

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Rethinking Terrorism After Afghanistan: India and the Politics of Recognition

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/11/28/rethinking-terrorism-after-afghanistan-india-and-the-politics-of-recognition/>

ASWATHY CHANDRAGIRI, NOV 28 2025

The first official visit by a Taliban leader, Afghan Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, to New Delhi, signalled India's cautious re-engagement with the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. The visit has signified an important shift in India's foreign policy dealing with Afghanistan and has generated diverse reactions across political and academic circles. While this initiative enjoys considerable support, others remain cautious about a deeper engagement. The primary reason for this hesitation lies in the fact that Afghanistan does not function as a conventional nation state. The Taliban regime currently exercise authority and administer large swathes of territory, yet their legitimacy remains contested because they have historically been perceived as an insurgent group with terrorist affiliations.

This historical perception, however, raises many critical questions. As the Taliban increasingly undertakes functions of governance, does its conduct continue to embody the practices of terror that once defined it? In the light of events that took place after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, where does one place a regime that came to power using brutal force? Does engaging with this regime help the Afghan people, or does it deepen the suffering of those already oppressed?

When erstwhile non-state violent actors establish themselves as governing authorities, the neighbouring states face the dilemma of balancing security concerns with the need for practical engagements. Consequently, the label of being an organisation that is linked to terror carries profound implications for diplomatic recognition, sanctions, humanitarian access, and regional security cooperation. However, definitions of terrorism are politically and legally contested, socially constructed, and also contingent on everchanging geopolitical realities. Walter Laqueur, a pioneering figure in terrorism studies has observed that trying to find a general theory of terrorism is a futile and misguided enterprise (Laqueur 2008; 2017). The shifting status of such groups illustrates how violence, authority, and legitimacy are reconfigured through practices of governance and international interactions.

Eluding Definition of Terrorism

The 9/11 attack served as a wakeup call that compelled the international community to confront the true magnitude of terrorist threats. It led to intense global negotiations and enactment of stringent counter-terrorism laws in many parts of the world. The U.N. member states unanimously adopted the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 that formulated binding legislations in response to the event in 2001 (United Nations Security Council 2001). While there are many such resolutions passed, notably, in none of these legislations has the U.N assumed the responsibility of providing a universal definition of what terrorism is.

In the absence of a universally accepted definition, various U.N. conventions, regional organisations, and nation states have articulated their own understandings of terrorism, depending on their distinct political and security priorities. The Institute for Economics and Peace, for instance, defines terrorism as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to achieve a political, economic, religious, or social objective through fear, coercion, or intimidation" (Institute for Economics and Peace 2016: 6). However, contexts such as Afghanistan, where non-state actors like the Taliban have acquired state-like authority through force and have remained linked to

Rethinking Terrorism After Afghanistan: India and the Politics of Recognition

Written by Aswathy Chandragiri

terrorist practices, complicates this understanding.

The definitional challenge therefore, lies in balancing inclusivity and precision where definitions that are too narrow may risk overlooking emergent forms of violence, while overly expansive ones may enable states to conflate insurgency with terrorism. As a result, existing definitional frameworks remain inadequate to conceptualize terrorism in the contemporary world. In fact, the social construction of terrorism has led to many debates within critical terrorism studies (Jenkins 2003). Schmid and Jongman (1988) famously observed that there are more than 100 competing definitions of terrorism and even today the number continues to increase depending on varied political, social, and analytical factors. Several studies assume the status quo of existing power structures as given and focus primarily addressing the problems created by non-state actors who use terror as a tool to instil fear in the minds of the masses. However, in cases such as the Taliban, the boundary between state and non-state becomes increasingly blurred over time.

Jackson's (2007) argument that "terrorism is not an ideology or form of politics in itself, but rather a tool employed at specific times by specific actors for specific political goals" highlights the analytical weakness of treating any group as inherently or permanently "terrorist." While the Taliban have historically employed tactics that many states classify as terrorism, such as brutal attacks on civilians and coercive violence, its contemporary status as the de facto governing authority of Afghanistan complicates the distinction between "terrorist organization" and "state". Even while governing, the Taliban continue to use violence and fear to impose political and territorial control. The Taliban's use of violence indicates that non-state actors, once in control, can wield power like states.

Therefore, terrorism refers to the deliberate and politically motivated use of repeated violence against civilians by actors seeking to establish, maintain, or expand authority, where the immediate victims are not the primary targets of the act, but serve as instruments to influence a broader audience or political outcome, regardless of their level of international recognition. Groups that transition into state power through violent domination may continue to use terrorism as a technique of governance, illustrating that terrorism is not limited to non-state actors but embedded in wider struggles over legitimacy and authority.

The difficulty of defining terrorism, which is a challenge common to many social and political issues, has been partly addressed through the creation of lists of designated terrorists and terrorist organisations by the U.N. and various other bodies. These lists have facilitated international cooperation by providing a practical framework for sanctions, intelligence sharing, and enforcement, thereby mitigating the problem posed by the absence of a universally accepted definition. For instance, the UN Security Council Consolidated List is one of the comprehensive lists of individuals and entities associated with terrorism (United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs 2022). The Indian government updates the list of terrorists and terror groups periodically under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

In the case of Taliban, UNSC resolution 1267 (1999) initially sanctioned the regime for its involvement in terror-related activities and although the Taliban and their leadership have remained under various UN sanctions regimes since then, the group itself has not been formally designated as a terrorist organisation by the United Nations (United Nations Security Council 1999). However, several individual members of the Taliban continue to appear on various international terrorist designation lists even today.

Notably, the Taliban remained on Russia's list of terrorist organisations for over two decades before being delisted by the Russian Supreme Court in 2025 (Associated Press 2025a). Similarly, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also removed the Taliban from their respective lists of terrorist organisations, signalling a gradual shift in regional approaches toward diplomatic normalisation with the regime (Farivar 2024). While Russia has officially recognised the Taliban government, a host of other countries like China, Nicaragua and Iran have developed significantly strong diplomatic ties.

Taliban's close ties with the Haqqani network and Tehreek – e- Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are widely recognised. Both TTP and the Haqqani Network remain on the United States' Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTO) list by the United States, but the Taliban itself have never been designated as an FTO, although individual Taliban leaders are placed

Rethinking Terrorism After Afghanistan: India and the Politics of Recognition

Written by Aswathy Chandragiri

on personal sanctions lists. This inconsistency, illustrates the political selectivity in the U.S. counter terrorism policy. The omission of Taliban as a terrorist organisation highlights how the designation of terrorism is often contingent on strategic necessity rather than objective reassessment of the group's ideology or conduct.

The United States' pattern of selective and inconsistent character of counter terrorism policy, largely driven by political expediency rather than a principled commitment to control terrorism can also be seen in the case of Syria. In 2025, the U.S. removed *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), which was a designated terrorist organisation, from its FTO list. This move is widely interpreted as a pragmatic adjustment to new political realities in Syria and have also reignited debates over the politicization of counter-terrorism designations (Blazakis 2025). While the United States effectively positions itself as the arbiter of global legitimacy, such acts undermine the credibility of international counter-terrorism norms due to the usage of the contested category of terrorism to advance its own political gains.

These cases demonstrate that both the definition of terrorism and the process of placing organisations on terrorist lists are not derived from objective, analytical categories, but are contingent socio-political constructs used by states to selectively advance their geopolitical interests.

Changing Geopolitics and India-Afghanistan Ties

The contemporary international order is becoming increasingly multipolar with countries asserting their autonomy and a wave of decolonial thought sweeping across all sectors of society. This shift calls into question the long-held assumptions about the legitimacy and nature of the nation state itself. When a territory comes under the control of a regime sustained by coercion and terror, the very meaning of statehood becomes blurred. Does the effective exercise of power alone suffice for sovereignty, or must legitimacy stem from consent and accountability? Externally imposed democratic frameworks often fail to take root in societies lacking the institutional foundations or sociopolitical consensus necessary for such a model of governance. In such a scenario, how should the international community engage with regimes that exercise effective control yet lack formal recognition or normative legitimacy? Extending recognition to such authoritative regimes risks normalising systems of governance built on coercion and exclusion, thereby institutionalising the subjugation of women and minorities and setting a precedent that could encourage similar regimes elsewhere.

This tension between power, legitimacy, and recognition is particularly visible in Afghanistan's recent history. America's war on terror after the Twin Towers attacks started a serious global collaboration of militaristic, diplomatic, intelligence, economic and soft-power engagement. It began with the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 to topple the Taliban and dismantle Al-Qaeda. This was followed by the 2003 invasion of Iraq under the pretext of eliminating weapons of mass destruction and countering terrorism. However, the military interventions evolved into protracted, resource-intensive, and deeply contentious conflicts, generating extensive civilian casualties, destabilizing regional political orders, and inadvertently facilitating the emergence of new transnational terror groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS). The chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan led to the collapse of the Afghan government and the return of the Taliban, underscoring the long-term instability in the region and leaving behind repercussions that the world continues to grapple with.

The liminal state in which Afghanistan finds itself in is characterized by deep uncertainty regarding its status and legitimacy as a sovereign nation state. In this evolving geopolitical order, state and non-state actors are navigating this ambiguity in ways that align with their strategic interests, revealing that the legitimacy of the nation state is no longer an absolute principle but a negotiated and contested reality. The geopolitical void created by the abrupt withdrawal of the United States has prompted other countries to engage with the regime in their own ways. China, with its diplomatic, strategic and economic engagement has been expanding its influence over the region. As mentioned previously, Russia has formally recognised the Taliban government, marking a significant shift in its regional policy. Also, Moscow views Taliban as a crucial partner for its counter terrorism efforts, especially against ISIS Khorasan. In contrast, Pakistan's relations with the Taliban have deteriorated, with escalating border tensions and the issue of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerging as a major object of contention. The United States maintains limited channels of engagement and is a major international donor of humanitarian and development assistance. However, recent U.S. calls to re-establish military access to Bagram air base were publicly rejected by

Rethinking Terrorism After Afghanistan: India and the Politics of Recognition

Written by Aswathy Chandragiri

the Taliban and met with regional opposition (Associated Press 2025b).

India's engagement with Afghanistan under the Taliban regime has been very cautious, distancing itself from a formal recognition but engaging with it for strategic and economic purposes and significantly for the provision of humanitarian assistance. Previously, India had viewed the regime as a Pakistan backed terrorist group and had maintained for years that there is no good or bad Taliban. While India supported the elected Afghan governments until the Taliban seized power in 2021, it shut its embassy and paused all official engagements following the Taliban's takeover. However, by 2022, it reopened a limited technical mission in Kabul to primarily oversee humanitarian aid (Parashar 2025). The latest visit by Taliban Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi to India marks a significant elevation in India's bilateral engagement with Afghanistan. By directly engaging with a Taliban minister, India hopes to maintain its influence over the territory. Days after the visit, India's technical mission of India in Kabul has been upgraded to the status of embassy (Bhattacharjee 2025). In this manner, India hopes to make its own presence count within the growing influence of other nation states like Russia and China. Also, India's humanitarian assistance is an important support mechanism for the people of Afghanistan amid persistent economic hardships and the absence of a legitimate, functioning government.

Moreover, the Taliban have maintained that the Kashmir dispute is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan (Shivamurthy 2022) and have condemned the recent Pahalgam terror attack in Jammu and Kashmir, thereby rhetorically aligning with India's own stance (Bhatti 2025). The Taliban could potentially serve as a pragmatic partner in India's fight against terrorism as the regime may have the leverage to regulate and restrain the militant groups that focus on targeting India. Strategically, India benefits from the Taliban's worsening relation with Pakistan as escalating tension would divert the focus of Islamabad to its western frontier.

However, engaging with the Taliban who are technically non state actors that captured power in Afghanistan by force can significantly risk India's own security. This is because there is a complex network of linkages and rivalries that the Taliban maintain with various other militant organisations and India would risk becoming entangled in their intricate web of alliances and hostilities, which include groups operating across Afghanistan and Pakistan. For instance, Taliban's rival organisations such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), may intensify their activities against India thereby exacerbating its strategic vulnerabilities, contrary to the Taliban serving as a partner in India's counter terrorism efforts.

Conclusion

As the politics of terrorism constitute a slippery terrain, traditional ways of engaging with it now stand at a critical crossroads. The case of Afghanistan exposes the inherent asymmetries in how terrorism is defined, applied, and contested within the international system. While Afghanistan's strategic location and its resources have long made it a focal point of global attention, engagement with a regime that lacks legitimacy, is involved in systemic oppression, and is associated with terrorism, presents a complex set of ethical and strategic dilemmas. Even when one moves beyond a Western-centric understanding of nation state and its legitimacy, the Taliban's violent rise to power, its continued repression of its own people especially women, and its fraught relations with other militant organisations pose many challenges in its way ahead.

India's evolving engagement with the Taliban represents not only a pragmatic readjustment of its diplomatic ties but also a geopolitical risk and its long-term consequences can only unfold with time. Ethically speaking, in the shifting landscapes of contemporary geopolitics, the terms of engagement must ultimately translate into tangible benefits for the people of Afghanistan.

References

Associated Press. 2025a. "Russia's Top Court Lifts 'Terror Group' Designation on Afghanistan's Taliban." The Hindu. April 17, 2025. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/russias-top-court-lifts-terror-group-designation-on-afghanistans-taliban/article69461136.ece>

Rethinking Terrorism After Afghanistan: India and the Politics of Recognition

Written by Aswathy Chandragiri

———. 2025b. "Taliban Reject Trump's Bid to Retake Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan." *The Hindu*. September 21, 2025. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/taliban-reject-trumps-bid-to-retake-bagram-air-base-in-afghanistan/article70076908.ece>.

Bhattacharjee, Kallol. 2025. "India Upgrades Technical Mission in Kabul to Embassy with 'Immediate Effect.'" *The Hindu*. October 21, 2025. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-upgrades-technical-mission-in-kabul-to-embassy-with-immediate-effect/article70187227.ece>

Bhatti, Mohd Usman. 2025. "India and the Taliban: How Cautious Pragmatism Is Redrawing South Asia's Power Map." *Frontline*. October 24, 2025. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/india-taliban-afghanistan-diplomacy-pakistan-south-asia-geopolitics/article70197489.ece>.

Blazakis, Jason M. 2025. "Trump Administration's Delisting of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham." *Just Security*. July 18, 2025. <https://www.justsecurity.org/117191/trump-administrations-delisting-hts/>.

Farivar, Masood. 2024. "Kyrgyzstan Follows Regional Trend, Takes Taliban off Terrorist List." *Voice of America*. Voice of America (VOA News). September 7, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/kyrgyzstan-follows-regional-trend-takes-taliban-off-terrorist-list/7775060.html>.

Institute for Economics and Peace. 2016. "Global Terrorism Index: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism." <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.2.pdf>

Jackson, Richard. 2007. "The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies". *European Political Science* 6 (3): 244–251. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210141>

Jenkins, Philip. 2003. *Images of Terror: What We Can and Can't Know About Terrorism*. Transaction Publishers.

Keen, David, and Ruben Andersson. 2018. "Double Games: Success, Failure and the Relocation of Risk in Fighting Terror, Drugs and Migration." *Political Geography* 67 (November): 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.09.008>.

Laqueur, Walter. 2003. *No End to War : Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*. New York ; London: Continuum.

———. 2017. *The Political Psychology of Appeasement*. Routledge.

Parashar, Sachin. 2025. "India Restores Embassy in Kabul, Taliban to Appoint 2 Diplomats in Delhi." *The Times of India*. The Times of India. October 21, 2025. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/after-taliban-ministers-visit-kabul-embassy-restored/articleshow/124729352.cms>.

Schmid, Alex P and A J Jongman. 1988. *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company

Shivamurthy, Aditya Gowdara. 2022. "Taliban's Kashmir policy: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Interests." *Observer Research Foundation*. September 21, 2022 <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/talibans-kashmir-policy>

United Nations Security Council. 2001. "S/RES/1373 (2001)/Adopted by the Security Council at its 4385th meeting, on 28 September 2001" [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1373\(2001\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1373(2001))

United Nations Security Council. 1999. "S/RES/1267 (1999)/Adopted by the Security Council at its 4051st meeting on 15 October 1999" [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1267\(1999\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1267(1999))

United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs. 2022. "Subsidiary Organs of the United Nations Security Council" Factsheets 23 Feb,2022

Rethinking Terrorism After Afghanistan: India and the Politics of Recognition

Written by Aswathy Chandragiri

https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/default/files/subsidiary_organs_factsheets_06nov22.pdf

About the author:

Aswathy Chandragiri is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at M.O.P. Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai, India. She holds a Ph.D. in Humanities and Social Sciences from BITS Pilani, India, where her research examined questions of gender and border politics. Her current research interests include gender, spatiality, borders, and geopolitics.