

Crisis and Complexity: Afghanistan's Economic Landscape Post-2021 and the Regional Security

Waseem Raja- Research Scholar, Department of National Security Studies, Central University of Jammu, Samba, India.

Neeta Rani *- Associate Professor, Department of National Security Studies, Central University of Jammu, Samba, India.

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to analyse Afghanistan's shifting security and economic conditions under Taliban rule using the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Since the Taliban regained power in 2021, they have faced critical challenges in establishing stable governance, resulting in a severe humanitarian crisis compounded by economic collapse and political isolation. External aid reduction and sanctions have limited Afghanistan's access to the global financial system, leading to dramatic socio-economic setbacks. Regional actors, including India, Pakistan, China and Iran, interact cautiously with the Taliban administration, aiming to prevent cross-border instability and insurgent threats, while hesitating to grant formal recognition. For South Asia, Afghanistan's internal upheaval escalates security tensions, particularly between India and Pakistan, and poses broader risks regarding extremism and economic destabilization. This study suggests that collaborative, conditional engagement by regional stakeholders facilitated through SAARC and SCO platforms may provide a viable path toward stability if the Taliban adhere to basic humanitarian and security norms. Such regional engagement is essential for addressing Afghanistan's humanitarian needs and reducing threats to regional security.

Keywords: Afghanistan, South Asia, Regional Security Complex Theory, Economic Crisis, Political Instability, Regional Cooperation, Taliban.

* E-mail: neeta.nss@cuammu.ac.in

1. Introduction

The tumultuous events in Afghanistan following the Taliban's rapid takeover in August 2021 have unveiled a multifaceted crisis, significantly complicating the nation's security and economic paradigms. In a landscape already laden with challenges from decades of conflict, the abrupt shift in governance has reshaped not only internal dynamics but also Afghanistan's role in the broader regional context. With the withdrawal of international forces and the subsequent collapse of the government, a complex interplay of local, regional, and global actors has emerged, necessitating a thorough examination through the lens of the Regional Security Complex Theory. This theoretical framework facilitates an understanding of how Afghanistan's security interplay with neighboring states influences economic stability, as actors vie for power, resources, and influence in a precarious environment. The Taliban, predominantly an Afghanistan's Pashtun population, regained control of Afghanistan in 2021 after a twenty-year insurgency. Following their reestablishment of power, the Taliban pledged to uphold minority and women's rights and to grant amnesty to those who had collaborated with American efforts. However, their governance has largely reverted to a strict interpretation of Islamic law, with limited security and economic opportunities for the Afghan population as they transition from an insurgent force to a governing administration (Maizland,2022). Key institutions have been dismantled or repurposed to align with the Taliban's strict ideological framework, leading to the dissolution of entities like the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. A temporary caretaker administration was established in September 2021, yet prospects for a more inclusive government remain doubtful given reported internal divisions within the Taliban leadership (Hakimi and Price,2022).Afghanistan's economic and security landscape has deteriorated under Taliban rule, characterized by a totalitarian ideology, increased security threats, gender apartheid, and a lack of legitimacy, exacerbating the existing crisis and impacting the safety of individuals and groups (Sakhi,2022).

Strategically positioned at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, Afghanistan's geopolitical significance has been a focal point for global power dynamics, especially in light of the 2021 crisis. The sudden withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, culminating in the Taliban's rapid

takeover, has not only reshaped Afghanistan's internal landscape but has also reverberated throughout the region. Neighboring countries, notably Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian republics, are now faced with the implications of a resurgent Taliban, which could potentially destabilize their geopolitical interests and security frameworks. The heightened risk of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan poses significant concerns for these nations, as well as for global powers invested in regional stability. Traditional alliances are being reevaluated and recalibrated, suggesting that Afghanistan's crisis serves as both a determinant of regional insecurity and a catalyst for new geopolitical alignments in a rapidly changing international order. RSCT posits that geographically proximate states often share interdependent security concerns, with political and military threats exerting a more immediate impact than those originating from distant regions. As Afghanistan straddles the borders of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, it occupies a complex position as an "insulator" state—a region that separates but is influenced by multiple security complexes. Historically, Afghanistan served as a buffer state, deterring regional powers from direct engagement but also functioning as a focal point of great power conflict due to its strategic location (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). Today, the country's instability exacerbates regional insecurities, notably for neighboring states like India and Pakistan, which remain deeply enmeshed in South Asia's security dynamics. In the post-2021 era, Afghanistan has faced severe humanitarian and economic challenges. The national GDP has plummeted by approximately 20%, and extreme poverty has surged, leading to widespread deprivation, unemployment, and food insecurity. Sanctions and frozen assets have compounded the crisis by isolating Afghanistan from the global financial system, creating a severe liquidity shortfall and increasing inflationary pressures on essential goods (UNDP, 2021-2022). The Taliban's rule has led to a substantial drop in education and literacy rates, particularly among women and girls. Studies indicate that early-school-age children under Taliban governance experienced a long-term negative impact on their educational attainment. The lack of educational opportunities has resulted in a generational decline in human capital, affecting future health investments and overall societal development (Chung and Partridge, 2023).

These socio-economic stressors are further aggravated by persistent regional tensions and insurgent threats. Despite the Taliban's assertion of

governance, Afghanistan remains highly vulnerable to destabilization from both internal divisions and regional rivalries, impacting neighboring countries security and economies (Byrd,2022).Afghanistan's economy has collapsed, leading to a dire humanitarian situation, while the Taliban's governance remains weak. This instability has allowed terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS-K to thrive, increasing the likelihood of external attacks over the next few years (Jones,2023).There is societal regression under Taliban rule, highlighted by severe restrictions on women, including exclusion from public employment and education. It indicates a broader instability and chaos in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of foreign troops in August 2021 (Abdul,2023).

The Taliban's rapid ascent to power led to an immediate reconfiguration of the states political and military apparatus, with a focus on consolidating control over key territories while simultaneously facing resistance from various insurgent factions. This environment has cultivated a heightened sense of insecurity among civilians, who grapple with a deteriorating humanitarian situation compounded by the Taliban's strict governance measures and the emergence of rival militant groups like ISIS-K. Furthermore, Afghanistan's geographic positioning underscores its role in a broader regional security complex, where neighboring states are compelled to recalibrate their strategic priorities in response to the evolving threat landscape. The central aim of this paper is to evaluate how Afghanistan's security and economic instability under Taliban rule reverberates throughout the South Asian security complex. Through the lens of RSCT, this study examines the dynamics among key regional players particularly India, Pakistan, China, and Russia and assesses how their responses to Afghanistan's shifting landscape influence broader regional security. This paper also explores how platforms like SAARC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could facilitate a collaborative regional approach to stabilize Afghanistan, conditional on the Taliban's adherence to international norms of governance and human rights. By framing Afghanistan within RSCT, this analysis offers insights into the implications of its current crisis for South Asia's stability and the potential pathways toward collaborative engagement.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, guided by the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), to analyze Afghanistan's economic collapse and security dynamics under Taliban rule. It draws on documentary review of reports from international organizations, academic literature, and policy briefs to trace governance patterns and regional implications. Comparative analysis examines the strategies of key regional actors, such as India, Pakistan, China, and Iran, as well as the roles of multilateral platforms like SAARC and SCO in addressing Afghanistan's instability. The research integrates political economy and security studies, analyzing statistical data on economic indicators alongside qualitative insights on governance and cross-border security concerns.

3. Theoretical Debate and Framework

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a foundational framework for understanding the security dynamics in regions with interdependent security interests (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). RSCT posits that geographically proximate states within a security complex, such as South Asia, experience heightened insecurity from neighboring states compared to distant powers. Scholars have extensively applied RSCT to analyze South Asia, identifying the region's security complexities and its susceptibility to cross-border threats (Tapan, 2021). Afghanistan's geopolitical position, acting as an "insulator state" among South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, makes it pivotal to regional security dynamics without fully belonging to any one security complex.

The economic collapse following the Taliban's takeover has led to a humanitarian crisis, with Afghanistan's GDP contracting by 20% and the poverty rate climbing by over 35% (UNDP, 2021-2022). Prior to 2021, Afghanistan's economy relied heavily on foreign aid, which accounted for 75% of its GDP. The sudden cessation of international aid and imposition of sanctions have devastated Afghanistan's economy, resulting in mass unemployment, rising malnutrition, and severe currency devaluation (Afzal, 2022; Byrd, 2022). The reduction in international aid has significantly contributed to economic decline in Afghanistan under Taliban governance, as the study indicates that aid dependency has not fostered sustainable economic well-being, exacerbating the impacts of insurgency and political uncertainty (Shafiq and Wafayezada, 2023).

Afghanistan's economic situation remains dire, with millions living in poverty. Politically, the country is marginalized internationally, despite some unofficial political-economic relations. The threat of terrorism persists, complicating the overall security landscape (Ożarowski,2024). Afghanistan has seen a dramatic reduction in violence, corruption, and narcotics trafficking, alongside a reasonable level of security. However, the regime's human rights abuses and ties to al-Qaeda remain significant concerns for the West (Cowan,2023). The Taliban's governance has led to a significant increase in food insecurity, with 98% of households affected post-takeover compared to 70% before. Additionally, all dimensions of quality of life, particularly psychological, environmental, and physical, have worsened (Saif-Nijat et al.,2023). Economic studies have highlighted that the Taliban's isolation from the global financial system has worsened the liquidity crisis, limiting access to essential goods and services. Despite the Taliban's claims of effective economic management, key indicators such as GDP, GDP per capita, unemployment, and poverty rates have all worsened. The stability of the Afghan currency is also uncertain, relying heavily on foreign aid and strict controls on currency withdrawals. The Taliban's revenue collection has fallen short, and their control over the mining sector faces challenges (Daudzai,2024). The primary obstacles to governance in Afghanistan are territorial-cultural exchanges with neighboring nations, opposing strategies, and interventions by regional powers (Kiani et al,2024). However, few studies have integrated RSCT into an economic analysis of Afghanistan's isolation, missing an opportunity to discuss how economic destabilization in Afghanistan could ripple across South Asia's interconnected security complex. This paper contributes to the literature by connecting Afghanistan's economic crisis with broader regional security concerns, especially for South Asian economies vulnerable to Afghan instability.

Afghanistan's instability intensifies security concerns in South Asia, particularly between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed neighbors entrenched in a historical rivalry. Studies on Indo-Pak security dynamics frequently highlight Afghanistan's strategic role as a proxy battleground, with both nations vying for influence to counter each other's regional dominance (Chowdhury,2022). The Taliban's alignment with Pakistan and its historic support for anti-India insurgents, including those active in Kashmir, amplify India's security concerns. Conversely, Pakistan's

relationship with the Taliban presents challenges as cross-border insurgent activity rises, particularly through the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has intensified attacks within Pakistan (Hakimi and Price,2022). Afghanistan's economy has deteriorated under Taliban rule, with increased narcotics production and trafficking. Security has worsened, marked by a resurgence of terrorist groups and rising violence, particularly in Kashmir, posing significant threats to regional stability and India's national security (Arpan,2023).

International actors, notably the United States and NATO, have historically played central roles in Afghanistan's stability, yet their withdrawal has shifted the responsibility to regional actors. China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan maintain diplomatic ties with the Taliban while refraining from formal recognition, aiming to contain Afghanistan's instability to avoid its spillover into neighboring regions (Maizland,2022; Salangi,2022). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are identified in the literature as potential platforms for coordinated regional engagement. However, challenges persist, particularly as these organizations must balance engagement with the Taliban against member states interests, human rights concerns, and international norms. While existing studies highlight these platforms roles in South Asia, limited research has analyzed the role of multilateral organizations within RSCT in stabilizing Afghanistan. This study extends RSCT application by proposing how regional organizations could provide a collaborative platform to address Afghan instability while maintaining security in South Asia.

4. Findings and Analysis

4-1. Economic Instability and Humanitarian Crisis

Afghanistan's economic collapse under Taliban rule has had severe repercussions for both its domestic population and the wider region. The Taliban's lack of access to international aid and global financial systems has exacerbated poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity across the country. GDP has contracted by an estimated 20%, and the poverty rate has surged by over 35%, leading to a severe humanitarian crisis (UNDP,2021-2022). Afghan households have reported a substantial decrease in income since 2021, with four out of five families experiencing income losses or loss of primary income sources. This economic instability not only threatens Afghanistan's population but also amplifies security risks in neighboring

South Asian countries. The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) framework posits that economic destabilization within one state can indirectly impact regional security through migration pressures, cross-border insurgency, and the exacerbation of poverty-driven crime. Afghanistan's economic decline thus contributes to a heightened sense of insecurity within the South Asian security complex, increasing the urgency for regional actors to engage with Afghanistan conditionally to prevent a further destabilization (Byrd,2022).

4-2. Rising Security Tensions between India and Pakistan

Under RSCT, the security dynamics between India and Pakistan are considered central to South Asia's regional security complex. Afghanistan's instability has historically served as a stage for Indo-Pak rivalry, and the Taliban's resurgence has intensified this competition. India, with extensive investments and development projects in Afghanistan, views the Taliban's rise as a threat to its security interests, especially concerning militant groups active in Kashmir (Hakimi and Price,2022). Pakistan, on the other hand, faces escalating violence along its western border, as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), supported by Afghan-based militants, increases attacks within Pakistan. RSCT emphasizes the proximity factor in understanding these tensions: geographically close states like India and Pakistan perceive Afghanistan's instability as a direct security threat due to the potential for cross-border militancy and insurgent spillover. India's recalibrated approach to engagement with the Taliban, aimed at countering Pakistan's influence, reflects RSCT's assertion that regional actors respond to their neighbors' security environments with a blend of cooperation and rivalry. Consequently, Afghanistan's instability has magnified Indo-Pak security concerns, aligning with RSCT's focus on how interdependent security issues shape regional dynamics.

4-3. Strategic Calculations and Regional Responses

China, India, Pakistan and Iran have adopted cautious engagement strategies with the Taliban to mitigate potential security threats. China's primary concern is to prevent the spread of militancy, particularly among Uighur groups, from Afghanistan into its territory. Reports suggest that the Taliban's relocation of troops from the Afghanistan-China border aims to prevent Uighur militants from aligning with the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (IS-KP), which could destabilize China's western regions

(Maizland,2022). Russia and Iran similarly prioritize containing IS-KP and other insurgent groups, with Russia focusing on stability in Central Asia and Iran maintaining a careful balance in its approach to the Taliban.

China's primary interests in Afghanistan are centered on security and regional stability, particularly as they relate to preventing extremism from spilling over into its own borders. Specifically, China is concerned about the potential for militancy to influence Uighur separatists in Xinjiang, where the Chinese government has faced long-standing security challenges. (Helštýnová,2023). China has sought assurances from the Taliban that they will prevent Uighur militant groups from operating in Afghanistan, particularly groups aligned with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (Iqbal et al.,2024).This organization has been designated as a terrorist group by China, which fears cross-border influences from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan could inspire or support Uighur separatist movements. While China has shown interest in Afghanistan's mineral wealth and infrastructure potential, it remains cautious (Siddiqi,2012). In theory, Afghanistan could become a key part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), yet the security risks and lack of political stability under the Taliban make large-scale Chinese investments unlikely for now. Through the SCO, China collaborates with Russia and Central Asian states to discuss policies that aim to stabilize Afghanistan (Khan and Mahmood,2023) reflecting RSCT's concept of a cooperative response to regional instability.

India's response to the Taliban's return to power is shaped by longstanding concerns over terrorism, especially regarding insurgent groups active in Kashmir (Commuri,2022). Historically, India has supported Afghanistan's democratic governments, contributing to development projects and economic aid, partly to counter Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. (Pant, 2010). Afghanistan holds significant geopolitical importance in Indian foreign policy; the strategic partnership with Afghanistan enhances India's "strategic depth" into Central Asia, not only averting encirclement by China and Pakistan but also facilitating the blockade and mitigation of various pressures on Pakistan (Shafiee et al.,2012). With the Taliban now in power, India's position is one of cautious engagement and heightened security concerns. India fears that Pakistan will use its ties with the Taliban to support anti-India groups, especially those operating in Kashmir. The Taliban's historical ties to Pakistan and perceived support for groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed exacerbate India's concerns about

cross-border militancy (Verma,2021). Although initially hesitant, India has re-opened limited diplomatic engagement with the Taliban to avoid being isolated from Afghanistan's geopolitical environment (Wani,2022).

The protracted conflict in Afghanistan adversely affects both Pakistan's domestic and foreign relations. In addition to several economic, political, and geopolitical repercussions, it adversely affects interests and connectivity with the energy-abundant Central Asian Republics (Khan and Wei,2024). Pakistan has had a longstanding relationship with the Taliban, largely due to its strategic objective of ensuring a friendly government in Afghanistan that counters India's influence (Zarawar et al.,2024). Pakistan's approach is complex, balancing its support for the Taliban with managing security challenges that arise from Afghanistan, especially regarding the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an anti-Pakistan insurgent group operating from Afghan territory (Rahman et al.,2023). Pakistan provides diplomatic and economic support to the Taliban, viewing their rule as a strategic win that limits India's influence in Afghanistan. This support, however, comes with challenges, as Pakistan seeks to influence Taliban policy to prevent cross-border militancy (Zarawar et al.,2024). Despite its influence over the Taliban, Pakistan faces increasing attacks from the TTP, which has intensified its activities since the Taliban took power. (Jan,2022). This has led Pakistan to push the Taliban to act against the TTP, though the Taliban has been reluctant to fully sever ties, (Rehman and Mingjin,2024) complicating Pakistan's security situation.

Iran shares a long border with Afghanistan and is directly affected by Afghanistan's instability, particularly regarding drug trafficking, refugee flows, and Sunni extremism (Hajivosough,2023). The Islamic State seeks to expand its influence in Central Asian countries and Iran via Afghanistan. Moreover, certain Taliban leaders have aligned with ISIS and currently function under the black flags. Consequently, it is imperative that appropriate measures be implemented to mitigate the effect of the Islamic State in Afghanistan by regional countries, including Iran (Alishahi et al.,2017). Iran's response is shaped by both pragmatic engagement with the Taliban and the need to manage internal security concerns that Afghanistan's instability exacerbates. Iran has maintained diplomatic relations with the Taliban, despite ideological differences. Iran's primary aim is to secure its borders, manage the flow of refugees, and prevent Sunni extremist groups like ISIS-K from gaining a foothold near its territory. Iran

engages in limited economic cooperation with the Taliban, facilitating trade and offering humanitarian support to reduce refugee pressures (Abdullah and Azim,2023). However, Iran is cautious in its investments, wary of the Taliban's alignment with Sunni extremist ideologies that conflict with Iran's government. Iran's participation in the SCO underscores its interest in collective security (Khan et al.,2023) and gentle engagement with the Taliban (Khan and Mahmood,2023). The current peace accord between the United States and Afghanistan has nearly collapsed. The militant and terrorist assaults persist, resulting in a lack of peace in Afghanistan (Bharti, 2022). Afghanistan's influence on neighboring regions illustrates how an insulator state's instability can prompt neighboring powers to adopt cautious but strategic responses to limit the spread of insecurity.

4-4. Role of Multilateral Platforms: SAARC and SCO

The study finds that multilateral organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could play critical roles in stabilizing Afghanistan. Despite limitations, both SAARC and SCO provide forums for regional actors to engage with the Taliban government, potentially setting preconditions that align with humanitarian standards and security norms. RSCT highlights that collaborative security complexes like SAARC and SCO facilitate dialogue, reduce enmity, and encourage cooperative security practices. Through these platforms, regional powers can address Afghanistan's instability collectively, fostering conditional engagement that may ease the humanitarian crisis while ensuring Afghanistan's alignment with basic international norms. This multilateral approach underscores RSCT's principle of regional security interdependence, as Afghanistan's stability increasingly hinges on the cohesive and collaborative efforts of its neighbors.

5. Discussion

5-1. Afghanistan as an Insulator State: Implications for Regional Security

Afghanistan's status as an "insulator state" within RSCT underscores its unique role in shaping security dynamics across South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Historically, Afghanistan's geographic position buffered regional powers from direct confrontation, but recent instability has transformed the country into a security liability rather than a stabilizing presence. RSCT's proximity principle highlights that Afghanistan's turmoil

reverberates most acutely through neighboring South Asian states, particularly India and Pakistan, whose rivalries intensify due to their shared borders and historical tensions. The Taliban's resurgence, therefore, raises important questions about how an insulator state's breakdown impacts interconnected security dynamics, signaling that Afghanistan's internal developments can directly exacerbate Indo-Pak security tensions.

In practical terms, Afghanistan's transformation from a buffer state to a destabilizing force necessitates recalibrated policies from both India and Pakistan. RSCT suggests that regional responses should address Afghanistan's instability not as an isolated issue but as part of South Asia's broader security complex. For India, greater strategic engagement with Afghanistan, contingent on the Taliban's willingness to address security threats to Kashmir, may offer a path to mitigating regional tensions. Meanwhile, Pakistan's counterinsurgency strategies along the Afghan border illustrate RSCT's concept of security interdependence, as it aims to manage the TTP's insurgent activities, which threaten domestic stability and strain its resources.

5-2. Economic Collapse and Humanitarian Crisis: Regional Impact and RSCT's Relevance

Afghanistan's economic crisis, amplified by sanctions and international isolation, has exacerbated regional insecurities. RSCT highlights that economic destabilization within a state can indirectly undermine neighboring countries' security by heightening refugee flows, increasing border tensions, and prompting resource competition. Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, fueled by a 20% GDP contraction and poverty rate surge, creates potential migration pressures on neighboring states like Pakistan and Iran, where the influx of Afghan refugees could strain resources and increase socio-political tensions. According to RSCT, such economic factors amplify the security threats within South Asia's interconnected security framework, challenging states to manage internal stability while addressing external pressures.

The potential for cross-border spillover emphasizes the need for a coordinated economic and humanitarian response by regional actors. SAARC and SCO, as multilateral frameworks, could provide a foundation for regional cooperation in addressing Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, possibly facilitating limited economic support through a humanitarian corridor. Such an approach aligns with RSCT's principles, emphasizing that

cooperative, conditional support might help manage Afghanistan's instability while addressing regional security needs.

5-3. Conditional Engagement through Multilateral Platforms

The findings suggest that multilateral platforms like SAARC and SCO have unique roles in mediating Afghanistan's security and humanitarian challenges. Although limited in enforcement power, these platforms offer a foundation for conditional engagement based on humanitarian and security standards. RSCT's principle of cooperative security mechanisms underscores the importance of collective action in complex security environments, particularly in regions with interdependent security issues. By utilizing SAARC and SCO as venues for dialogue and conditional engagement, regional actors may address Afghanistan's instability without fully endorsing the Taliban regime.

Conditional engagement by South Asian powers through these platforms might involve coordinated humanitarian support, contingent on the Taliban's compliance with basic governance norms, including human rights protections and counter-terrorism commitments. Such multilateral frameworks can provide regional actors with leverage over Afghanistan's governance trajectory, encouraging adherence to international standards. This aligns with RSCT's assertion that regional security is most effectively maintained through cooperative mechanisms that mitigate the risks posed by a destabilized insulator state.

5-4. RSCT as a Guide for Policy Formulation

The application of RSCT to Afghanistan's situation offers valuable insights into policy formulation for regional actors. By understanding Afghanistan's role within the South Asian security complex, policymakers can better assess how cross-border dynamics shape their security environment. The theory suggests that regional actors must approach Afghanistan not merely as a national issue but as a focal point of interdependent security risks. This insight is crucial for countries like India and Pakistan, whose historical rivalry over Afghanistan now necessitates a more cooperative stance, particularly in addressing humanitarian needs and controlling cross-border militancy.

In line with RSCT, regional actors may consider policy options that promote stability through engagement rather than isolation. For instance, limited cooperation on humanitarian aid and economic support, facilitated through

SAARC and SCO, could provide an avenue for regional stability. While full recognition of the Taliban regime may not be feasible, RSCT encourages conditional engagement to prevent further destabilization, signaling a pragmatic path forward that balances regional security concerns with humanitarian imperatives.

6. Policy Recommendations

To foster stability, regional actors should prioritize a comprehensive and cooperative approach that addresses both security and humanitarian concerns in Afghanistan. Key recommendations include:

6-1. Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation

Neighboring states, especially South Asian powers, should utilize multilateral platforms like SAARC and SCO to engage the Taliban government conditionally. Collaborative engagement focused on humanitarian support, cross-border security, and counter-terrorism initiatives could provide a cohesive response to Afghanistan's instability. By coordinating policies and setting standards for engagement, SAARC and SCO could facilitate constructive dialogue with the Taliban on key governance issues, mitigating regional tensions.

6-2. Promote Economic Resilience and Humanitarian Aid

Afghanistan's economic collapse and rising poverty threaten regional stability by increasing cross-border migration and resource pressures. To address this, neighboring states should support Afghanistan's economy through controlled humanitarian aid, including food security and basic healthcare. Creating a humanitarian-financial corridor through SAARC could ease Afghanistan's liquidity issues and alleviate poverty, conditional on the Taliban's adherence to basic human rights norms.

6-3. Support for Domestic Economic Development

Sustainable stability requires that Afghanistan rebuild its economic foundations. To this end, the Taliban government should prioritize policies that promote domestic productivity and reduce reliance on foreign imports. Encouraging small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and supporting agricultural modernization could foster local employment and reduce economic vulnerability. Regional stakeholders could facilitate knowledge-sharing initiatives to enhance Afghanistan's agricultural practices, crucial to economic recovery and stability.

6-4. Enhance Border Security and Counter-Insurgency Cooperation

Cross-border militancy remains a major threat, especially in regions affected by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other insurgent groups. India, Pakistan, and Iran should strengthen collaborative counter-insurgency measures, sharing intelligence to counter potential threats from Afghan-based militant networks. A coordinated response to security risks would align with RSCT's cooperative security principles, helping manage cross-border instability more effectively.

6-5. Conditional Engagement Based on Governance Norms

Engagement with the Taliban should be based on clear conditions that include commitments to human rights, particularly for women and minorities, and transparency in governance. By signaling a unified regional stance on governance norms, regional powers can leverage conditional engagement to press for greater accountability within the Taliban administration. This approach could improve Afghanistan's adherence to international standards, offering a pragmatic pathway to limited international recognition and support.

6-6. Foster Long-Term Political Stability

Regional stakeholders should advocate for an inclusive governance structure within Afghanistan that reflects the diverse perspectives of its people, including minority groups. Through conditional diplomatic engagement, neighboring states could encourage the Taliban to open avenues for political dialogue with rival factions, fostering a more representative and stable government. Such a framework would support Afghanistan's long-term stability and reduce the potential for political fragmentation.

7. Conclusion

Afghanistan's resurgence as a destabilized state under Taliban rule has redefined its position within the South Asian security complex, intensifying regional security and economic challenges. By applying Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this study has shown that Afghanistan's instability heightens insecurities for neighboring states, especially India and Pakistan, and reverberates through South Asia's interconnected security dynamics. The study illustrates how RSCT offers a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of regional security interdependencies, emphasizing that Afghanistan's challenges cannot be isolated but must be

addressed collaboratively. The findings suggest that while the Taliban's governance has deepened Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, conditional engagement by neighboring states through platforms like SAARC and SCO could provide a foundation for stability. Collaborative regional efforts remain essential to addressing Afghanistan's humanitarian needs and mitigating threats to broader regional security.

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9. Conflict of Interest

There are no potential conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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