

Pakistan's National Interest and Recognition of Afghanistan's Taliban Regime

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Abstract

The victory of the Taliban insurgency over the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 presents Pakistan with a prime opportunity to align itself with the liberal democratic bloc of nations and demonstrate its unwillingness to join the opposing authoritarian grouping. By working with like-minded democratic states, especially the United States, Canada, members of the European Union and United Kingdom, on the conditions for international recognition of the Taliban regime, Pakistan can help assuage concerns in the West of growing Chinese influence over Islamabad's foreign policies. Pakistan has interests in South and Central Asia that are distinct from those of Russia and China, the two most powerful autocratic regimes. Islamabad is in a unique position to pressure the Taliban to move away from religious illiberalism and to respect human rights, including opportunities for women. An unreconstructed Taliban presents a threat to Pakistan's security by inspiring extreme religious armed groups within Pakistan to follow their example by overthrowing a democratically elected government. Pakistan can firmly establish that it is not the same government that was only one of three nations to grant formal recognition to the Taliban in 1996 and that it

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has evolved in a more liberal and democratic direction. The benefits of aligning with the democratic bloc in dealing with the second Taliban regime are independent of the question whether America is in decline as a hegemonic power. As a Middle Power, Pakistan has an interest in pushing back against a revisionist China and Russia and helping maintain the rules-based, liberal international order, in place since the end of the Second World War, from which Pakistan benefits.

Keywords: Afghanistan Taliban, National Interest, China, US, Russia, Democratic Bloc, International Relations Theory.

Introduction

The appeal of the Taliban to the nations of the world to grant them international recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan presents Islamabad with several choices. (1) Repeat its behavior during the first Taliban victory in 1996 and be one of the first countries to grant recognition; (2) Wait until other majority-Muslim nations have decided to recognize the Taliban before following suit; (3) Cooperate with Russia and China, the most powerful nations in the region following the US withdrawal, in timing recognition; or (4) Work with the United States, European Union and United Kingdom in imposing conditions upon the Taliban, including respecting human rights, especially the rights of women, and forming a government inclusive of the country's ethnic minorities, before granting recognition. This paper argues that the fourth choice best serves Pakistan's national interests for the following reasons. (1) Early recognition of the Taliban regime rewards an armed insurgent group for overthrowing by force a democratically elected government established by a liberal constitution. (2) The Taliban, in their present form, present a threat to

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Pakistan's security, since their victory has inspired terrorist groups dedicated to the overthrow of the Pakistani state, including Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and several Baloch separatists groups. There are especially close links between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP.² (3) Instability and poverty in Afghanistan will lead to a flood of impoverished people to a country that already hosts more than 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees. Pakistan needs developed countries, including those in the European Union, to accept some of these desperate people, who generally do not seek asylum in China or Russia. (4) The G7 countries are in a better position to provide humanitarian assistance and, thus stability, to Afghanistan than the autocracies, especially Russia, China, and Iran. (5) Aligning with the Western democracies in negotiating with the Taliban to set conditions for recognition will strengthen the consolidation of liberal democracy in Pakistan, help earn a place for Islamabad in the D-10 Plus group of democratic nations and carve out a foreign policy independent from that of China. In the current great power competition between Washington and Beijing, the United States will reward those countries that align with the liberal bloc.³

Pakistan's Choices and International Relations Theory

International relations theory can help frame Pakistan's foreign policy options regarding Afghanistan. The two dominant theories of international relations are realism and liberalism. Realism suggests that Pakistan identify the dominant powers and either bandwagon with the most powerful or join a coalition to balance against it. In the current

²Amira Jadoon, "The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," Report No. 494 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, May 2021), 14.

³Madiha Afzal, "The U.S. Needs a Reset With Pakistan," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2021.

global configuration, there are two great powers, the United States and China. America has enjoyed hegemony both regionally in the Asia-Pacific and globally since the end of the Second World War. It is arguably still the world's only superpower and is globally dominant not only militarily but also economically, diplomatically, and culturally. Since the ascension of Xi Jinping to the position of paramount leader in 2012, however, China has risen militarily and economically to challenge America's status as the world's sole superpower. If per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is measured in purchasing power parity (PPP), China is now wealthier than the United States.⁴ If nominal gross domestic product (GDP) is used as the measure of economic might, China is expected to surpass America by 2028.⁵ Beijing is expected to achieve air superiority over US forces in the Western Pacific by 2035.⁶ China's modernization and expansion of its military threaten Washington's hegemony in the Western Pacific.⁷ According to power transition theory, China's rise is likely to trigger a war with the United States, the long-time hegemon, and the replacement of the latter by the former as the world's dominant power.⁸ Realism, then, suggests that Pakistan should consider allying with China as the future regional hegemon. Islamabad, however, must be cautious in assuming Chinese victory in its military and naval competition with the United States, since Washington has a strong alliance structure in the Pacific and an

⁴ Graham Allison, "The U.S.-China Strategic Competition: Clues from History," in *The Struggle for Power: U.S.-China Relations in the 21st Century*, eds. Leah Bitounis and Jonathan Price (Washington D.C.: Aspen Institute, February 2020), 81.

⁵ "Chinese Economy to Overtake US 'by 2028' Due to Covid," *BBC News*, December 26, 2020, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55454146> (accessed on 12 September 2021).

⁶ John Xie, "Will China Surpass the US in Military Air Superiority?" *Voice of America News*, October 13, 2021, Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/when-will-china-surpass-the-us-in-military-air-superiority-/6270069.html> (accessed on 18, October 2021).

⁷ Eric Heginbotham, "Chinese Views of the Military Balance in the Western Pacific," Report No. 14 (Newport: CMSI China Maritime Reports, June 2021).

⁸ A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 23.

edge in technology and maritime and naval power that will be difficult for Beijing to overcome.⁹ Realism, in any case, asks Islamabad to calculate the relative might of the world's two great powers and bandwagon or balance accordingly. Liberal theorists, on the other hand, urge Pakistan to examine its identity and determine whether the goal of its foreign policy is primarily to obtain security against external threats or to promote, in cooperation with like-minded states, the principles of liberalism, viz., freedom, equality, human rights, prosperity and democracy.¹⁰

Middle power theory also points to a liberalizing role for Pakistan in managing its relationship with the Taliban. According to the theory of structural realism, the main determinant of the behavior of states is the number of great powers and only great powers can determine the structure of the international system.¹¹ Middle power theories, however, acknowledge that intermediate powers can influence the behavior of both great and small powers and, through cooperation, the international system. A middle power can influence specific aspects of the international system as well as have an impact on its region.¹² Traditional middle powers, such as Australia and Canada, conceive of middle power status in normative terms. Classic second-tier powers have an obligation to preserve the liberal international order (LIO) and the status quo. They are opposed to revisionism, any effort to change that order. Liberal middle powers work through cooperation with other like-minded states to defend and

⁹Mykola Fesenko, "The Danger of Confrontation between the United States and China in the New Cold War," *Problems of World History*, no. 11(2020), 118.

¹⁰ Michael Doyle and Stefano Recchia, "Liberalism in International Relations," in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, eds. Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Leonardo Morlino (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 1434.

¹¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 34.

¹²Tanguy Struye de Swielande, "Middle Powers: A Comprehensive Definition and Typology," in *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New theories, New Cases*, eds. Tanguy Struye de Swielande, et al., (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 22.

promote democracy, respect for human rights, market economies, environmental protection, international law, arms reduction, and global institutions. They push up on the great powers and push down on the small powers to defend the status quo. The regime change in Afghanistan, therefore, offers Islamabad the opportunity to play a leadership role in mediating the conflict between the Taliban and the West, thereby mitigating threats to the ILO posed by the defeat of a democratic regime by an illiberal, theocratic armed group. During the Cold War Pakistan was one of the most important Middle Powers in the world. Islamabad allied with the anti-Communist bloc and helped defend the free world against the autocracy of the Soviet Union, while New Delhi developed close ties with Moscow. In the Post-Cold War, the growing geo-strategic rivalry between India and China provides an opportunity for both Pakistan and India to look to the United States as an ally in maintaining the status quo.¹³

Pakistan as a Liberal Democracy

There is lack of agreement on the nature of Pakistan's political system. On the one hand, it is the only state established in the name of Islam. The constitution, adopted in 1973, describes Pakistan as an Islamic Republic and declares Islam to be the state religion. Pakistan shares with the Taliban the view that Sharia law is the supreme law of the land, a view supported by a majority of the Pakistani people.¹⁴ Scholars of Islamic law, the *ulama*, play an important role in Pakistani politics.¹⁵ It is not surprising; therefore, that Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban regime that came to power in

¹³ TV Paul, "When Balance of Power Meets Globalization: China, India and the Small States of South Asia," *Politics*, Vol. 39, Issue 1(2019), 55.

¹⁴ James Bell et.al., "Beliefs About Sharia," *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* (Pew Research Center, 2013), 41.

¹⁵ Mohamed Nawab bin Mohamed Osman, "The *Ulama* in Pakistani Politics," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, no. 2 (2009), 235.

Afghanistan in 1996, in spite of the fact that it faced widespread international disdain. Pakistan regards the Pashtuns, from which the Taliban are largely drawn, as a more reliable proxy than the Tajiks and other tribal groups that make up Afghanistan, although the Pashtuns are the most prone to religious extremism, a threat to Pakistan's security.¹⁶ The UN Security Council passed two resolutions in 1998 urging the Taliban to respect the rights of women. In 1999 the UN condemned the government's hosting of al-Qaeda. Islamabad apparently saw the Taliban as capable of bringing unity and stability to Afghanistan and of being strong enough to withstand pressure from Russia, India, and Iran.¹⁷ Pakistani politics, however, have evolved since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 at the hands of the United States. President Pervez Musharraf decided to support Washington's global war on terror and established a strategic alliance with the United States. Over the past twenty years, democracy and liberalism have grown stronger, as the size of the middle class has increased.¹⁸ General elections were held in both 2013 and 2018. The last military coup was in 1999. The military, however, continue to exercise powerful influence on security and budgetary issues, making Pakistan a hybrid civil-military regime. The 1973 constitution guarantees the liberal individual rights of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of association and freedom of assembly. Pakistan's position in the *Fragile States Index*, published annually by the Fund for Peace, rose from number nine in 2008 to number 29 in 2021, indicating

¹⁶Anchita Borthakur, "Pashtun Factor in Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations," in *Bilateral and Multilateral Cooperation in South Asia*, ed. Adhuri Subramanyam Raju (London: Routledge, 2021), 102.

¹⁷Zachary Laub, *The Taliban in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2014), 5.

¹⁸Fauzia Ghani, "Democracy of Pakistan and Dilemma of Liberalism under Constant Struggle with Religious Nationalism and Politicized Institutions," *Journal of Political Studies*, Vol. 27, no. 2 (2020), 215.

substantial progress in building a democratic state.¹⁹ Pakistan's score in providing people's access to political rights and civil liberties rose from 6.5 in 2000, when Freedom House classified the country as Not Free, to 37.0 in 2021, with a ranking of Partly Free.²⁰ Pakistan is clearly moving away from authoritarianism toward liberal democracy, although progress is fitful and many challenges to representative government and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of journalists and rights of women, remain.

Regional Authoritarian Regimes

As Pakistan moves closer to realizing the liberal democratic principles enshrined in its constitution, many of its neighbors are moving in the opposite direction. Two of the world's most powerful autocratic regimes, China and Russia, seek to dominate Eurasia. They are revisionist great powers, seeking to change the international status quo.²¹ The former Soviet republics in Central Asia bordering Afghanistan and Iran have eschewed democratic reform.²² The re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan gives Pakistan an opportunity to show the world how much it has changed since the first Taliban victory and how committed Islamabad is to being a member of the group of democratic nations and eventually to being included in an expanded D10 club of democracies, established in 2014 to maintain a

¹⁹"Fragile States Index," *The Fund for Peace* (2021)., Available at: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/> (accessed on 14 December 2021).

²⁰"Freedom in the World 2021," *Country and Territory Scores: Pakistan* (Freedom House, 2021), Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-world/2021> (accessed on 29 October 2021).

²¹U. S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC, 2018), 6 , Available at: <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed on 14 September 2021).

²²Filippo Costa Buranelli, "Authoritarianism as an Institution? The Case of Central Asia," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 64, no. 4 (2020), 1011.

"rules-based democratic order" under the leadership of ten "leading democracies."²³

Pakistan's Contribution to the Current Negotiations

Of all the countries currently talking with the Taliban about possible recognition, Pakistan has the most leverage. The Taliban, understandably distrustful of the United States and the US-led coalition that established and helped maintain the Afghan government, by contrast view Islamabad as a benefactor.²⁴ Russia, China and the United States, therefore, are courting Pakistan to serve as an intermediary with the Taliban leadership. Russia took the lead among the UN Security Council Permanent Members by forming the Troika Plus, consisting of Russia, the United States, China and Pakistan. The group has set conditions for the recognition of the Taliban. On November 11, 2021, three months after the Taliban takeover, Islamabad hosted a meeting of the extended Troika, which met on the sidelines with senior Taliban leaders. The joint statement issued by the four participating states called upon the Taliban to adhere to several liberal principles. The signatories:

4. Called on the Taliban to work with fellow Afghans to take steps to form an inclusive and representative government that respects the rights of all Afghans and provides for the equal rights of women and girls to participate in all aspects of Afghan society. . . .

6. Emphasized that access to education for women and girls at all levels is an international obligation and encouraged the Taliban to

²³*D-10 Strategy Forum*, (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2014), Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/scowcroft-center-for-strategy-and-security/global-strategy-initiative/democratic-order-initiative/d-10-strategy-forum/> (accessed on 22 September 2021).

²⁴Laub, *The Taliban in Afghanistan*, 6.

accelerate efforts to provide for full and equal access to education countrywide. . . .

13. Called on the Taliban to take a friendly approach towards neighboring countries and to uphold Afghanistan's international legal obligations, including universally accepted principles of international law and fundamental human rights and to protect the safety and legitimate rights of foreign nationals and institutions in Afghanistan.²⁵

Also included were demands that the Taliban take steps to ensure regional stability and the security of the four states by keeping Afghanistan "free of terrorism and drug related crime" and "cut ties with all international terrorist groups, dismantle and eliminate them in a decisive manner, . . . deny space to any terrorist organization operating inside the country [and] fulfill their commitment to prevent use of Afghan territory by terrorists against its neighbors, other countries in the region and the rest of the world." Pakistan also initiated formation of a platform of the six countries bordering Afghanistan plus Russia to reach a regional consensus on how to stabilize Afghanistan.²⁶ An unstable Afghanistan is not in Pakistan's strategic interests, since instability invites interference from outside powers.

Pakistan can benefit, however, by distancing itself from Russia's initiative and seeking closer collaboration on the Afghanistan question

²⁵U. S. Department of State "Joint Statement on Troika Plus Meeting, 11 November 2021, Islamabad," *Media Note*, November 11, 2021, Available at: <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-troika-plus-meeting-11-november-2021-islamabad/> (accessed on 15 November 2021).

²⁶United Nations, "Abandoning Afghanistan Now, Amid Humanitarian Crisis, Would Be 'Historic Mistake,' Special Representative Tells Security Council," *Press Release*, November 17, 2021, Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14706.doc.htm> (accessed on 20 November 2021).

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with the D10 members, especially the European Union, United Kingdom, and Canada. Although the United States did not invite Russia and Turkey, a NATO ally, to the Summit for Democracy held virtually in December 2021, Washington did invite Islamabad to participate, acknowledging Pakistan's democratic progress. Due to Chinese influence, however, Prime Minister Imran Khan at the last moment decided not to attend.²⁷ Pakistan may also have felt uncomfortable participating with India, a member of the D10, in the summit. Islamabad seeks to deny New Delhi a major role in stabilizing Afghanistan. The Western democracies have conditioned humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan on the Taliban's respecting human rights, including the rights of women and girls, and treating minorities well. The EU refuses even to discuss international recognition with the Taliban leadership. That two blocs are forming regarding relations with the Taliban was evident at an October 12, 2021, virtual meeting of the G20 to discuss ways of preventing a humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan. US President Joe Biden participated but President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Xi Jinping of China did not.²⁸ In simultaneous meetings with Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar, the United States said decisions to grant diplomatic recognition to the Taliban or to unfreeze billions of dollars in aid earmarked for Afghanistan were not imminent. Also in Doha, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab announced that the United Kingdom would not recognize the Taliban but saw "scope for dialogue." Because the Taliban defeated the West in Afghanistan, it will be difficult for the United States and its allies to recognize the Taliban government. Raab

²⁷ Paul D. Shinkman, "China Undermines Biden's Democracy Summit by Forcing Pakistan Not to Attend," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 10, 2021, Available at: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-12-10/china-undermines-bidens-democracy-summit-by-forcing-pakistan-not-to-attend> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

²⁸ Michael Crowley and Steven Erlanger, "E.U. Pledges \$1.15 Billion in Afghan Aid as U.S. Talks to Taliban," *New York Times*, October 12, 2021.

described Pakistan as a “linchpin” in dealing with the crisis in Afghanistan and hoped that Islamabad would join a grouping the UK would help put together “that can exert the maximum moderating influence on what the Taliban does next.”²⁹ Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, likewise, announced in August 2021 that Canada has no plans to recognize the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan.³⁰ Pakistan is likely to be welcomed to join any coordinated strategy by Western countries to negotiate the terms of diplomatic recognition.

Chinese and Russian Recognition of the Taliban

As is evident from the statements released by the extended Troika, China and Russia are concerned about the Taliban’s behavior. Their qualms are not that different from those of the United States. They fear that the Taliban may continue to engage in the opium trade to fund their government and support terrorist groups that launch attacks outside Afghanistan. Beijing is especially concerned about Taliban encouragement of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement which it regards as a separatist and Islamic extremist force in Xinjiang Province. Russia fears that the Taliban will embolden Chechen separatists and jihadists and enable terrorists to cross the border into the Central Asian republics. China, however, is eager to extend the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Afghanistan, blessed by abundant mineral resources and a gateway to energy-rich Central Asia and Russia. On July 10, 2021, the Taliban proclaimed, “China is a friendly country, and we welcome it for reconstruction and developing Afghanistan.” China did not extend diplomatic recognition to the Taliban when they were in power from 1996 to 2001, Beijing, however, is now likely to recognize the Taliban

²⁹ “UK Will Not Recognise Taliban but Sees Scope for Dialogue: Raab,” *Aljazeera*, September 2, 2021.

³⁰ “Canada Will Not Recognize Taliban as Afghan Government, Trudeau Says,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 17, 2021.

not only to gain access to its natural resources, including precious rare-earth metals, but also to gain an advantage in its geopolitical rivalry with the United States.³¹ China is counting on Pakistan to facilitate infrastructure development in Afghanistan and to pressure the Taliban to keep their promises. A delay in Chinese legitimation of Taliban rule threatens to anger their future partners and weaken Chinese security and development opportunities. Eschewing liberal internationalism, China's customary practice is to work with any government, regardless of its composition, principles or how it came to power.³² China, however, is not likely to take the lead in extending diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan but may do so in a coordinated effort with Pakistan, Russia and Iran.³³

Pakistan risks becoming a tool of Beijing in its efforts to replace the United States as the hegemon in Asia. The China of 2021 is very different from that of 1996. An increasingly authoritarian China that has suppressed human and democratic rights in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong is not likely to criticize the Taliban for brutal treatment of the Afghan people, including extrajudicial killings of former government officials and political opponents. Beijing has global ambitions and seeks not only to supplant the United States as the Asia-Pacific hegemon but also to change the US-led rules-based liberal international order. China warned Taiwan that the abandonment of Afghanistan was evidence that the United States could not be counted on to defend the island against a Chinese takeover.³⁴ Some of the major revisions it seeks are the removal of references to human rights and democracy in the mission of international organizations, such as

³¹Derek Grossman, "Chinese Recognition of the Taliban Is All but Inevitable," *The RAND Blog*, August 27, 2021.

³²John Calabrese, "China's Taliban Conundrum," *MEI*, September 21, 2021.

³³Yew Lun Tian, "China Will Not be the First to Recognise Taliban Government, Scholar Says," *Reuters*, October 30, 2021.

³⁴John Calabrese, "China's Taliban Conundrum," *MEI*, September 21, 2021.

the United Nations and its specialized agencies and international financial institutions. America's hasty and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan is being used by China as proof of Xi Jinping's thesis that America is in decline and China is on the rise.³⁵ China's competition with the United States is pushing developing countries, many of whom depend on the United States for their security and China for their economic growth, to choose sides.³⁶ Pakistan, however, is not ready to turn its back on the United States and embrace its rival China.

Russia has been courting good relations with the Taliban for years. Although the Russian government placed the Taliban on its list of banned terrorist organizations in 2003, Taliban representatives began coming to Moscow for talks in 2018. The US government accused Russia of supporting the Taliban insurgency and supplying arms to the Taliban. The departure of the Americans and their Western allies from Afghanistan was seen as a win in Moscow's geopolitical struggle against Washington.³⁷ Unlike the United States and its allies, Russia and China did not close their embassies in Kabul after the Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021. Russia's major condition for granting diplomatic recognition is that the Taliban form an inclusive government that contains ethnic groups other than the Pashtuns, especially Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmens, who, if excluded, might draw their relatives and sympathizers in the neighboring former Soviet Central Asian republics into a civil war, thereby destabilizing the region.³⁸

³⁵ Sabine Fischer and Angela Stanzel, "Afghanistan: The West Fails — a Win for China and Russia?," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, September 22, 2021.

³⁶ Uri Friedman, "How to Choose Between the U.S. and China? It's Not That Easy," *The Atlantic*, July 26, 2019.

³⁷ Petr Kozlov and Anna Rynda, "Afghanistan Crisis: Russia Plans for New Era with Taliban Rule," *BBC News*, August 21, 2021.

³⁸ M. K. Bhadrakumar, "Russia's Conditions to Recognise Taliban Govt in Afghanistan," *The Citizen*, September 3, 2021.

Conclusion

Russia, China, and Pakistan are different countries than they were in the 1990s when the Taliban emerged victorious in the Afghan civil war and established a brutal dictatorship. While Russia and China have become more authoritarian and illiberal, Pakistan's young democracy has grown freer and more democratic. The 2013 and 2018 elections were marked by the civilian transfer of power following the successful completion of a five-year term by a democratically elected government. Pakistan has a vibrant civil society. The overthrow of a democratically elected government operating under a constitution guaranteeing civil liberties by the Taliban in 2021 was part of an ominous global trend of the retreat of democracy and the spread of autocracy.³⁹ The Taliban, the de facto government in Afghanistan, are demanding diplomatic legitimization. While neither Russia nor China recognized the first Taliban regime, they are likely to grant recognition in accordance with their effort to take advantage of the American withdrawal from the country, change the status quo and revise the US-led, rules-based liberal international order. Although Pakistan was one of only three countries to award diplomatic recognition to the first Taliban government and is being courted as allies by both Moscow and Beijing, caution is strongly suggested by international relations theory, which emphasizes Pakistan's status as a Middle Power with the ability to influence both its region and the international system through cooperation with like-minded states. It is in Islamabad's interests to join the democratic bloc in holding the Taliban accountable for violations of human rights and repression of the rights of women, political protesters, civil society activists and journalists.⁴⁰ Pakistan risks

³⁹"Democracy in Retreat," *Freedom House*, 2019.

⁴⁰United Nations, "Abandoning Afghanistan Now, Amid Humanitarian Crisis, Would Be 'Historic Mistake', Special Representative Tells Security Council," *Press Release*, November 17, 2021.

being drawn into the Chinese orbit and becoming a steppingstone to China's ambitions to dominate Eurasia.⁴¹ More importantly, Islamabad risks enlistment in the campaign of Moscow and Beijing to advance authoritarian regimes and weaken the liberal international order, from which Pakistan benefits, including access to loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Taliban, moreover, represent a threat to Pakistan's stability and security. Working with the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and the European Union in imposing strict conditions on possible recognition of a new Afghan regime, committed to an inclusive government and respect for human rights, including equal opportunities for women to work and receive education, will send a signal that Pakistan is ready to be an active member of the group of democratic nations.

⁴¹ Daniel S. Markey, *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 23.