

Title: The risks and rewards of engaging with Afghanistan's Taliban government

Description: Afghanistan's Taliban government has been busy appointing ambassadors, courting foreign investment, and participating in global forums, all with the aim of winning international recognition and standing. And it's paid off to a degree: last year China and the UAE both established formal diplomatic ties with the Taliban government, putting stability and economic opportunity ahead of ideological concerns like human rights that have inhibited similar moves by Western nations.

Meanwhile, the Afghan people continue to face a complex reality of systemic repression, particularly against women, as well as ongoing economic and security challenges.

So can engagement compel the Taliban to genuinely improve their human rights record and counter-terrorism efforts? What are the consequences of isolation versus engagement for the Afghan people, and for the international community? And how might the new Trump administration reshape US-Afghanistan relations?

Masoom Stanekzai, former chief peace negotiator of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahimi, a peacebuilding expert, both from the University of Melbourne, join host Sami Shah to examine the geopolitical and humanitarian dilemmas surrounding the Taliban regime and its global relations. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform, under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Sami Shah: Hello, I'm Sami Shah, this is Ear to Asia.

Masoom Stanekzai: The Taliban still believe their relation with the US is fundamental for them to survive as a state or as a government. For that reason, behind the scenes, they have made a lot of efforts and they will continue to make that efforts. But at the same time, that is a reason of concern for the regional countries as well.

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: The US has other priorities in other parts of the world. Afghanistan will be competing with those issues like the Middle East, Ukraine war and other places to maintain international attention, including attention in Washington. It will be more likely a short term transactional approach, and it is unlikely that we will see any significant policy shifts under the new Trump administration.

Sami Shah: In this episode, the risks and rewards of engaging with Afghanistan's Taliban government.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

In 2020, for both China and the United Arab Emirates formally accepted ambassadors from Afghanistan's Taliban government, highlighting a growing trend of putting stability and economic opportunity ahead of ideological concerns like human rights and standing in contrast to the West's refusal thus far to recognize the Taliban leadership. The Taliban government, for their part, are seeking international legitimacy through a coordinated diplomatic campaign, participating in global forums, appointing ambassadors, and courting foreign investment for infrastructure projects. While this shift from isolation might suggest a move towards moderation, their actions on the ground often tell a different story. The enduring presence of extremist groups in Afghanistan, exporting terrorist violence to neighbouring Pakistan, and the systemic suppression of women's rights raised significant concerns about the risks of engagement. Can engagement compel the Taliban to genuinely improve their human rights record and counter-terrorism efforts? What are the consequences of isolation versus engagement by the international community for the Afghan people? And how might the incoming Trump administration reshape US Afghanistan relations? Joining me to explore the complexities of international engagement with the Taliban government are Masoom Stanekzai, former chief peace negotiator of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi, a peacebuilding specialist and expert on Afghanistan. Both are affiliated with the University of Melbourne. Masoom and Niamatullah. Welcome to Ear to Asia.

Masoom Stanekzai: Thank you very much. Thank you.

Sami Shah: Masoom, I'll start first with you then. The Taliban's diplomatic offensive and regional engagement since coming to power has been actively pursuing legitimacy. How have they gone about this?

Masoom Stanekzai: I think this is a very good question. And the Taliban is. Yes. Really, they are looking for legitimacy. But I will put it in a different way, not as a Taliban offensive for getting the legitimacy or recognition, international recognition. It is a diplomatic game of necessity by the regional countries because of different reasons, including the mix of strategic, geopolitical, security, humanitarian and economic aspect that is driving these engagement. And they are really wanting to use this opportunity between that engagement and limited engagement of the Western countries. But the problem is with the Taliban in their

own policies, because initially, after they returned back to power, whether the western country or regional countries, they all wanted to engage with the Taliban and aiming that the Taliban will change for the better. But over a period of time, it has proven and becoming very clear that Taliban position become more rigid, more restrictive. And the perception was gradually changing, both in the region and also beyond the region in terms of whether the Taliban has changed or not. And I think that perception is today kind of cemented that they haven't been changed and they are returning back to the book of their first term in power. I think they are looking after getting the legitimacy, there is no doubt about that. But actually, if you look to the broader picture, whether the regional countries or the international community, they are not looking at what is happening with the Afghan people in Afghanistan.

Masoom Stanekzai: They are looking at who is taking the prominent position in Afghanistan. I saw an article a few days ago in the *Foreign Policy*, and they are saying that why we should engage with the Taliban, because the Russian and the Chinese and the regional countries have more dominant position there. And why we should be also there, instead of going to the principal values, that why in the first place, the regional countries in international community should be engaged with Afghanistan. And that is about how the people in Afghanistan have suffered over so many years of repeated regime changes and Taliban is repeating the same mistake as they have done in the past, of all the other regimes, every regime who came to the power in the past half a century, initially they had the first few years of relatively stability and hope. But after a while, because they were not able to deliver on the wishes of the people, they monopolized the power, they didn't deliver on the social justice and economic opportunity. And driven by the foreign ideologies or pushes. They lost the balance of relationship between the regional and global power. And that was the reason for continuation of instability in Afghanistan. So that is basically no matter how hard the Taliban will try, they will have some limited successes. But their relation with the regional countries is a kind of a relation of love and hate.

Sami Shah: Niamatullah. Which countries does the Taliban do you think prioritize as high value nations for their diplomatic efforts?

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: I think I would like to reiterate the point made by Masoom here. I think the Taliban over the past almost three and a half years has created a condition in Afghanistan that is quite multifaceted and complex. I think during this three and a half years, we have seen an intensifying set of crises in Afghanistan. I think we often hear a lot about the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, and rightly, more than half of the population in Afghanistan are needing humanitarian assistance to survive. But there is also a massive political, human rights and security crisis that affect Afghanistan and the region. So to come back to the question you raised, you know which countries the Taliban are prioritizing in

terms of their engagement. So I think here it was important to see which factions or groups within the Taliban you are really referring to? Some more so-called pragmatic members of the Taliban, they have been quite keen to engage with diplomatic relations with countries in the region, but also globally. They have been seeking a more normal diplomatic relationship with the region and the world more generally. And these are the people we often hear them talk during the process of negotiation of the 2020 agreement between the Taliban and the United States. However, there are other factions of the Taliban, especially those who have accumulated and centralized power around the leadership of Haibatullah Akhundzada, who are not that much concerned with engagement and diplomatic relations with the outside world. They may use diplomatic relations in order to reduce the negative impact of international relations on their ability to consolidate power, but they're also extremely concerned about international influences in the way international influences might change the direction of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. So therefore, over the past three and a half years, we have seen some level of pragmatic engagement between the Taliban and countries in the region. I think some countries have developed closer ties. Surprisingly, Iran and the Taliban has developed quite good close relationship, which is again one of those kind of love and hate relationship. I think, as Masoom pointed out. But they have also been some breakthroughs between the Taliban in Central Asian republics, China, Russia, but also India and a lot of these countries. Again, I would like to emphasize, are driven by the fact that they are making sure that they are not losing out in terms of access to the situation in Afghanistan. Because remember, this is a country of 40 million people, and there are massive humanitarian, political and security dynamics in that country. So all of the countries would like to have a foot in the ground in order to see at least what is going on, if they can influence the Taliban's policies in Afghanistan. But as far as the Western countries are concerned, I think, you know, again, there have been some attempts, but I think given the Taliban's policies over the past three and a half years, we have seen massive reversals in terms of the ability of the Taliban to make any significant progress in achieving international recognition or diplomatic ties with the Western powers, or gaining, for example, this Afghanistan a seat at the United Nations.

Sami Shah: From what you're describing, then, the engagement of the Western powers has not been as successful as it has been with places like Iran and India and China. So the charm offensive is it then successful in regards to what they want? Is this what the Taliban wants? And have they kept agreements and promises made to these countries?

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: Well, there are a number of different priority areas for Western powers, but also countries in the region. Formally speaking, what Western powers and also countries in the region, they have been agreeing on a few talking points, which is the fact that Afghanistan should not be a country and that the Taliban, which poses a security threats

to other countries in the region, but also for countries in the West, they're also interested in stabilising Afghanistan so that, you know, there is no massive number of refugees coming from Afghanistan to countries in the region or countries in Europe. There is also the interest in humanitarian situation, but also some attention on human rights situation also in Afghanistan. So I think probably it is a bit of exaggeration to say that the Taliban has been on a charm offensive because the charm, the Taliban hasn't really been developing the ability to charm, you know, the countries either in the region or other more distant powers, because that implies some level of soft power. And when you say, you know other countries are on a charm offensive, they have some ability to attract, you know, other powers in the region or more distant countries. But Afghanistan under the Taliban has lost anything that they had in terms of soft power. You know, we saw in 2020, 2021 this whole idea of a Taliban 2.0, a new version of Taliban, a moderate Taliban, which had the potential to create conditions for my charm offensive through some of those pragmatic members of the Taliban. But over the past three and a half years, I think the Taliban's policies, both internationally but also domestically, has really done to to undermine any potential in terms of charm offensive. So what you see is a more kind of engagement based on necessities. You know, in order to safeguard interests of these countries or play games of geopolitical interests in and around Afghanistan.

Sami Shah: Masoom, China was the first nation to establish full diplomatic relations with the Taliban government. Why? What are the motivations behind Beijing's decision, in your opinion?

Masoom Stanekzai: With the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan, they filled a vacuum and no countries in the region will be able to fulfill that vacuum because of the current situation. So they had three main policy issues, which they have followed kind of consistently over the years, even during the Republic time. And also they also continued that policy today. One is it is driven by their interest is on the security because they are seriously concerned about the security and particularly on the ETIM and destabilizing the situation in part of the China Xinjiang province. And I think that is one of the major problems. Second issue is the connectivity issue, because they have the two major initiative of global infrastructure Initiative of the BRI, the Road in Belt Initiative, and also the CPAC. I think these two are integration of Afghanistan into those projects in the regional connectivity will create an opportunity for the economical development of sustainable growth of China. It is important for them to have that connectivity and their investment in those projects, which has been now a challenge for them because of the situation both in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the insecurity that is kind of increasing. And the third is Afghanistan is kind of resource rich country. And I think the future, the oil will be replaced by lithium and the exploration of the mineral resources, the rare earth, oil and gas. All these issues will have driven the

Chinese to have an influence. And they also had a fear that maybe other countries will use Afghanistan or will use the Taliban to further destabilize China, and that is one of the main reasons they have jumped in in the first place.

Sami Shah: You mentioned CPEC, which is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Um, you know, particularly things like Gwadar Port, etc.. How complicated is that relationship between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan given the history between the three countries?

Masoom Stanekzai: I think it is a very challenging issue because of the relationship between the countries. And I think you should not forget about the role of India in this whole episode, because the relationship between India and China, the competition, the relation between Pakistan and China, and the relation between Afghanistan and all these countries, it is the complexity and you cannot judge based on the relation between one country or the approach of one country. You have to see the whole network of the different countries in the region. Each of these countries, they have common concern about the situation in Afghanistan, but each is following their own policy toward Afghanistan, which is further complicating the situation in Afghanistan. And I think Pakistan has been suffering because of its own policy of strategic depth in Afghanistan. To use Afghanistan as a kind of a background for their jihadi groups, training for Kashmir in the first place, during the first rule of the Taliban. And then I think you can see that the 180 degree shift of the Indian policy toward the Taliban, you can see in this phase, that will have an impact. You can see that the relationship between Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan in relation to the border and also India has made Chabahar Port.

Masoom Stanekzai: You have to see the linkages between what happened in Balochistan, what happened in Gwadar, what happened in Chabahar in all this concentration location between the south part of Afghanistan, an escalation of the violence in those areas, they are all interconnected issues. And to some extent, it is part driven by the geopolitical competition between all these countries. This issue will need a kind of a more transparent and a different policy approach in order to succeed with this kind of mega projects to be implemented. In the first instance, there was not a very supportive attitude from the Western countries. There were the CPAC, and there was also a different approach of the other countries, because the gas pipeline that was agreed between the Iranian and Pakistan, and that pipeline project is now stuck because of the sanction that is imposed. That is the complexity of the situation in this region. And the most important is that supporting the extremist groups as a solution was a huge mistake that today Pakistan is seeing the backlash.

Sami Shah: Niamatullah we're focusing on Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban? It has changed though. This government and Pakistan are not the same as the previous Taliban government. Pakistan? Is that fair to say?

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: Well, I think in a way the Pakistani establishment hugely miscalculated when they backed the Taliban insurgency against the former republic in Afghanistan. And also we also remember, like in 2021, many in Pakistan were kind of celebrating the return of the Taliban to power. But now in 2024, we can see that those were huge mistakes in many different ways. First, the Taliban as a movement which is now in power, is not controlled by the Pakistanis, or the way they were hoping, you know, would be under Pakistani influence for many decades. They were hoping to install a regime that is friendly towards Islamabad, and it is not under the influence of India. So we have seen that over the past three and a half years, the Taliban has significantly diversified its relationship with countries in the region in a way that it is no longer dependent solely on Pakistan, either for political support or for economic and trading ties. The Taliban now have good relations with countries in Central Asia, with China, with Iran. So as a result, they do not feel the need to be, you know, solely dependent on Islamabad. And second is also, I think, the effect of Taliban's return to power in reviving and providing sanctuaries for extremist groups that have been responsible for the rapid increase in insurgency in Pakistan. We have seen really dramatic increase in the number of activities and incidents claimed by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. Pakistan is also experiencing an intensifying insurgency in Baluchistan, whilst also going through a difficult political and economic situation as well. So I think in a way Pakistan has lost some of the opportunities it was hoping it would gain by supporting the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, because I think, in a way, some of those major underlying issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan are more or less the same, regardless of who comes to power. And I think in some ways, the Taliban has been behaving in ways that are quite similar to previous Afghan governments.

Sami Shah: You mentioned the wider region, the UAE, the United Arab Emirates was the second nation to establish full diplomatic ties with Kabul. What do they want with the Taliban government?

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: Well, the UAE and the Gulf countries has been pursuing quite a different set of objectives in relation to Afghanistan. First, we should remember that the UAE was one of the three countries that recognized the Taliban regime between 1996 and 2001. The other one being the Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. But in recent years, as the United States was trying to negotiate a deal with the Taliban so that it could withdraw from Afghanistan, countries in the region tried to position itself in relation to that kind of potential change of power in Afghanistan. The UAE tried to position itself as a broker between the US

and the Taliban. And that role, as we know, was eventually given to Doha, Qatar. And then more recent years after return of the Taliban to power, they have also been trying to maintain or establish linkages with Afghanistan by securing contracts for management of Afghanistan's airports. But at the same time, we should also remember that the UAE has also been quite a vocal critic of the Taliban's policies, especially with regards to women. During 2022 and 2023, when the UAE had a seat at the UN Security Council and they sponsored a number of resolutions which strongly condemns Taliban's policies with regards to women. So now, I think in addition to all of those things, the UAE has also been quite concerned with regards to the situation there and not losing their contacts and influence in Afghanistan. They have been in touch with certain individuals, factions within the Taliban. And we should also remember a number of former leaders of Afghanistan's republic, including former President Ashraf Ghani, is also in the UAE, even though they don't have apparently the permission to engage in any significant political activity. So I think again, this is one of those kind of policies where you can see a regional country kind of hedging its bets. They try to maintain some level of diplomatic engagement, the relations, pragmatic engagement with the Taliban, but also distancing themselves from some of the policies of the Taliban regime, especially when it comes to human rights and women's rights, as demonstrated by UAE's position in the UN.

Sami Shah: All these new allies that the Taliban has developed, Masoom, they will all come with expectations of their own with regards to what they want from the Taliban government. How likely is it that the expectations of those pro-engagement nations will be met?

Masoom Stanekzai: There is expectation from these countries, and they all hope for a better kind of getting something in return from the Taliban. But at the same time, nearly all of them are to some extent disappointed with the progress they are making with the Taliban because of the security concern, they still have that security concern. All of these countries in the region, they have one way or another way, they have that kind of concern. Secondly, they are also concerned about who is really making the decision and actually the leader sitting in Kandahar. He has not accessible those who are sitting in Kabul and actually running the government. Their decision can be changed at any moment by the decision of the leader, because he is the one who is making the final decision and the authority of those who are actually running the government, like the ministers, acting Prime minister and others. I think they have been very limited in making the decision and delivering on the commitment they are making during their deal or their negotiation with different countries, and I think it is very evident from the recent meetings that is taking place, whether it was the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or it is about the different neighboring countries. They each has raised their concern about the commitment of the Taliban regarding both on managing or containing the different jihadi groups affiliated with the Taliban.

Masoom Stanekzai: But at the same time, they have kind of a aiming for fighting against or opposing the current regime in the different regional countries. So I think that is that is the complexity of the situation, that how it is impacting both. They are very cautious, they are not going into really a major investment, but at the same time they are still exploring their engagement, but at the same time, they don't want to be a victim of something that will happen in term of the security threat that will be posed by continuation of the current situation in Afghanistan. I think that is the major issues of concern for all these countries. You might be very surprised that for me, as someone who is being in the government and have seen the games that was played by the different countries in Afghanistan politics yesterday, I think the Secretary of the National Security of Council of the Russian Federation has arrived to Kabul -- Shoigu, and it will be a surprise why at this time, whether it was the approach or diplomatic approach of the Taliban or whether it was something else. You can see immediately to something that a new government will be formed in the United States, and there will be two different trends.

Masoom Stanekzai: One trend whether the Trump new administration will change its policy towards the Taliban with more engagement or with more restriction. So they wanted to position themselves prior to making any decision there, so that they will not face kind of a consequences that they are not prepared for. I mean, you can see these kind of issues that is driving the policies of the regional countries, particularly the global power toward Afghanistan. The US cannot forget Afghanistan. The reason is because they are rival are located all around Afghanistan. Whether it is China, whether it's Russia, whether it's Iran. You have to judge the engagement of these different countries with Afghanistan on that, on that level. And then you have the secondary kind of immediate neighbor of Afghanistan, the smaller countries, the Central Asian countries, Pakistan and others. They have a different reason why they are engaged with Afghanistan, because, as I mentioned, that Afghanistan is seen as a roadblock for the regional connectivity. And for that reason, each of these because of the sanction and because of the situation where the Central Asian country is located, they need to have that engagement with the Taliban, not only for the economic reason, but also for the connectivity reasons.

Sami Shah: So let's talk a little bit about the US and other Western governments. Then they've refused to engage with the Taliban government, largely because the human rights record. And human rights issues is what they say. What are the potential benefits or risks in recognizing the Taliban government now going forward for the Trump government, for example?

Masoom Stanekzai: I think there is two things we have to recognize. One, that the Western countries, particularly the US, if it is not diplomatically engaged, but there is a substantial engagement with the Taliban, because you see the Doha process that was started by the UN, they engaged the Taliban, they are providing humanitarian assistance. And still US is the largest provider of assistance to the Taliban government as well, or to Afghanistan as a general. So you cannot say that the US is just disengaged or the West is disengaged with Afghanistan. They are engaged with Afghanistan in a different way, but they didn't recognize them and they have those concerns. And one of the questions that you previously asked that what is the preferred diplomatic efforts of the Taliban, that who should be their first priority, Despite their engagement with the regional countries, with China, with the Russian, but still they believe their relation with the US is fundamental for them to survive as a state or as a government. So for that reason, behind the scene, they have made a lot of efforts and they will continue to make that efforts. But at the same time, that is a reason of concern for the regional countries as well.

Sami Shah: You're listening to Asia to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You will find articles by some of our regular Ear air to air guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Air to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Sami Shah and I'm joined by longtime observers of Afghanistan, Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim and Masoom Stanekzai. We're talking about the potential benefits and risks of recognizing the Taliban government of Afghanistan. How have the ordinary lives of ordinary Afghans been affected, then, by the opposing stances towards legitimizing the Taliban from the Western countries and the ones closer to home? Niamatullah, let's start with you .

Niamatullah Ibrahim: Well, I think the life of the ordinary people of Afghanistan over the past three and a half years has been really tragic. We have seen a devastating humanitarian crisis. Afghanistan's GDP collapsed by about 30% between 2021 and 2022. Still, more than half of the population of Afghanistan in 2024 requires humanitarian assistance. These are, I think, some of the aspects of everyday life of Afghanistan's people that we hear and talk about. But I think equally importantly, over the past three and a half years, the people of Afghanistan have also seen a massive denial and violation of their human rights. We know the Taliban's regime has imposed a kind of system of policies that are increasingly recognized and referred as gender apartheid, that is affecting everyday life of the women of Afghanistan. The women of Afghanistan cannot go to school beyond grade six. They have limitations on their work and their movement and even on their voices. Every aspect of the

life of the women and girls of Afghanistan are affected by the Taliban's policies, but there are also other groups that are also very severely affected by the Taliban's policy. For example, the situation of the Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan have been really seen a significant reversal in terms of both their political, social and cultural rights, but also in terms of their humanitarian situations, as they are extremely marginalised by the Taliban's regime over the past three and a half years, to the point that there are reports that the Taliban are also increasingly interfering with the delivery of humanitarian aid in situations where there are other communities living that they are not seen as traditionally pro Taliban.

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: So therefore, I think, you know, the people of Afghanistan are really stuck in this kind of really tragic situation where international discussion of engagement or lack of engagement is often not reflecting the day to day realities and aspirations of the people of Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan would obviously like to see humanitarian aid. International assistance in order to alleviate humanitarian emergency, address poverty. But they would also like to see an opportunity in opening so that they could also see a path for the fulfillment of their social and political rights as well. So in a way, the Taliban regime has imposed itself through the sheer power of coercion, violence and terror. And they would like to maintain their power through that ability to use violence on the people. And the people of Afghanistan are, in a way, forgotten in much of this discussion now, in both in terms of the day to day life, but also their long term aspiration for in Afghanistan, in which they can feel reflected, included, represented and in which they have equal opportunities as citizens of that country.

Sami Shah: Masoom how might Western nations then collaborate with the current pro-engagement regional players, the ones who are already involved with the Taliban to promote human rights and prevent terrorism. Is that even a possibility?

Masoom Stanekzai: I think this is an issue that gradually the position of the Western countries has changed because initially there was a very high appetite among the many countries in the Western Hemisphere that they engage with the Taliban, with the hope that the Taliban will gradually improve and they will become moderate and they will fulfill their commitments they have made, whether in Doha or in other public statements they have made before they return to power. But gradually they have consolidated their power, but with consolidation, their human rights violation has become more evident. In particular, two things is very significant, both for Afghan people and also from the rest of the international community and the Islamic world. The restrictions they have put on the women. On education, I think that is a dark era, that one of the reasons why many people from Afghanistan, they are still leaving Afghanistan is because for the future of their kids, because of their education. Apart from unemployment and economic hardship and their behavior the

way they are, they're dealing with with their own people. So I, I would say that the Taliban, as a movement, they are the enemy of themselves. And as a de facto government, they are undermining the wishes of their own people, as a government responsible for their relationship with the regional and international community. Actually, they are mistrusted in a way that they might change their position frequently and they cannot be predicted. So for that reason, I think that Taliban had the chance. We should be fair that what is the positive? What is the negative things? Yes. Ending the conflict was one of the greatest wishes of the Afghan people.

Masoom Stanekzai: But the lack of the war is not everything; it is not peace. Peace will come with justice. Peace will come with tolerance. Peace will come with respecting the wishes and inclusion of all the different segments of the Afghan society. And they failed to deliver on those aspects. In fact, today we don't have a functional administration because of the losses of so much of the brain drain of the qualified civil servants. And you cannot deliver everything by mullahs because we have seen this in many different countries. Mullah cannot be a doctor, he cannot be a pilot. But today they are appointing that kind of a system where everywhere there is somebody who should be a Talib to lead a government institution, whether it is a very professional technical institution or whether there is a general institution like defense or interior or the religious affairs or the leadership. So, I mean, they have made a significant mistake. They are losing a chance for Afghanistan to transform into a stable country. Sometime we are going to discussing about the the secondary issues. But the key issue for Afghanistan is a legitimate government that has the support of the Afghan people and based on some kind of a rule of law and constitution, not that everything should be led or ruled by the decrees of a person of his own thinking, on ideological basis, of interpretation of Sharia from his own point of view, not on the core principles of Sharia, which is in Islamic governance, there is a lot of experience, there is a lot of literature that outlined that. What is the good governance approach in the Islamic teaching? But they have undermined all of that and they lost that opportunity for making a real difference in change in the Afghan society, and they still have the chance if they want to make that change in difference.

Masoom Stanekzai: But as we can see, the current policy, I think the likelihood is it's very difficult to predict. And for that reason, I think after the issuing of the decree of the vice of virtue in transforming that into a law, I think many of the countries has lost more faith on the Taliban, the way they are behaving in putting more restrictions. And for instance, for a moment, we have to think that the number of madrassas they they establish and replacing schools and where all these graduates will go and they still have the concern about the raising of the groups like the Daesh, ISKP and others. But if you generate that number of people only on ideological grounds, without having a professional or technical knowledge where the country will go and where the region will go, and how that will reduce the trade to

to the rest of the international community. And I think that is that is something more fundamental, rather than to think that whether pro-taliban engagement will help the Afghanistan or kind of putting more restriction to that. So I think there are different ways of engagement to be more structured, to be more coordinated, to have the unified kind of messaging, these delivering of the different messaging and the different position of the regional and the international community. in fact, put both Afghanistan and the regional country and the trajectory of a more dangerous path.

Sami Shah: The Taliban's undermining of education is ironic, particularly given the fact that the word Talib means student, and that's where the word Taliban comes from; member of the Taliban is a Talib as well. Uh, let's look forward now. Let's look at the future of Afghanistan and its relationship with the international community and some of these peculiar allies that it seems to have picked up along the way. Niamatullah, Iran is a regional power, shares a border with Afghanistan, and like Afghanistan, it's a theocracy. But is that the main reason why Iran has a diplomatic relationship now with Afghanistan, with the Taliban government? Because they share so much in common? Or is there are there deeper reasons there?

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: Well, I think to understand Iran's position, you got to take a long term historical perspective. We should remember during the first time in power, the Taliban was facing opposition from Iran from 1996 to 2001. There was this issue of killing of Iranian diplomats in the Iranian consulate in Mazar-I Sharif in 1998. So therefore, when the United States and its allies tried to invade Afghanistan in 2001, Iran was one of the few regional countries that willingly participated and helped with that kind of effort to overthrow the Taliban regime and help establish a new government in Afghanistan. It was a major participant of those efforts in Afghanistan during the early years. However, subsequently, other events in the region but also globally helped change the Iranian attitude towards Afghanistan and long term US policies and presence in that country. One was the 2003 declaration of Iran as part of the Axis of Evil by former President Bush and the US invasion of Iraq, and the increasing feeling of insecurity that it generated in Tehran that eventually Tehran or Iran might be next in that kind of long term policy of regime change in Afghanistan. So that really, I think, fundamentally mentally changed the thinking in Tehran with regards to the long term US presence in Afghanistan, and another set of events has to do with the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East region, especially after 2014 and the emergence of its offshoot in Afghanistan, the so-called Islamic State Khorasan, which as we know is vehemently anti-Iran anti-Shia, and Iranians began to think that the Islamic State is a more immediate threat to Iran's national security, both in Afghanistan but also in its immediate neighborhood in the Middle East, in places like Syria and Iraq as well.

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: So I think putting all of those, you know, new factors together, we saw in recent years a significant shift in Iran's thinking with regards to Afghanistan and the long term US presence. You know, the US presence became, you know, a source of instability, a source of future threat to Tehran. And therefore they try to oppose long term US military presence in Afghanistan, but in other parts of the region as well. And in that respect, Tehran and the Taliban found a common enemy, which is, you know, first and foremost, Western presence in Afghanistan, but also, um, Islamic State in many Iranians think can potentially be undermined by a strong government in the form of Taliban regime in Kabul. So having said that, I think that doesn't mean, again, that there is a strong love relationship between Iran and the Taliban.

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: They are, you know, fundamentally different views about the system of government. You know, they are both theocracies. We can see in the sense that there is, um, a clerical leadership who have the final say in all issues of the government and both Taliban and Iran, but also they are significant differences in terms of the social and political freedoms that these systems of government allow for their citizens in Afghanistan and Iran. So therefore, I think it is still seen again, you know, that kind of prioritizing long term insecurity that Iran feels from the US presence, the Islamic State, and therefore that has meant that they are kind of, you know, deprioritizing other issues, like their views on what could be, you know, inclusive national government in Afghanistan, you know, and other similar kind of issues. And I think adding to all of that is also a significant common economic interest that now Iran and the Taliban find itself in together, because Iran is under sanction. It is the leading exporter to Afghanistan, which has increased in recent years under the Taliban regime. So there's a lot of, I think, kind of common interests that they are developing, but they do not always necessarily share the same kind of ideological or normative massive vision for Afghanistan or for the region.

Sami Shah: Masoom India is another ally that in previously was very, very supportive of the US backed Afghan government -- the Islamic Republic, but now seems to be having a fairly diplomatic approach to the Taliban government. Why did this change? Do you think.

Masoom Stanekzai: The Indian relations with Afghanistan should be seen with the Pakistan relation with Afghanistan? So that is how the relation between Pakistan and Afghanistan and Pakistan and India is shared because of that situation, because Pakistan has the fear of influence of India in Afghanistan. And that was they devised their policy, how to counter that influence the same as with India. They are seeing that how much Pakistan has an influence with the Taliban, and then they shape their policy based on reacting that how that will shape. I think that is one of the reasons, apart from other reasons, whether it is economic or whether it is historic ties or other broader interests. So in the first time of the Taliban, I think

there was very close relationship between the Taliban and the Pakistan. But at that time, India had no relationship, no kind of information about who these Taliban are, how they should be contacted. They emerge out of those madrassas and some of the jihadi groups that were based in Pakistan. So all these things has generated a lot of concern for India for their national security issue.

Masoom Stanekzai: But when you look to the India, India policy was always that whoever is in power in Afghanistan, in Kabul, they have to establish relationship with them. But now with this change, I think they have adopted an approach because of the Taliban diversification of their relationship with many different countries. So those countries who supported the Taliban in the previous time, actually they turned to disappointed with them. And those countries who were against the Taliban. They turned to be the friend of the Taliban. So it means that the politics don't have the permanent friends, they don't have the permanent enemies. It is all about the interest. And if the interest of a country is serving in one way or another way, they will change and shift their policy. That shift of policy of India is based on their assessment that the Taliban is not that much under the influence of Pakistan. Then there are TTP and other groups that they are turning against the Pakistan establishment, and that they see that as a way of reducing the influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan. That is basically the reason.

Sami Shah: Niamatullah we now look towards a Trump's America. What will the relationship be, do you think, between the US and Afghanistan and their engagement?

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: Well, I think as we have discussed, the US has been quite a significant player despite the withdrawal from Afghanistan physically in 2021. The US has been the largest donor of humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan, has played quite an important role in the Doha process, which is about bringing the Taliban together with international partners to agree on a common path for the future of Afghanistan and the role of international engagement in that one. But now, how is that going to change under the Trump administration in 2025? But as we know, the main point to note is that the Trump administration hasn't really spelled out a clear policy of what they will do with Afghanistan or the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan during the 2024 presidential election campaign. Afghanistan's issue was only brought up in the discussion as a liability. For example, the Trump administration accused the Harris-Biden administration of the failures of the US policies in Afghanistan and the way the withdrawal, in their view, facilitated the return of the Taliban to power. The return of, you know, other powers like China to Afghanistan and the fact that they were, in their view, many American weapons were left in Afghanistan.

Niamatullah Ibrahim: But, you know, as we know as I think you know, Biden Harris campaign also pointed out in fact, it was a Trump administration that signed that 2020 agreement in Doha with the Taliban. So I think it is unlikely that we see any fundamental shifts in terms of any significant new policy posture with regards to the Taliban in Afghanistan. We know the US has other priorities in other parts of the world. Afghanistan will be competing with those issues like the Middle East, Ukraine war and other places to maintain international attention, including attention in Washington. However, there are concerns that there will even be further reduction of already declining humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. We have seen over the past 2 or 3 years that aid has been declining, even though the humanitarian situation has been continuing to stay dire. I think it will be probably more likely a short term transactional kind of approach with regards to the Taliban in Afghanistan, and it is unlikely that we will see any significant policy shifts under the new Trump administration.

Masoom Stanekzai: I agree with Niamat, but one thing that is very clear that two things might happen. One, that they have mentioned that they will make accountable those people who are responsible for during the withdrawal and called the withdrawal as a kind of a historical embarrassment for the United States. There is some noises for a while about regarding with Afghanistan, but how much it will go forward? That is a different story. The second important issue is that no matter whether they will have a revision or reassessment of the policy toward Afghanistan and the toward the region and broader region, the South Asia region in Afghanistan might fit within the South Asia regional policy. So how that policy will shift/shape? I think it will depend on the debate in the discussion that will take place during the period when the new Trump administration come to power. But we have to acknowledge that the foreign policy of the US, it is about their national interest and that they have their own priorities, their domestic priorities, they have their international foreign policy priorities. And I think Afghanistan will not be put at that high level of the priority issue for the United States. But at the same time there will be some changes. Maybe we can see several shifts. If one policy is not working, maybe there will be another policy shift. But one thing will be clear that they will want to make Taliban accountable to deliver on their promises. I think that is clear. They will push for that.

Sami Shah: And before we close, is there any final message both of you would like to share with listeners?

Masoom Stanekzai: Yes, we have the message and the message that the Afghanistan case do not have a military solution. Afghanistan needs a political dialogue at the four different levels. At the level of the Non-taliban Afghan to bring them together, to think about the future and to get ready to engage with the Taliban, to discuss with the Afghan people how the

future of Afghanistan will shape for the formation of inclusive, legitimate, constitutional-based government in Afghanistan. And I think that is one of the one of the layers of the discussion. And the second important layer is the engagement with the regional countries. And I think the regional countries has to come together. And because they have the prime responsibility in term of their own interests, that Afghanistan's stability should be their priority. And for that reason, this should not aim for interference. They should not aim for proxies, they should aim for stability in Afghanistan. And I think that will require delivering a common message to the Afghanistan people and also help in peace building in the context of Afghanistan and help that process. And it is also for the international community, I think, the the international community and the regional countries, they are delivering five key messages. They are common, but their approach is different. They want in Afghanistan an inclusive government that is legitimate. They want the girl education and human rights. They want a responsible kind of approach toward the people, and toward the economy, and fulfill its responsibility, international responsibility, and the commitment that the Afghan government, whether the previous government or the current government, they made in terms of their international obligation and they should fulfill its international and also national obligation. For that reason, I think, both for the global issues and for the regional issues in Afghanistan, I think Afghanistan should be made a place for cooperation rather than for confrontation between the bigger power and regional countries that will serve the interest of all. And I think, in resolving the conflicts through negotiation and discussion and through the diplomatic approach would be the best way that will serve the interests of all.

Sami Shah: Anything to add? Niamatullah.

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: So far, we have discussed Afghanistan from the perspective of regional and global players and their interests. I think if I have one message that would be to put Afghanistan's people and their future at the front and center of any debate on Afghanistan. And I think that requires looking at the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan. I think I mentioned in the beginning in this interview, we talked of political crisis, humanitarian crisis, human rights crisis and security crisis. And I think the world cannot achieve their interest in any of these crises without looking at the intersectionality of those crises. You cannot address Afghanistan's long term problems without also addressing the issues of political inclusion, representation, and human rights protection in that country. And I think that is central to long term stability and future of Afghanistan, an Afghanistan which will be, as they often say, at peace itself, but also at peace with the world.

Sami Shah: Our guests have been Masoom Stanekzai and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi from the University of Melbourne. Thank you both.

Masoom Stanekzai: Thank you.

Niamatullah Ibrahimi: Thank you.

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