

## Focus 74 – **Post-Taliban Takeover: What is at Stake for India in Afghanistan?**

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### Abstract

India and Afghanistan share a long history of cultural and social linkages. Post-independence relations between India and Afghanistan were complicated by various power dynamics in the region. After 2001 India managed to have an amicable relationship with the Afghan government. However, after the Taliban took over, the future of India in Afghanistan has become uncertain. This article aims to discuss the implications for India of the newly emerging geopolitical scenario in Afghanistan.

### Keywords

India, Afghanistan, Taliban Takeover, Geopolitics, Regional Politics.

## Introduction

There is a long history of cultural and social links between India and Afghanistan. After 2001, New Delhi has pursued a multifaceted involvement in Afghanistan. From the Indian perspective, Pakistan, which incorrectly perceives any sort of Indian participation in Afghanistan as a danger to its own statehood, is the most crucial element in the Afghan imbroglio. We can perceive two eras in post-Cold War ties between India and Afghanistan. The first lasted from 1991 until the Taliban administration was overthrown in 2001. In this era of civil conflict, Islamic extremism and jihadist terrorism, India maintained difficult ties with Afghanistan. India's influence fluctuated, with that by the Najibullah government diminishing and that by the Burhunuddin Rabbani momentarily growing in the 1992-96 period. However, in 1996, New Delhi's influence in Afghanistan was overtaken by Islamabad as the Taliban administration sponsored by Pakistan came to power. Phase two started with the Taliban regime's overthrow in 2001. In this period, India has re-established bilateral links with Afghanistan and regained influence. As the largest regional power, India invested in Afghanistan institution-building. The economic help supplied by New Delhi since 2001 stands at \$3 billion (Kuchay, 2021).

The Pakistani factor remains the central conductor in India's post-independence engagement with Afghanistan. Pakistan has been a major component in Indo-Afghan relations, as it remains the most important external player in Afghan political affairs. India's long-standing alliance with Afghanistan, based on long-standing historical and cultural ties, is particularly sensitive to Pakistan. Despite numerous friendliness and fraternity proclamations between the Pakistani army and post-Taliban Kabul, Islamabad never completely collaborated with the Hamid Karzai administration (Kaura, 2017).

Now, after Afghanistan's full takeover by the Taliban, India faces a dilemma regarding which approach to adopt when dealing with the emerging geopolitics of Afghanistan. As the Taliban seized control, India's presence in Afghanistan was virtually erased: consulates and embassies were closed, ambassadors were evacuated. While analysing the Taliban takeover's implications for New Delhi, a few subtleties need to be addressed.

## SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

In 1999, less than two years before the US invasion of Afghanistan, Taliban-backed terrorists hijacked an Indian Airlines flight on its way from Kathmandu to New Delhi. The release of three militants imprisoned in India was then negotiated (The Financial Express, 2021). In recent months, after the US withdrew and left the region to face all consequences, Indian intelligence officials have anew recognized the Taliban as a fresh danger. Among the reasons cited for this renewed perception we find the group's cooperation with Pakistan-based organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-i-Mohammed, both of which have been connected to violence in the Indian-controlled region of Jammu and Kashmir. Meanwhile, in Pakistan, pro-Taliban sentiments are on the rise (Sharma, 2021). At least six Pakistani terrorist organizations have joined the Taliban's battle in Afghanistan. Two suspected terrorists, reportedly affiliated to Al-Qaeda and with handlers in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, were recently captured in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh (The New Indian Express, 2021). Kashmiri youngsters are extremely susceptible to radicalization. In addition, three Indian corps-level groups which occupy the land along the "LOC" (not including the deployments along the International border) have already engaged in hostilities with the Pakistani Army (PA).

According to Sanjaya Baru (2021), an analyst and senior media assistant to former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh writing in the Deccan Chronicle, Biden had "dealt a blow to the Indian national security." He predicted that India-US relations would deteriorate, "once again exposing India to the increased threats of Islamist terrorism."

## STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

While analysing the strategic perspective of India's interests in Afghanistan there are three major dynamics to take into account. First, Afghanistan is very crucial for India in its relations with Pakistan. The Taliban may not have been marching through the streets of Kabul right now if it weren't for Pakistan's sanctuaries and general assistance (Lieven, 2021). On the other hand, the Taliban triumph has significantly diminished the Afghan alliance with India – and Afghan support for internal Pakistani insurrections. Apart from the fact that the Pakistani Army has demonstrated in recent years (after some delay) that it can successfully crush any

rebellion, India is bitterly hostile to the Taliban and is unlikely to be able to ally with them. If the Taliban support Islamist rebellions against Pakistan, Islamabad can simply cut off Afghanistan's trade routes to the sea. Thus, Pakistan now has far more leverage over Afghanistan than India used to have. Having said that, the so-called proxy game between India and Pakistan in Afghani territory now became more complicated.

Second, the future of some of India's strategic connectivity projects is now in jeopardy due to the Taliban takeover. Because India and Kabul have no shared boundaries — while arch-rivals Pakistan and China do — New Delhi is forced to view Tehran as its gateway to Afghanistan. Indeed, India has long collaborated with Iran so as to establish a trade route between the Iranian port of Chabahar and Afghanistan (Siddiqui, 2021). Indians, however, were delayed in their endeavour. Other nations are already conjuring up alternate connectivity pathways that render Chabahar obsolete. Much of the responsibility for the Chabahar project's sluggish progress should be placed in India and its overly cautious approach. After the US placed sanctions on Iran, Delhi feared antagonizing the US government.

Thirdly, India's strategic position in Afghanistan is now challenged by China's wiliness. China has already signalled its willingness to get involved with the Taliban — while India's dilemmas led it to consult with international partners when forming their strategies regarding the issue. India is also in contentious with China in the Askia Chin region since 2020 — where around 200,000 Indian forces are presently engaged (Anbarasan, 2021). Thus, China's involvement in Afghanistan will have various implications for India. For an alliance between China, Pakistan, and the Taliban may pose an overwhelming national security threat. Moreover, if China is successful in integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), thereby fully exploiting its natural riches (estimated to be worth \$1 trillion), India's regional leverage would further deteriorate. India has been opposing the BRI especially because of the CPEC, which crosses disputed territory between India and Pakistan.

## **ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA**

Despite Pakistan's refusal to provide an overland connection between the two countries, India-Afghanistan commerce has much increased since the development

of an air freight corridor in 2017. Afghan government officials claimed during a recent meeting with Indian exporters in Mumbai that bilateral trade surpassed \$1.3 billion in 2019-20 (Subramanian, 2021). The trade balance is significantly skewed: India exports are valued at around \$900 million, while Afghanistan exports to India are worth roughly \$500 million.

India also constructed in Afghanistan critical infrastructures such as highways, dams, power transmission lines and substations, schools, hospitals, and so on. The value of India's development aid has risen to well over \$3 billion (Kuchay, 2021). And, unlike other places where India's infrastructure projects have stalled or been entangled in the host country's politics, concrete action has delivered in Afghanistan. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar remarked during the Afghanistan Conference in Geneva in November 2020 that "no area of Afghanistan today is unaffected by the 400-plus initiatives that India has undertaken in all 34 of Afghanistan's provinces." The fate of these projects is currently unknown.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Military withdrawn by the United States and its allies was completed on 31 August, 2021. The Taliban now fully control Afghanistan and have already formed an interim government on 7 September, 2021. The new Taliban government is run under appointed Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund (acting Prime Minister) as the head of the new caretaker government in Afghanistan (Deutsche Welle News, 2021). The list of cabinet members has also been announced – unsurprisingly, without any women representation (Fox, 2021). The interior ministry was given to the representative of the Haqqani Network, which is a very controversial move because this group is on the list of terrorist organizations (Findley, 2021). The Islamic Emirate has appointed 33 members for the new Islamic government (Al Jazeera, 2021). Reports are also emerging that after the several days of fighting, the Taliban now also controls the last remaining provincial capital, Panjshir. Meanwhile, the evacuation is still ongoing, and women of Afghanistan are protesting for their rights. (Al Jazeera, 2021; Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

On September 08, 2021, China has announced 200 million yuan (the U.S. \$30.96 million) to Afghanistan on an urgent basis. the support includes the worth of grains, winter supplies, vaccines and medicines (India Today 2021). China claims that the

humanitarian support is given on a concrete-need basis. China has thus become the first country to officially provide aid under the caretaker government. A first meeting between Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Mutaqi was held via video conferencing. Wang stated that China maintains its support to the Afghan people and emergency aid supplies under the China-South Asian Countries Emergency Supplies Reserve (China South-Asian Emergency Supplies Reserve; China Global Television Network, 2021).

In this meeting, a Joint Statement by Foreign Ministers was provided via a video link by Afghanistan's neighbouring countries – Pakistan, China, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The joint statement “expressed support for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Afghanistan, and non-interference in its internal affairs, and noted that the future of Afghanistan should be determined by its people, in accordance with the provisions of the UN Charter”. They all committed to “recognize changes undergone and work together to address common challenges strengthening cooperation and friendly relations in the neighbourhood, and promoting peace, security, stability, regional connectivity, people-to-people linkages, economic integration, trade and investment for the benefit of the whole region”(Xinhua, 2021).

Considering all the new developments in the region – and as Pakistan, China, Iran and Turkey are all actively participating in the emerging scenario – India is lagging behind as concerns dealing with Taliban. China and Pakistan have both shown their strategic interests in Afghanistan and have already presented themselves as strong contenders in the region's ‘new great game’. A recent press conference by the Taliban showed their interest to join China's ambitious project, the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) (Aamir, 2021). The inclusion of Afghanistan can provide an easy connection towards Central Asia and the Western Xinjiang region. such developments naturally worry India, as its strategic rivals all seem eager to become closer to the Taliban. However, Professor Zhang Li, from South Asian Studies at the Sichuan University, states that “While Pakistan might be thinking of leveraging on Afghanistan against India, this is not necessarily the case for China” (Miglani et al., 2021).

Likewise, the Taliban takeover also included taking over the Salma Dam, which was reconstructed with India's assistance. There is another Shahtoot Dam under construction, also supported by India. Taliban fighters have also seized a Mi-25 helicopter gifted by New Delhi to the Afghan National Army – as well as many more provided during the period 2001-2021. This means that whatever assistance and support provided to Afghanistan is now under Taliban control (Iwanek, 2021). Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar translated India's investments as a "historical relationship with the Afghan people". He then mentioned that "I think that relationship with the Afghan people obviously continues and that will guide our approach to Afghanistan in the coming days. At this time, as I said, these are early days. Our focus right now is on ensuring the safety and security of Indian nationals who are there"(Roche, 2021). Initially, Jaishankar mentioned that India is observing Afghanistan's developments. India's Defence Minister, Mr Rajnath Singh, stated regarding the Taliban takeover that "the situation in Afghanistan emerged as challenges for India". In his words: "The changing equation in Afghanistan is a challenge for us. These situations have forced our country to rethink its strategy. We are changing our strategy and the formation of QUAD underlines this strategy"(Srivatsan, 2021).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

India has several options. Most importantly, India needs an official position regarding the Taliban. India faces a dilemma. It must consult with both the USA and Russia so as to develop and re-establish relations with the newly acquired power by the Taliban. Due to its dependency on its western partner's perspectives, India is still following a wait-and-watch strategy. There is an urgent need to redefine foreign policy goals towards the new Afghanistan. First, it needs to consider the possibility of discreetly forging ties with the Taliban. As it is very early for so-called western powers to initiate their own policies, India must assess its own priorities in Afghanistan. Second, India needs to convince both the Taliban and tribal bodies (jirgas) to perpetuate the technical and economic achievements of India's assistance to Afghanistan. Third, New Delhi must retain goodwill, soft-power capital through scholarships and trainings – India has been involved in training many students, technocrats, and government officials. Fourth, India must safeguard the interests of traditional allies — Tajiks, Uzbeks, Ismailis and Hazaras.

India's experience with diversity and respect towards minorities, joined by this extended support, would certainly be exemplary. Fifth, it is the right time to increase bilateral communications with Pakistan as well. It is time for India to get involved with all parties and draw a new dialogue as well as a new approach regarding the changing South Asian geopolitical scenario. For China already discussed 'reconciliation and reconstruction' of Afghanistan with the Taliban representative in Tianjin in late July – and they started to fulfil those commitments with the recent Joint Meeting of Afghanistan's neighbourhood countries (Goulard, 2021). India needs to face these realities most immediately – with a truly realpolitik ambition.



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