



By: *Sharmila Devi*

# Realpolitik towards the Taliban should not marginalise humanitarian issues



Barely two weeks after the UN noted it was 1,000 days since Afghanistan's ruling Taliban banned girls from attending secondary school, the global body oversaw a meeting of the Islamic government with envoys from about two dozen countries in Doha on the last day of June.

The meeting was a public relations coup for the Taliban, which has called the country the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan since it seized power in 2021, twenty years after the US ousted the fundamentalist group and spent \$2 trillion on war and other costs.

The Doha gathering was the first time that Taliban officials attended a UN-sponsored meeting and UN officials were at pains to stress that it did not translate into a recognition of their government but this has not stopped an outcry from rights activists because of the exclusion of female representatives from Afghanistan.

Their opposition to the Taliban's harsh rule is having little sway as realpolitik asserts greater prominence. The US has been making tentative steps towards engagement with the Taliban behind Chinese and Russian diplomatic overtures as they eye the country's potential mineral wealth estimated at \$1 trillion.

## "The de facto authorities"

The first official talks between the US and the Taliban took place last year also in Doha on topics including the lifting of sanctions and travels bans as well as the return of Afghan central bank assets, including \$7 billion held in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, half of which are now in a Swiss-based Fund for the Afghan People.

No breakthroughs were announced after the latest talks that focused on trade and counter-narcotics, with the Taliban insisting that issues such as women's rights were firmly off the agenda. "I would like to emphasise that this meeting and this process of engagement does not mean normalisation or recognition," said Rosemary A. DiCarlo, a UN official for political

and peace-building affairs.

## The talks took place despite the insistence that women and girls should be included by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

The talks took place despite the insistence that women and girls should be included by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which said "the de facto authorities' recent decision to reduce to their lowest level the salaries of women civil servants barred from employment, regardless of experience or qualifications, reflects an additional deliberate and harmful measure to disempower women in Afghanistan."

The talks included officials from the US, Canada, Norway and the European Union. Before the two-day talks started on 30 June, Taliban held bilateral meetings with Russia, Saudi Arabia, India and Uzbekistan.

At least 16 countries have diplomatic missions in Afghanistan but only Beijing has exchanged ambassadors with Kabul.

## China and Russia's ties with the Taliban

China and Russia's ties with the Taliban will be closely watched by Washington. Two years ago, Beijing resumed issuing visas and allowed 98% of Afghan imports to enter tax free. China is also planning to expand its Belt and Road infrastructure initiative into Afghanistan.

Russia is one of the few countries that has handed over the embassy of Afghanistan to Taliban representatives, a move made in April 2022, two months after it launched its invasion of Ukraine.

## The background to all this quiet diplomatic activity are the potential riches from gold to gemstones to minerals

Russia is also considering dropping sanctions against the Taliban, said Vasily Nebenzya, Russia's ambassador to the UN. The US, EU and others have maintained sanctions and the Taliban government has not been officially recognised by any other since it took power.

The background to all this quiet diplomatic activity are the potential riches from gold to gemstones to minerals such as chromite hidden beneath Afghanistan's rugged landscape left untapped due to decades of war.

## Security worries

Over the past three years, the Taliban has announced more than 200 mining deals worth billions of dollars, according to a recent FT report that examined 128 contract sites where there has been Chinese investment.

Afghanistan's domestic revenues increased 22% year-on-year in April and May because of the auction of mines and resources such as oil, emeralds and nephrite, said the World Bank.

Several Chinese companies operate in Afghanistan, including the Metallurgical Corp. of China Ltd (MCC), which has held talks with the Taliban administration over plans for what could be a vast copper mine.

## Significant investment in the country is hampered by the ongoing security worries

Significant investment in the country is hampered not only by the difficulties of dealing with the Taliban but also ongoing security worries given the deadly attacks by the Afghan branch of ISIS known as Islamic State Khorasan.

It is not only hard-headed strategic business that is driving the Taliban's slow journey in from the cold but humanitarian considerations. Foreign aid accounted for 40% of Afghanistan's GDP before collapsing when the Taliban retook power and around 23.7 million people need help including food aid, drinking water and healthcare.

## Separate tracks

Foreign assistance should focus on supporting Afghan humanitarian groups, said Alexander Matheou, Asia Pacific head for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. "While restrictions on women are unacceptable and severe, there are exceptions and workarounds that can support women, and these are opportunities to help," he recently wrote.



Foreign assistance should focus on supporting Afghan humanitarian groups - Alexander Matheou (IFRC)

Given the "dismal" track record of using diplomacy and pressure in getting the Taliban to respect women's rights, the International Crisis Group think tank also believes a new approach is needed to address the humanitarian crisis.

Issues should be compartmentalised and agendas unbundled to allow separate tracks in talks with the Taliban such as women's issues and fighting terrorism, it said in an April commentary.

It would appear the West is following such an approach but then none of the diplomats are unlikely to ever have to explain to a young girl

why she cannot go to school. Human Rights Watch chose a Farsi proverb to express their utter disappointment at the Doha meeting.

“Whatever spoils, they put salt on it. But woe to the day when salt itself spoils.”