



Taliban militants in front of where the Shahrnama Buddha statue once stood before being destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001 in the central Bamiyan Province. Sahel Arman / AFP

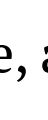

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

# A Case for Recognizing Taliban-Led Afghanistan

Afghanistan's complex web of diplomatic relationships under Taliban rule have significant implications for international norms and regional stability.

 Wilder Davenport

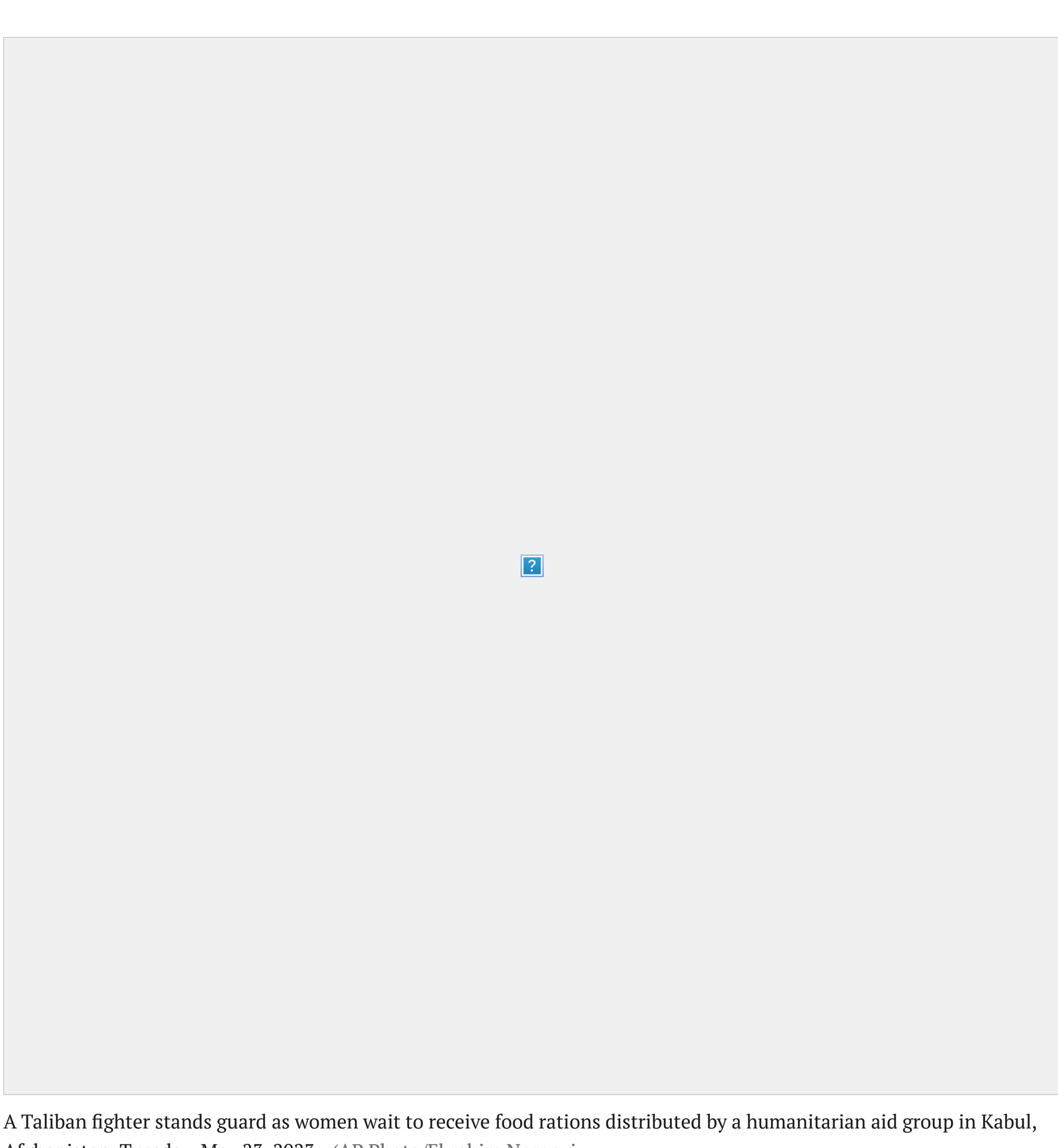
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While the U.S. has largely disengaged from Afghanistan, neighboring countries do not have the luxury of severing ties with the Taliban. These nations, out of necessity, maintain relations with Kabul, even as they protest the Taliban's alleged harboring of terrorist groups. As Aaron Y. Zelin noted for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, since 2021, the Taliban has had over 1300 meetings with at least 80 countries, honing the diplomatic skills it showed off in the Doha deal. Earlier in September, the Taliban reopened its embassy in Oman after scoring the acceptance of their ambassadors to the United Arab Emirates and China. Seventeen countries currently maintain diplomatic missions in Kabul, though the strength and purpose of these relationships vary significantly.



A Taliban fighter stands guard as women wait to receive food rations distributed by a humanitarian aid group in Kabul, Afghanistan, Tuesday, May 23, 2023 (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi)

## Diplomatic Struggles Over Resources

Despite regional concerns over violence, the Taliban are succeeding as diplomats, especially with regional actors. On September 27th, Iran's foreign minister met with his Russian, Chinese, and Pakistani counterparts in New York to address the growing threat of terrorist groups based in Afghanistan. The foreign minister warned that organizations like ISIS-K and Al Qaeda continue to destabilize the region.

Diplomatic relationships with Afghanistan help its neighbors manage water rights, a contentious issue. One of the most controversial infrastructure projects undertaken by the Taliban is the Qosh Tepa Canal, which diverts water from the Amu Darya River to enhance Afghanistan's water security and irrigation capabilities. This diversion has immediate consequences for Tajikistan, which lies directly downstream, but other Central Asian nations also feel the impact, many of them already facing water shortages.

Countries like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which maintain bilateral diplomatic relations with Kabul, face an anticipated 15% reduction in their water supply once the canal is fully operational. Despite these grievances, Afghanistan's neighbors cannot afford to ignore the Taliban—they must engage with the Afghan government to preserve their stake in critical water agreements. As The Hill recently noted, including Kabul in the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia would benefit both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan by ensuring dialogue over the region's water supply.

Tajikistan, despite being one of the most affected countries, does not have a diplomatic mission in Kabul. This absence is motivated not only by water disputes but also by security concerns, including the presence of the Jamaat-Ansarullah, a Tajik Islamist militant group allegedly operating from Afghanistan's Badakhshan province.

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## Disputes with Iran and Pakistan

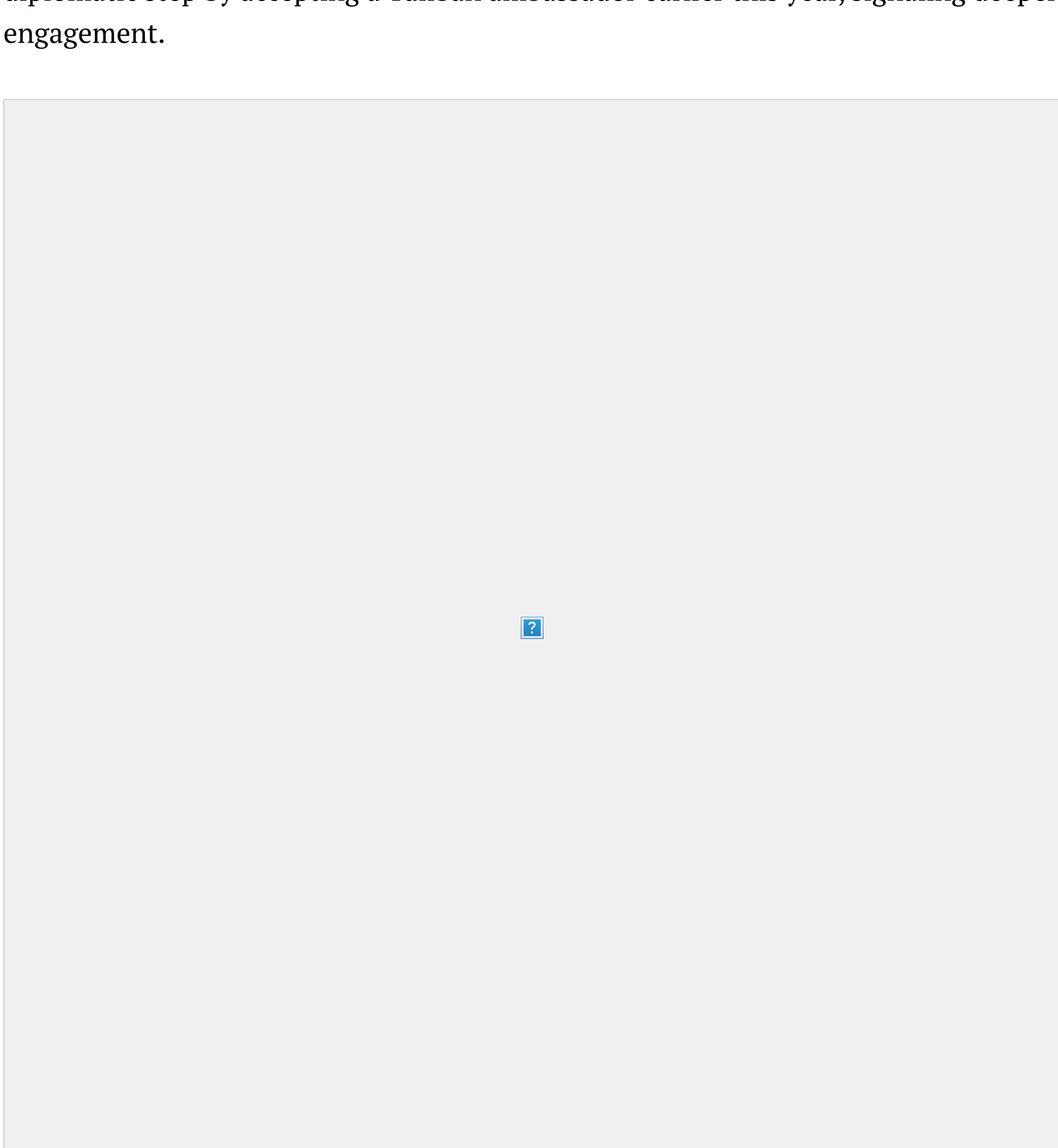
Afghanistan's water disputes extend beyond Central Asia. Both Iran and Pakistan have long-standing grievances regarding water resources shared with Afghanistan. Afghanistan is under no formal obligation to follow international water allocation rules regarding the Helmand River, which flows into Iran. This has strained relations between the two countries. Similarly, Pakistan disputes several hydroelectric projects on the Kunar River, which could reduce its own water supply.

These disputes are compounded by the large numbers of Afghan migrants residing in Iran and Pakistan. Years of conflict have driven millions of Afghans across the border, and both countries are now carrying out deportation campaigns in response to rising anti-migrant sentiments. Ethnic border clashes also contribute to tensions, making the management of diplomatic ties more complex. Both Iran and Pakistan recognize the necessity of engaging with the Taliban, not just for water rights but also for managing border security and migrant flows. For its part, the Taliban seeks improved relations to ensure the safe return of its citizens abroad.

## Strategic Diplomacy from Russia and China

While Afghanistan's neighbors manage diplomatic relations out of necessity, far-away powers like Russia and China also maintain embassies in Kabul for strategic purposes. Both nations have kept their embassies open and frequently engage with Taliban leadership, driven by security and economic interests. Russia is deeply concerned about regional stability and the potential for extremist groups to use Afghanistan as a base for operations in Central Asia, threatening Russian allies in the region. Thus, Moscow seeks to maintain an open channel of communication with the Taliban to prevent terrorism from spreading into its sphere of influence.

China's interests in Afghanistan are largely tied to economic investment through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese companies dominate Afghanistan's mining sector and have invested heavily in Afghan infrastructure projects. Additionally, Beijing is concerned about Uyghur militants possibly finding sanctuary in Afghanistan, which adds a security dimension to its engagement with the Taliban. Despite not officially recognizing the Taliban government, China took a significant diplomatic step by accepting a Taliban ambassador earlier this year, signaling deeper engagement.



The iconic Taliban flag is painted on a wall outside the American embassy compound in Kabul, Afghanistan, Sept. 11, 2021 VOA News

## The Challenges for Taliban Diplomacy

This list of countries with diplomatic missions in Afghanistan is not exhaustive. Countries like Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan have recently voiced their interest in integrating Afghanistan into regional discussions at the United Nations. Qatar remains diplomatically involved in Afghanistan, a fact which the US can leverage to their advantage (Qatar has spoken for the US before).

However, one of the reasons many countries hesitate to formally recognize the Taliban-led government is the existence of Afghan diplomatic missions that remain loyal to the previous regime, especially in Europe. For instance, the Afghan embassy in London closed on September 27th after the Taliban dismissed diplomats loyal to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The closure of these embassies might be a pragmatic move for the Taliban, but it still complicates their efforts to establish broader diplomatic ties.

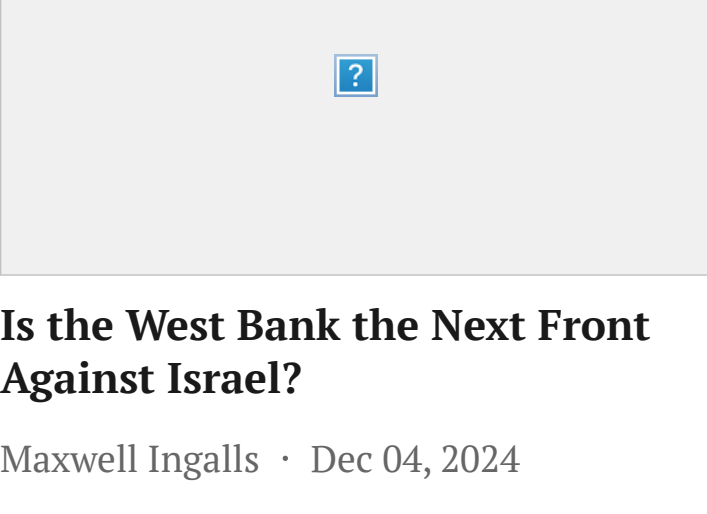
Another challenge the Taliban faces comes from domestic opposition. Resistance groups like the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF), which claimed victory over Taliban forces earlier this year, continue to fight for control in certain regions. The Taliban has resorted to relying on local warlords to maintain security in rural provinces. Many countries assert that Afghanistan remains a safe haven for militant groups, with some even accusing the Taliban of deliberately supporting these organizations. The question is: will the Taliban ever be able to secure its own nation?


Countries with the ability to recognize the Taliban may ultimately find it beneficial to do so. Engaging diplomatically with the Taliban could pressure the regime to adhere to international norms, especially if recognition is tied to specific conditions related to human rights, terrorism, and governance. This approach assumes that the Taliban can act as a rational actor on the global stage, an assumption many are reluctant to make. However, one thing remains clear: the international community cannot expect the Taliban to follow global norms while isolating them from the diplomatic process.

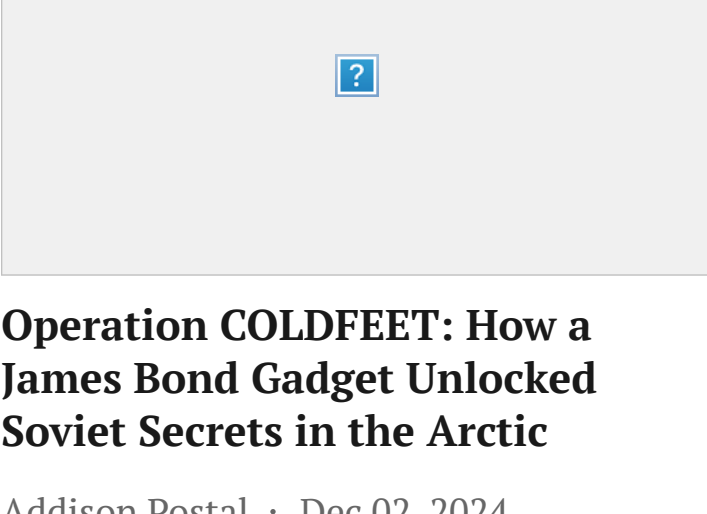
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