employment prohibition, and university exclusion order³⁰. This kind of displacement was slight in the 2017-2021 data, validating that it represents a Taliban induced threshold effect rather than continuation from the pre-Taliban period.

Afghanistan's economic collapse after August 2021 has been hasty and structurally consequential for the wider region. The World Bank estimated the contraction of 30-40 percent between 2021 and 2023, and the World Food Programme reported that over ninety percent of the Afghan households were experiencing food insecurity by late 2022.³¹ Freezing of Afghan central bank reserves, withdrawal of international aid, and the collapse of the formal banking system transformed a fragile but functioning economy into one operating largely through illegal trade and limited humanitarian aid³². This led to minor security consequences for the neighbouring states- it has increased militant recruitment groups in border regions, reinforced the relative economic incentive for narcotics cultivation despite the Taliban's 2022 poppy ban. All regional states recognise the humanitarian crisis as a source of

²⁹ Pakistan: Widespread Abuses Force Afghans to Leave," November 28, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/28/pakistan-widespread-abuses-force-afghans-leave>; IOM, *Afghanistan — Flow Monitoring Quarterly Report (January–March 2024)* (Geneva: IOM, 2024), <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/afghanistan-flow-monitoring-quarterly-report-january-march-2024-eng>. ³⁰

Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Taliban Deprive Women of Livelihoods, Identity," January 18, 2022. ³¹ World Food Programme (WFP), "WFP Afghanistan: Situation Report, 22 December 2022," ReliefWeb, December 22, 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/wfp-afghanistan-situation-report-22-december-2022>.

³² United Nations Development Programme, "Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Outlook 2023" (New York: UNDP, 2023), 4–9.

secondary security instability, but none has committed to the institutional cooperation that is necessary to address it.

Taken together, evidence from both periods supports the paper's central argument that the Taliban's takeover did not introduce Central and South Asia to completely new threat categories, but the conditions that kept them moderated were removed post 2021. The Taliban's takeover raised Walt's threat variable significantly across multiple dimensions, while producing divergent securitization responses that resulted in domestic political action but not effective multilateral coordination. Most consequential policy failures are present between the gap of recognition of threats and ineffective collective response.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

The findings of the paper indicate a specific policy gap that regional states have individually demonstrated political will to respond to the Taliban's induced threat, but have failed to translate shared threat recognition into a coordinated multilateral strategy to control the situation in the region.

There is a need for a common evidentiary source, whose absence led to divergent securitization narratives as demonstrated in the contradictory responses of Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran. This can be done through structural reformation in organisations like the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) that can produce a shared, declassified statement on military group capability and cross-border activity.

Furthermore, donor states and financial institutions should condition economic re-engagement with Afghanistan on verifiable Taliban adherence to cross-border militant restraint, especially those outlined in the Doha agreement. The absence of such conditionality allowed the Taliban to benefit from selective humanitarian access without bearing any institutional cost for the operation of TTP.

CONCLUSION

The paper argues that the Taliban's return after August 2021 does not lead to the creation of an entirely new set of challenges and new border security threats; rather, the removal of constraining conditions that previously moderated fault lines in Border security, displacement, and humanitarian governance intensifies the long-standing trajectories. The

lens of Walt's Balance of Threat Theory as a material baseline and Securitization theory as a constructivist approach, the comparative analysis across the 2017-2021 and 2021-2024 periods indicated that threat indicators escalated significantly across all three dimensions, while the state responses diverged in securitization strategies. The most significant finding is not the acceleration of threat but that multilateral frameworks presented with regional states proved to be inadequate to operationalize shared threat recognition into collective policy action.

The wider implication is that the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 is understood as a threshold event that intensifies pre-existing vulnerabilities, exceeding the ability of existing institutions to manage them, and not as a rupture that introduced whole new categories of threat in the region. This distinction is significant for policymakers, as the intensification of previously existing challenges requires targeted reform of existing frameworks to close the coordination gap and not wholesale redesign of the regional security architecture. The Afghan crisis remains a test of whether regional states can move beyond the logic of competitive securitization towards a shared multilateral framework.