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AFGHANISTAN REGIONAL COLLECTIVE II

Policy Brief

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About RDDC

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The Centre for Stabilisation at the Institute for Strategy and War Studies is a part of the Royal Danish Defence College and contributes to the Danish Defence on its international stabilisation efforts through implementation of projects, research, and education. We are currently working with projects in Afghanistan-Pakistan, Iraq, Georgia, and the Gulf of Guinea.

About Tabadlab and CRGC

Tabadlab is a think tank and advisory services firm that works at the intersection of robust data and evidence, strategic communication, and public engagement. We enable leaders, institutions, and firms to achieve better outcomes for all.

The Centre for Regional and Global Connectivity (CRGC) at Tabadlab seeks to explore the convergence between economics, security, finance, politics, energy, and demography. CRGC's research and advisory work strengthens a shared agenda for nations and regions to improve the lives of their citizens, bolster cross-border connectivity, enhance economic interdependence and secure regional stability.

Authors and Acknowledgements

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Background

Tabadlab's and the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC's) Afghanistan Regional Collective (ARC) Dialogue II convened 28 experts from 6 countries (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Denmark, US, UK, and the Netherlands) to investigate emerging security issues in Afghanistan at a local, regional, and global scale and to explore strategies to counter these threats. ARC II featured three thematic areas:

1. Assessing the threats from terrorist groups in Afghanistan.
2. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan[1] (IEA or Afghan Taliban)'s relations with and policies towards terrorist groups.
3. Security issues as a platform for international cooperation and engagement with the IEA.

This policy brief presents key findings and recommendations from said sessions.

Key Findings

The Security Landscape: Assessment of Different Groups Operating in Afghanistan

While a number of militant groups, designated as "terrorist groups", are active in Afghanistan three groups are of significant importance:

- **Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP):** The ISKP is currently fragmented and weakened by effective counter-terrorism (CT) efforts by the IEA. The group seized opportunities presented by the US withdrawal and positioned itself as an umbrella organization for those seeking an alternative to the IEA. It aims for a broader influence across South and Central Asia but is predominantly located inside Afghanistan. By disrupting IEA's external negotiations and focusing on foreign entities, specifically targeting Chinese and Russian entities, ISKP seeks to showcase the IEA's perceived incapability to govern and maintain security. The intention of ISKP is to establish itself as a potent regional organization, employing propaganda tactics targeting the IEA, as well as countries and groups collaborating with them, especially Western countries and Pakistan.

  The IEA has, to some degree, successfully weakened the ISKP through various CT efforts which are typically assisted by the US through covert intelligence sharing. Several participants highlighted that the IEA strategy of identifying and cracking down on ISKP fighters was reminiscent of the US/NATO strategy towards the Taliban in the early 2000s. While being immediately effective, it could result in intensifying grievances leading to increased mobilization and a larger resistance to the IEA in the medium and long term.

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[1] The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), or the Afghan Taliban, are used interchangeable in this report as describing the current government in Afghanistan (post august 2021). Please note, that when using the Taliban's self-titled 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', this is not a matter of 'recognition', 'normalisation' or 'legitimizing' the Taliban government by Tabadlab nor the Royal Danish Defence College, but simply an analytical descriptor.

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- **Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS):** The AQIS is believed to have pledged allegiance to the IEA and has integrated its fighters into its structure. The AQIS has evolved into having something resembling an advisory role for the IEA with a focus on propaganda to expand the idea of regional Al-Qaeda affiliates. Overall, AQIS is in a weakened state, and holds limited freedom in Afghanistan, as it is largely controlled by the IEA. After the US drone strike on the former Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman Al-Zawarhiri, in August 2022, it is challenging to identify Al-Qaeda's core leadership in Afghanistan, particularly since ground intelligence is sparse and unreliable. Without any official leader of the group, it is estimated that the group has 180-400 [2] active fighters in Afghanistan. It is believed that AQIS has no current presence in Pakistan, where the last official attack was seen in 2016. Globally, AQ is still posing a terror threat to Western countries, but in a distinct way. Since 2019, AQ operations have typically been "lone wolf attacks" with a consistent lack of tangible proof that these are planned or "masterminded" from a central point, such as Afghanistan.

- **Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP):** Following the IEA's takeover in 2021, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, has shifted its focus back to Pakistan. Originally formed in 2007 as a coalition of militant Islamist groups in Pakistan's tribal areas, the TTP faced challenges such as government crackdowns and internal fragmentation. In the past two years, the TTP has undergone organizational changes, including mergers, enhanced media activities, and growing operational activities thereby adopting a more localised strategy. Bilateral relations between the IEA and Pakistan have rapidly deteriorated, especially after the breakdown of negotiations between the TTP and the Pakistani government.

Sourcing Information and Addressing Bias

Throughout the seminar (as well as the preparation and planning for this), it was highlighted that Afghanistan has become an "information and intelligence vacuum", especially from a Western perspective. Since August 2021, it has become increasingly hard to assess the facts on the ground in Afghanistan as almost all intelligence capacities disappeared after the US/NATO withdrawal, and international journalists struggle to give valid reports from inside Afghanistan. Navigating the informational landscape in Afghanistan is similar to entering an information vacuum, especially given the covert and informal nature of militant or terrorist organizations. It demands strict methodological rigor and not falling for easy-picking alarmism.

When analysing the security situation in Afghanistan, information is not only extremely scarce, but also prone to bias. The topic of 'terrorism emanating from Afghanistan' is an extremely politicized and emotional topic for both regional and Western countries. In Western policy debates, the complexity of the region is often overshadowed by an American obsession with combatting terrorism formed by the attacks on September 11th, 2001. This can, in turn, result in homogeneous thinking, as well as risk limiting the general analysis and the scope of knowledge when assessing the threat emanating from Afghanistan, as the presented information is not assessed objectively, but in a manner that aims to fit a predetermined narrative or agenda.

To counter the 'information vacuum' and existing biases, overreliance on a single source was discouraged - emphasizing the necessity of a diverse range of inputs, including mixed sources and firsthand accounts. At the moment, signal intelligence (SIGINT) is the predominant source of information from inside Afghanistan. However, it was noted that this is not as reliable as human intelligence (HUMINT), and is prone to bias. Relying on UN reports, and especially those from the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team, also demands caution as these too include bias, and have a consistent lack of methodological and empirical transparency.

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[2] Figure extracted from the United Nations Security Council Report (May 2022).

Instead, it was suggested to rely on historical data, especially when working backwards to source information and regional sources thereby overcoming eventual cultural and language barriers. Combining open-source data, think tank reports, and employing mixed methods is important for a more accurate analysis.

Afghanistan, Pakistan and the TTP

Following August 15, 2021, Pakistan publicly championed engagement with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), and was one of two operating embassies in Kabul when the takeover happened. Pakistan also engaged in multilateral diplomatic forums like the Moscow Format and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and trilateral collaborations, particularly with China. Pakistan had hedged its bets on the IEA, particularly the Haqqani faction, to be strategically aligned and deliver results. However, from a Pakistani perspective, two years of tense bilateral relations have revealed an absence of support by the IEA to address and dismantle existing hurdles hindering cooperation.

In the past, Pakistan has viewed Afghanistan as its "strategic depth", hedging against Indian military advancements and aggression. Over time, this has devolved into a strategic compulsion and even a liability. The demands made by the TTP in the failed negotiations with the Government of Pakistan (GOP) show that the IEA views Pakistan as its strategic depth now. They indicate a desire for cooperation, including changes to Pakistan's internal policies (repealing the 25th amendment and conversion of FATA to Newly Merged Districts NMDs), withdrawal of security forces from the border and NMDs, and flexibility regarding the TTP. These requests suggest the IEA seeks stability and collaboration with Pakistan to address shared concerns in the region.

The TTP has been emboldened since the fall of Kabul and seems to feel a sense of empowerment and protection from the IEA. With 664 attacks[3] in the first 11 months of the year and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa witnessing 416 attacks since the negotiations between TTP and Pakistan's government fell through in November 2022, bilateral ties between the IEA and Pakistan have rapidly deteriorated. The IEA's unwillingness to curtail the TTP's activities has increased Pakistan's frustration. The culmination of this resulted in Pakistan's passing of the widely-condemned Illegal Foreigner Repatriation Policy (IFRP) in October 2023.

Pakistan's stance on Afghanistan is marred by contradictions. In the past, Pakistan actively strengthened the IEA's hand in gaining power in Afghanistan, whereas now there is a fixation on the TTP. This suggests a narrative shift away from the initial soft-line policies towards the IEA. Today, with the IEA in power in Kabul, the differences between Pakistan and them have come to light, as compromises have been proven harder to reach than expected. There is a cognitive dissonance in asserting that Pakistan's framework and policy were robust and holistic, while simultaneously acknowledging that the policy failed. The current responses to the security issues in Pakistan seem as reflexive reactions that are misaligned with an acknowledgment and learning process of previous policy mistakes. The current relationship between the IEA and Pakistan is contingent on the IEA's apprehensions about the Repatriation Policy and Pakistan's concerns regarding TTP's growing presence within its borders:

The Repatriation Policy - A Policy Failure or Pragmatic Move?

Pakistan claims that the IFRP exclusively targets illegal and undocumented foreigners and not just Afghan refugees. There is active coordination with the Afghan government to ensure the seamless execution of the plan, leading to the repatriation of over 410,000 refugees, with over "90 percent

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[3] Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS).

of them leaving the country voluntarily".[4] The policy was implemented under Pakistan's legal jurisdiction to address an administrative problem faced by the country.

Both the perspectives of Pakistanis on the Afghan population, security, and economic concerns influence the government's policies on border control. A Gallup survey[5] showed that over 80 percent of Pakistanis want Afghan nationals to leave, leading to calls for more structured border control, even in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.[6] The Pakistani population's diminishing appetite for extremist groups signals a departure from the internal support observed for the Taliban in the early 2000s. This has resulted in reduced support for TTP terrorists flowing through Pakistan and declining cross-border sympathy.

However, this policy has proven highly detrimental, resulting in a significant erosion of the goodwill that Pakistan built over 40 years, during which Pakistan hosted millions of Afghan refugees. This situation and anti-Pakistan sentiment, in general, can be exploited to boost youth recruitment for extremist organizations such as the ISKP. The policy is also viewed as an extension of the closed border policy with other neighbours, Iran and India — serving as a justification for Pakistan's perceived failures in foreign policy.

The IEA, TTP, and Pakistan - Pakistan's Stance

The IEA's resolve against TTP is not the same as against other groups such as ISKP. Under the Doha agreement, they pledged to prevent the use of Afghan soil by international terrorist groups. The TTP's activities within Pakistan, raise questions about their commitment to their promises. In this regard, three trends have emerged:

- A significant surge in TTP attacks in Pakistan using Afghan territory, with a 60 percent increase in security incidents and a 500 percent rise in suicide attacks since August 2021, causing 2,267 casualties in Pakistan.[7]
- There is a growing recruitment of Afghan nationals into TTP ranks.
- Mutual coexistence is observed between Pakistan-focused terrorist organizations like TTP and ISKP, leading to mergers.

Due to significant efforts by Pakistan to address the threat posed by TTP, there is no established governing setup for the TTP within the country. Ideologically, the TTP lacks qualification as an Islamic organization and it does not adhere to Pakistan's constitution by avoiding persecution for their actions. For the TTP to integrate into the mainstream political landscape, similar to parties like the Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI-F), they must adopt constitutional methods. These factors collectively characterize the TTP issue as a state-versus-non-state problem.

The IEA, TTP, and Pakistan - The IEA's Stance

The IEA's stance on TTP involves a few key points:

- The modern weaponry and equipment possessed by the TTP came from Afghanistan during the chaotic US and NATO troop withdrawal, absolving the IEA of any responsibility.

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[4] Figures from the Government of Pakistan's official stance.
[5] Public Opinion in Pakistan on Government's Afghan Refugee Policy : Overwhelming support for government actions to repatriate Afghan nationals
[6] It must be stated that Tabadlab has repeatedly questioned the validity of this snap poll, considering the language in the question is very misleading and likely to skew the results.
[7] Figures from the Government of Pakistan's official stance.

- The disparate TTP factions merged in 2019, long before the IEA regained power in August 2021, highlighting the disconnect between the IEA and the TTP.
- The technology and logistics supporting TTP are not based in Afghanistan.
- The TTP operates independently of the IEA, as their strategy of attacking law enforcement in Pakistan is inconsistent with the IEA's view and priorities.
- The IEA has issued a fatwa prohibiting its fighters from launching attacks outside Afghanistan, specifically aiming to prevent TTP attacks in Pakistan. The TTP has control of areas within Pakistan that are beyond the IEA's authority/mandate.
- Pakistan's blame on the IEA for TTP's actions mirrors the approach of the US, EU, and NATO

In summary, the IEA has categorically disclaimed responsibility for TTP's actions. Despite strong tribal and cultural links, it opposes TTP's independent actions in Pakistan, and their fatwa banning Jihad outside of Afghanistan being the most salient example of this.

Afghanistan, Pakistan and the TTP

The IEA's policy towards other countries reflects pragmatism and personal interests. Their expanding relationships with Qatar, the UAE, Central Asian states, and China indicate a preference for economic partnerships focusing on investment and infrastructure. Using religious interlocutors or religion as a platform for dialogue, as demonstrated by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, has so far proven ineffective.

The current trade sanctions and structural barriers between countries impede regional connectivity by hindering the flow of trade, and restricting economic cooperation. There is a lack of knowledge regarding key political economy structures in Afghanistan, particularly the arbitration and rent-seeking structures crucial for collaboration with the IEA. These structures in the country are based on a subsistence economy while creating space for ideological interests, and negotiations take place through the vernacular of Hanafi vs. Salafi legislation. It was highlighted that IEA's susceptibility to large monetary interests is limited as they navigate relationships through the politics of spiritual order.

Enhancing Regional Cooperation: Pakistan's Role

Given Afghanistan's central location in the heart of Asia, it can serve as a key conduit between the GCC and the Far East, as well as between Central Asia and South Asia. Despite being landlocked, leveraging Afghanistan's geostrategic position could secure transit income and facilitation fees for nearly half of the world's population. Pakistan can play a crucial role in making this happen as its access to West Asia and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) depends on Afghanistan.

However, the situation for Pakistan is pessimistic as various projects aimed at improving regional connectivity such as Trans Afghan railway, TAPI, and CASA-1000, TUTAP500 are contingent on regional stability. In this regard, Pakistan's National Security Policy (NSP) introduced in January 2022 is a long-term endeavor, and Pakistan's incremental improvements in connectivity, such as developing roads and border crossing mechanisms for trade and transit, signify a step in the right direction. Connectivity will foster positive interdependence as millions become reliant on Pakistan and Afghanistan for essentials like gas and electricity. The notion of an unstable region will eventually become economically untenable for China, the West, and Central Asia. This creates a mutual incentive for these stakeholders to actively stabilize Pakistan and Afghanistan, ensuring

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³ Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS).

a conducive environment for sustained regional cooperation.

Challenges and Opportunities for International Engagement with Afghanistan

After August 2021, the initial policies of the IEA leaned towards efforts to cooperate with and appease the international community. This position eventually turned into more 'hardline' as cooperation with the international community dwindled, and the widely criticized policies towards girls and women were implemented. This 'hardline' shift is believed to represent the viewpoint of a minority within the IEA's leadership that holds the greatest significance, typically characterized as the Kandahar faction. Engagement with the IEA is deeply tied to the internal power dynamics of the movement as religious scholars around the Emir have significant influence, and use this to advocate for hardline policies on issues such as women's rights. Additionally, the IEA has formed new strategic partnerships with Iran, Russia, China, Turkey, and Qatar - coinciding with a decline in Western influence in the region.

The IEA has so far been resistant to change resulting from outside pressure, as they remain uncooperative and dogmatic on critical issues for both the West and Pakistan, particularly terrorism. At the same time, the international community has been selective in focusing on security threats emanating from Afghanistan, which are perceived as threats to Europe and the US. While not engaging with Pakistan on TTP, Western countries tend to focus on the threat from ISKP and al-Qaeda. Likewise, China and Uzbekistan respectively focus on the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) as these are perceived as the main security threats to these countries.

International, and especially Western, engagement with Afghanistan is hampered by domestic politics and misconceptions. In Washington as well as European capitals, there is a tendency to compare the IEA to groups like Hamas or Hezbollah, distorting the dynamics in Afghanistan. In many Western capitals, the IEA still holds the status of "the enemy", which many NATO countries fought and lost soldiers to. This makes a pragmatic dialogue politically sensitive, if not politically unviable. Furthermore, when debating giving humanitarian and development aid to Afghanistan, the IEA is often conflated with the Afghan people, leading to claims that they will utilize or "steal" aid directed towards the Afghan public.

However, the IEA are both ideological and pragmatic, and space for engagement with them may exist in the following areas: a) economic issues, b) human rights, and c) counter-terrorism. In general, international engagement with them should transition from a reactionary stance grounded in issues of national security to one grounded in mutual interests.

Afghan Economy

The economic potential of Afghanistan is constrained due to its landlocked nature, frozen central bank funds, underfunded humanitarian operations and a general lack of development aid. The reversal of frozen funds is unlikely to happen as it is contingent on meeting conditions like anti-money laundering, which the IEA are unlikely to fulfil governance problems within the IEA influence trade dynamics in Afghanistan.

An example of this is Afghan transit and trade with Pakistan that presents an economic challenge due to smuggling, the informal economies of both countries and misuse of trade measures.

Despite Pakistan's attempts to improve this, through banning specific imports, imposing processing fees, and requiring bank guarantees for Afghan importers, the problems persist. In conclusion, economic engagement with the IEA is constrained by such limitations of the Afghan economy.

Human Rights

The Western pressure to improve the social rights of Afghan citizens is counterproductive as the IEA's paranoia is exacerbated by this "inclusivity" pressure. The international community's loose definition of an inclusive government, excessive focus on specific areas, and securitization of human rights contribute to the problem. Therefore, the distinction between de jure rights and the gradual progress on the ground (de facto) should be clear, with more patience from the international community. In summary, human rights should part of engagement with the IEA, without undue influence from the West.

Counterterrorism

Several factors are conducive to counter-terrorism (CT) cooperation with the IEA. Opting for limited CT cooperation is essential for building mutual trust between Afghanistan and the West as it is less hamstrung by political oversight and the domestic political audiences. The collaboration observed during the transfer of power from the US to the interim IEA sets a precedent, demonstrating that cooperation is possible. Shared interests such as border management and countering internal threats like ISKP can be avenues for collaboration with the IEA.

According to the UN, there is a notable improvement in security in Afghanistan, and increased professionalism in border management — reflecting the IEA's interest in engagement and slowly improving competence. Moreover, regional consensus prioritizing peace and stability in Afghanistan, along with multilateral recognition of Afghanistan also creates a pathway for cooperation.

However, international cooperation on CT is limited (or covert in nature) because of overall lack of engagement with Afghanistan from external actors. While the CT-interests of external actors regarding some groups (ISKP e.g.) does align with the IEA, the political values and modes of cooperation does not.

For Pakistan cooperation is hindered by the IEA's familial and cultural ties, such as those with the TTP, which may take precedence over demands from outsiders. The unpredictability of the Israel-Hamas war adds to the uncertainty, potentially increasing hostility by extremist groups towards Westerners.

Key Recommendations

International Engagement with Afghanistan - A New Framing

- When engaging with Afghanistan analytically or politically, all — and especially western - actors must acknowledge the current "information vacuum" as well as their inherent biases. Methodological rigor, source criticism and commitment to unbiased analysis are needed when attempting to understand Afghanistan.

- A holistic international approach towards Afghanistan covering humanitarian aid, development, economic and regional collaboration, and security should be adopted. Humanitarian aid in Afghanistan must be integrated with consideration for regional and global security concerns regarding various groups operating and stability in the country.

- Effective border control and counter-narcotics measures should also be enforced. Collaborative efforts between law enforcement, drug enforcement, immigration, and border control agencies in Pakistan, Afghanistan, regional countries, and the UNODC are essential for addressing shared challenges.

- The Western framing of engagement with the IEA must separate them from the Afghan public and shift to engagement with "Afghanistan state/Afghan people".

- Prioritizing engagement with future youth leaders of Afghanistan is the key to utilizing their full potential.
  - Advisers within the IEA - outside Kandahar- especially those advocating for moderation should be actively engaged.
  - Academics, researchers, professors, and religious scholars should be engaged with - with an emphasis on ensuring active representation of females in all engagement efforts.
  - Engagement with the globally dispersed Afghan diaspora, which holds diametrically opposite views on the IEA, should be included, but not prioritized as these holds limited influence and legitimacy in Afghanistan.

- Critical dialogues are necessary to address key questions such as the prevailing issue of an inflexible mind-set of both the West and the IEA, as well as discussing ways to include diverse Afghan voices in the decision-making process, and shifting the emphasis from narratives to actual policy.

- The political and diplomatic framing of engagement and dialogue with the IEA can be changed to being a starting point, rather than a concession from the international community.

- Upholding a strong political pressure on human rights has so far not been providing any results. Instead, dialogue and engagement by the international community can focus on less politicized issues, in order to gain momentum and advance trust building. This can potentially lead to positive developments in other areas.

- While, counterterrorism is an established platform for international engagement with the IEA, it is also — by its very nature — deeply securitized, which limits the scope for trust building and broader diplomatic and societal involvement.

Pakistan and Afghanistan - Strengthening Bilateral Relationships

Pakistan's Role:
- Cease using border closure as a policy tool.

- Implement policies that separate trade from security and political issues to shield the common population from the impact of strained ties.
- Prioritize border fencing for improved border management.
- Acknowledge the ideological alignment of TTP with IEA and the impossibility of IEA operating against the; adjust policies and demands accordingly.
- Reform civilian law enforcement agencies in Pakistan, focusing on manpower, compensation, equipment, training, and incentivization.
- Leverage cultural ties and garner support from Pashtun tribal leaders, settled Pashtuns, and individuals affiliated with the Awami National Party (ANP) to engage in negotiations with the IEA.
- Cooperate with IEA to ensure safe return of Afghan refugees being repatriated under IFRP and well-being of ones residing in Pakistan.

Afghanistan's role:
- Facilitate collaboration with Pakistan to manage the border effectively, ensuring only legal and documented individuals travel.
- Collaborate with Pakistan to control TTP operations in Pakistan.
- Prioritise continuity of trade with Pakistan despite political challenges.
- Manage internal security and ensure that Afghanistan does not become a hotbed for terrorism.

A Roadmap for Improved Regional Connectivity

- Some level of alignment amongst all stakeholders - even actors perceived as adversarial to the West, such as China, Russia, and Iran - should be pursued for broader regional stability. Messaging to Afghanistan on essential points of actions should be unified and consistent, emphasizing: its status as a landlocked country with strategic geopolitical potential, and peace in the country and region.
- Incremental progress in road connectivity and border crossing mechanisms amongst the CARs should be prioritized as they could serve as pressure points for the IEA to cooperate.
- Positive interdependence between countries should be promoted with a focus on connectivity projects such as the Trans-Afghan railway, TAPI, CASA-1000, and TUTAP500.
- Existing frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Moscow Format, Heart of Asia, the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan, and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation CAREC should be utilized to ensure effective regional cooperation.
- The potential of digital connectivity in informing the perceptions of the general Afghan population through various media channels should be availed. For example, launching targeted digital campaigns on social media platforms to share accurate information, counter misinformation, and promote positive narratives.