



## **A Difficult Road Ahead for Pakistan**

**Dr Anne-Marie Schleich**

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### **Abstract**

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The recent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban has strong implications for Pakistan which faces various new challenges such as the influx of Afghan refugees, the threat of militants using Afghan territory for attacks on Pakistani targets and an increased insurgency by Balochistan rebels. China is getting impatient with the Pakistan security situation as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects have come under threat. But Pakistan also has the opportunity to use its leverage with the Taliban to assist Western countries with the new Taliban government.

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## Analysis

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It is too early to judge whether the recent developments in Afghanistan will be a game changer for Pakistan. At first sight, it seems that Pakistan, China and Russia have been consolidating their positions in the region while India, having supported the Ashraf Ghani government, seems to be on the losing end, at least for the time being.

Pakistan has had longstanding and the closest contacts with the Taliban among its regional neighbours. Prime Minister Imran Khan's first comments after the fall of the Ashraf Ghani government in August were triumphant as relations between the ousted Afghan government and Pakistan had been strained.

### Regional Diplomacy

Pakistan has always been suspected of providing supplies and logistics to the Taliban while the old Ashraf Ghani regime government was accused of supporting the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban, which had increased its attacks in Pakistan. Islamabad also alleged that India was supporting the TTP in order to destabilise Pakistan.

PM Khan has since toned down his language, underlined the importance of an inclusive Afghan government and lobbied for "support of Afghan people to address their humanitarian needs and help to sustain its economy". At the same time, PM Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi have liaised with regional partners in Central Asia and with Iran.

A pro-Pakistan Afghan government might help facilitate Pakistan's trade with Central Asia. PM Khan and Russian President Vladimir Putin recently agreed to cooperate more closely within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in which both countries as well as China, India and the Central Asian countries are members. As China and Russia had started in recent years to directly engage with the Taliban to safeguard their respective interests, they are no longer dependent on Pakistan's good offices with the Taliban.

### Refugees

Pakistan has assisted recent rescue efforts in Kabul by facilitating the humanitarian air bridges of the UN World Food Programme as well as the joint rescue missions of a number of countries. Pakistan's national carrier PIA had also assisted evacuations of foreign nationals. A number of European ministers have been seeking Islamabad's assistance in stemming a potential flood of Afghan refugees to Europe and help to establish links to the new Taliban government. Should Pakistan be able to help, it will then be in a position to present a shopping list of demands to those countries. Among them could be the abolition of existing trade and aid restrictions as well as political support for the next IMF tranche to Pakistan.

According to 2020 UNHCR statistics, Pakistan has already been hosting 1.4 million Afghan refugees. The Pakistani government has kept open some of the five Pakistan-Afghanistan border crossings for trade and border commuters but closed these transit points for refugees without visas. It has also increased its border troops along the 2500-kilometre-long fortified Afghan-Pakistan border in order to avoid mass migration. Still, with the help of people smugglers, Afghan refugees are coming into Pakistan through the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan close to Pakistan's Balochistan province. Concern about a growing influx of refugees is growing in Pakistan.



## Security Concerns

The Pakistani government is faced with two terror groups threatening Pakistan: the Afghanistan-based TTP and the Balochistan-based Liberation Army (BLA).

The TTP, a 3,000 to 5,000-member Pashtun Islamist group in the Afghan-Pakistan border region with links to al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, aims to overthrow the Pakistan government. It has overcome internal rifts, regrouped under new leadership and executed major terror attacks on Pakistani soil, especially on Shia targets. Security experts estimate that there were about 60 TTP terror acts in Pakistan at the beginning of 2021. The 2020 US-Taliban Doha Agreement requires the Taliban to ensure that no militant groups are allowed to use Afghanistan as an operating theatre. PM Khan has, therefore, demanded from the Taliban the “extradition of the most wanted TTP extremists”. Pakistan will be closely watching whether the Taliban will be able to reign in these anti-Pakistan forces.

For decades, BLA, a group of separatists in Pakistan’s Balochistan province, have been fighting the Pakistani Army. The Pakistani government established in 2019 a Special Security Force to protect CPEC projects and Chinese personnel. It launched major security operations against the BLA but is accused of having been rather heavy-handed with alleged extrajudicial arrests and the abduction of hundreds of people.

China is increasingly alarmed and has requested Pakistan to step up protection measures for projects and Chinese citizens. CPEC has become unpopular among the Balochistan population. It symbolises China’s close relationship with the Pakistani central government which the BLA accuse of human rights abuses in Balochistan. So far, CPEC projects have only had a small impact on Balochistan’s economy and unemployment. As PM Khan needs to appear to manage the threat on Pakistan’s home front, he offered peace talks with the BLA and appointed a ‘Special Assistant on Reconciliation in Balochistan’ in July. However, should these talks not tackle the underlying political and economic causes of the BLA estrangement, there is a likelihood that they will end without results, similar to initiatives of previous governments.

## Opposition

The leaders of Pakistan’s two biggest opposition parties, Nawaz Sharif, PML-N, and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, PPP, are closely watching the government. They hope for a national consensus in Afghanistan and have requested to be consulted before any decision is made in Islamabad regarding the recognition of the new regime.

PM Khan has tread carefully so as not to appear to be giving in too much to the Taliban. Last year, eleven opposition parties formed the “Pakistan Democratic Movement” and called for his ouster. The alliance criticised PM Khan’s handling of the economy, high costs of living and the dominant role of the military in governance.

## A potential winner?

PM Khan is carefully juggling these problems. His future relationship with a newly established Taliban leadership will be scrutinized by the international community and Pakistan’s opposition. If he and the Pakistani army handle these issues well, Pakistan could become one of the winners of the current Afghanistan turmoil.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published by RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, September 9, 2021.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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Dr Anne-Marie Schleich was a career German diplomat who has served in Islamabad, Singapore, Bangkok and London. She was most recently Consul-General in Australia and the German Ambassador to New Zealand. She has been a speaker at international security conferences in South East Asia and her articles on geopolitical trends in Asia have been published in Switzerland, Singapore, Australia and Germany.

