

CSS | ISSUE BRIEF

THE AFGHANISTAN CRISIS

India's Strategic Hedging

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The escalation of the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan has shocked many across the world. In the field of International Relations, it has prompted many nations to recalibrate their foreign policy towards Afghanistan; one that accounts for the Taliban's consolidation of power. India has long withheld the position of an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled” process for enduring peace and reconciliation, but the current conditions seek for a renewed bilateral framework within which Indo-Afghan relations could prevail. The hasty U.S. abandonment of Afghanistan post two decades of direct intervention has shifted the weight of responsibility disproportionately over Asian and West-Asian states, from which India is expected to be heavily impacted. The threat of Afghanistan becoming a failed state or a breeding ground for terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda puts the region's security at risk. India, which has contributed vastly on the economic front under the U.S. security umbrella, would now not only require to secure its assets in Afghanistan but also address the very pressing security threat Pakistan-Taliban collusion poses. In the past, India has held a strong anti-Taliban stance because it believed it to be Pakistan's instrument of conducting proxy-wars against India. Although in recent years, due to the political limelight Taliban has been in, India's stance vis-à-vis Taliban has softened and back-channel communication with the group has been initiated. But a politically empowered Taliban does threaten Indian security on various fronts, such as insurgency in Kashmir, targeted attacks from an emboldened Pakistan, and risk to India's Western Asia energy calculus.

This article provides an overview of the current conflict from India's lens as well as elaborates upon past India-Taliban relations. Following which it discusses the security threats India faces and presents relevant policy options it could adopt to tackle the same. In doing so it provides pertinent arguments to address the question of - whether India should deploy Peace Keeping Forces in Afghanistan or not. Lastly, it discusses the possibility of a renewed Northern Alliance given upgraded India-Iran cooperation over Afghanistan.

US ABANDONMENT: FROM INDIA'S EYES

India has contributed vastly on economic, political, militaristic, and social fronts to Afghanistan since the 1950s when both countries signed the Friendship Treaty. Over the years India has increased its investments, expanded the reach of its social projects, opened various economic channels for Afghanistan as well as trained and equipped Afghani military personnel.

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Evidently, India has established its role in Afghanistan as that of an aid provider and thus limited itself to the exertion of its soft power under the security umbrella provided by the U.S. India's role was instrumental in pushing for Afghanistan's membership of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Moreover, as a demonstration of India's motivations, at the 2012 Kabul "Heart of Asia" conference, India offered to lead two confidence-building measures, intended to support Afghanistan and integrate it into the regional economy. This included linking chambers of commerce and recognizing that trade and investment were about private entrepreneurs taking the initiative².

Afghanistan's land-locked geography posed a limitation as it denied key access to other regions beyond its border states. This made it dependent on Pakistan's Karachi port for access to the sea and land routes via the vast borders that they share. For India it was initially a challenge as transporting basic supplies, and/or equipment and manpower for reconstruction projects were made difficult. Thus in 2016, India signed a historic three-nation deal with Iran and Afghanistan to develop the Chabahar port and built a transport-and-trade corridor through Afghanistan that could substantially reduce the time and cost of (Afghanistan) doing business with Europe³. Furthermore, it funded the construction work of a 135-mile road connecting Afghanistan's Nimroz province with the Iranian port of Chabahar. The highway created North-South transport corridors linking the Indian sub-continent and land-locked Central Asia and enabled Afghanistan to access the Arabian Sea through Iran, raising its potential to stimulate more investment from trade with outside powers like India⁴. This project ended Pakistan's monopoly over seaborne transit trade to Afghanistan and opened various trade opportunities for the latter. India also helped in the construction of the Salma Dam power project in the Herat region which brings electricity supplies from Uzbekistan into Afghanistan.

Furthermore, India's social projects in many Afghani provinces have high approval rates amongst Afghans since they are personalized and curated projects that address the needs of the Afghani people. This is in stark contrast to the Western developmental aid that failed to bring about much measurable change in Afghan society. Much of the money, as one New York Times assessment found, was wasted on programs that were poorly conceived or riddled with corruption. American dollars went to build hospitals that treated no patients, to schools that taught no students (and some- times never existed at all) and to military bases the Afghans found useless and later shuttered⁵. But the U.S. executed its crucial responsibility as that of a

² Vinay Kaura, "India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1/2 (2017): pp. 29-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26465815>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sarah Almukhtar and Rod Nordland, "What Did the U.S. Get for \$2 Trillion in Afghanistan?" *The New York Times*, December 09, 2019, [PAGE], accessed September 02, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/09/world/middleeast/afghanistan-war-cost.html>

security provider in the country. Thus, in the past, U.S.-India efforts in Afghanistan complimented each other as one was the provider of hard power, that is security, while the other executed its soft power in sectors such as education, social programs, health and infrastructure, etc. In a way, the co-existence of the two provided the best possible outcome for the Afghani society. The current crisis tilts the balance of shared responsibility overwhelmingly towards India which invested heavily in the region under the security umbrella that the U.S. provided. The hasty withdrawal without a sustainable framework in place and consultation and communication with major stakeholders in the region has a pronounced impact on India. Especially since India has long been left out of key decision-making processes regarding Taliban where Pakistan has had a central role; The Troika Plus Grouping - Russia, U.S., China, Pakistan - being a recent example of which. Pakistan has taken this opportunity to achieve its geopolitical objectives. And Afghanistan has become a playground for major powers like the U.S. to achieve domestic goals and China and Russia to chase shallow self-interests. Thus, under present circumstances, India is left to strategically manoeuvre its way around broader geopolitics to safeguard its security.

INDIA-TALIBAN RELATIONS

India's initial interaction with the Taliban dates back to the 1990s with the rise of the Taliban and consequent removal of the Rabbani government that led to diplomatic isolation from Afghanistan. This phase was problematic for Indo-Afghan relations primarily due to Pakistan's adoption of a "deep strategic" policy towards Afghanistan. During this period Pakistan conducted military activities as well as shared intelligence with the Taliban. Thus Islamabad's relations with Afghanistan overshadowed that of New Delhi's; posing a direct threat to India's security. Instances of targeted attacks by the Taliban with the aid of Pakistan's ISI against Indian personnel in Afghanistan grew. To counter Pakistan's growing influence in Afghanistan, India established links with the Northern Alliances. India strengthened the defence of the Northern Alliance by providing high-altitude warfare equipment worth \$10 million through its Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) and Indian defence advisers provided technical advice to the Northern Alliance⁶. India, from the very beginning, has been on the opposite side of history vis-à-vis the Taliban. India's anti-Taliban stance was a bi-partisan position within the Indian political classes as well. It also garnered support from Indian nationals particularly after the horrific incident of 1999 when Indian Airlines flight 814 was hijacked and landed in Kandahar, behind which Taliban and Pakistan's ISI were suspected.

Thus the United States' campaign of War Against Terrorism and the subsequent "Operation Enduring Freedom" in 2001 was seen to be a blessing in disguise for India that doubled its

⁶ Praveen Swami, The terror trajectory, *Frontline*, Vol. 18, Issue 21, 13-26, October 2001.

Fahmida Ashraf, "India-Afghanistan Relations: Post 9/11," *Strategic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): pp. 90-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242397>.

efforts to combat Taliban. India cooperated entirely with the U.S. by providing air facilities and intelligence for it to carry out its operation. With the toppling of the Taliban, India re-established diplomatic links with Afghanistan and even re-doubled its efforts to provide Afghanistan with the necessary aid for its rebuilding and construction endeavour. It got involved in various training programmes, humanitarian, health, rural, as well as infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan⁷. While India maintained its hardliner anti-Taliban stance and developed warm relations with the Karzai government. Contrastingly, Pakistan did not acknowledge the Karzai government but sheltered and trained the Taliban. This was done to counter the possible Indo-Afghan nexus once the U.S. exited Afghanistan⁸. The attacks on Indian nationals thus never subsided and continued to threaten Indian security. In 2010 during the London Conference, India dismissed the idea of there being a “good” and “bad” Taliban and re-iterated its viewpoint of Taliban being an instrument of Pakistan’s ISI used to conduct proxy wars against India and thus there being no “good Taliban”.

INDIA’S POLICY OPTIONS

In recent years India’s stance towards the Taliban has become somewhat moderate due to the political importance the latter has been given by the international community, particularly the U.S. But the current status of relations with the Taliban cannot be expected to suffice for future interactions and negotiations; especially because of the strong Taliban-Pakistan nexus. Their previously colluded efforts targeting Indian security reflect the extreme likelihood of Pakistan continuing to have prominent influence over Taliban-India relations. This could lead to diplomatic isolation between the two countries, in turn hurting Indian assets and investments in the region. The Taliban-led, Pak-influenced Afghanistan will also pose a risk to India’s Northern borders which are already marred by uncertainty and hostility from its neighbours - China and Pakistan. Moreover, a greater concern for India remains the insurgency within Kashmir that could be encouraged by the Taliban’s ascent to power. Kashmir-focused armed groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) could use Afghanistan as a staging ground to launch attacks on Kashmir, with Pakistan’s backing. On a broader level, a prominent threat remains that of the rise in transnational terrorism. Terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and Islamic State- Khorasan (ISIS-K), although rival to the Taliban, will be emboldened under the present murky state of Afghanistan to further their agenda of establishing a ‘pure’ Islamist rule. Since these groups have no allegiance to a particular state, controlling their rise once they have established a breeding ground will be a challenge for all regional states as well as for the West. For India, this would not only be a security threat but also pose a risk to its energy security calculus for which it is heavily dependent on West Asia; thus adding to India’s insecurity in the region as well as contributing

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Vinay Kaura, “India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era,” *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1/2 (2017): pp. 29-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26465815>.

to the region's overall volatility.

Deploying Indian Forces

Some military analysts thus view India's deployment of peacekeeping forces in Afghanistan as a viable option to secure Indian interests. Although two major factors are in play behind India's reluctance to make this move. First, India continues to carry with it the historical baggage of the failure of the Indian Peace Keeping Mission in Sri Lanka which resulted in the loss of lives of numerous Indian soldiers. India paid a huge price for its ill-fated militaristic involvement in Sri Lanka not only in terms of the political fallout, the IPKF casualties, as well as the deterioration of international relations but also by losing its then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in an assassination by an LTTE* member. Thus, the failure of IPKF continues to overshadow India's foreign policy vis-à-vis counter-insurgency techniques and military intervention doctrine. Second, India does not yet possess the high-level equipment required to operate in hostile and unknown terrains, its surveillance assets are limited, and the independent intelligence capacity is almost non-existent⁹. Furthermore, as Vivek Chadha a former army officer now working at the Institute for Defence and Strategic Analysis in New Delhi argues:

"Experience also teaches us (India) that missions like these (militaristic intervention) tend to snowball. We'll send troops; they'll be attacked by Pakistan's proxies, and we'll have to send more troops to protect them."¹⁰

There exist various unknown variables in the deployment of Indian troops on Afghan soil, such as - the strength of the deployed troops, period of deployment, necessary equipment and warfare supplies, support from regional partners. Currently, there isn't a proper framework within which India could send its troops.

Offensive and Defensive Strategies

India has often strategically deployed a non-aligned policy to manoeuvre around conflicts in the international arena to maximize its interests. The Afghan conflict is expected to be another example wherein India instead of hastily picking sides, assesses the degree of threat and accordingly deploys offensive and/or defensive strategies. While direct militaristic intervention in Afghanistan remains highly unlikely as stated before, but India could activate its Farkhor Base in Tajikistan which was established for the very purpose of gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan and the region. At the outset of transnational terrorist groups gaining footing in

⁹Praveen Swami, "Afghanistan's Request for Indian Troops - It's an Insane Idea, Which New Delhi Must Take Seriously." Afghanistan'S Request For Indian Troops - It'S An Insane Idea, Which New Delhi Must Take Seriously. Accessed September 04, 2021. <https://www.cnbctv18.com/views/afghanistans-request-for-indian-troops-its-an-insane-idea-which-new-delhi-must-take-seriously-5127611.htm>.

¹⁰Ibid.

* LTTE - Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam - a militant separatist group fighting for an independent homeland for Hindu Tamils in Northeastern Sri Lanka

the region, the Farkhor Base will act not only as a security net to preserve India's energy interests in West Asia but also as a base to deploy offensive attacks in case Indian security is breached. On the defensive front - that is tackling the threat from within borders - India has greater control and vaster foothold. India could shift its focus on strengthening its internal security on two levels - (1) ensuring security within Kashmir vis-à-vis insurgency groups, (2) securing the Pak-Kashmir border from potential external attacks. This dual-level security model would ease instability threats within Indian territory as an impact of the Afghan crisis. The current government's hardline stance on counterinsurgency and terrorism - commissioning of surgical strikes against Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM) and counter-attacks on Pakistan - is reflective of India's revamped zero-tolerance policy towards infringement of its national security.

Diplomacy

Finally, deploying diplomacy as a tool to secure its interest remains a sustainable policy option for India. While engaging with the Taliban diplomatically is a customary course of action but the strengthening of bilateral ties with Iran for cooperation over Afghanistan would be of added value to India. Since both the countries have been, in the past, excluded from crucial engagements concerning the Taliban, but continue to be major stakeholders in the region, their partnership in the present context presents as a fruitful opportunity. The paradoxical relationship Iran and the Taliban had in the past was governed by a strong anti-U.S. sentiment that both shared. But with the common enemy out of the picture Iran is unlikely to continue its past diplomatic stance vis-à-vis the Taliban especially because of the latter's anti-Shiite ideology. Moreover, possible Sunni persecution of the Hazaras minorities in Afghanistan is likely to worsen Iran-Taliban relations. Iran would not hesitate to intervene if required and knows that it could safely exert military pressure on the western provinces of Herat, Nimroz, and Farah if the Taliban were to return to its old sectarian methods¹¹. This could accelerate India-Iran relations both of which recognize that their national interests are better served with a politically stable and secure Afghanistan. On the economic front, if the Taliban do assume lasting political power, a tripartite platform for Iran-India-Afghanistan engagement could be a constructive step towards ensuring peace and security as well as promoting Indian and Iranian interests in the region. Furthermore, trilateral trade and transit agreements would not only facilitate the movement of goods through the Iran-Afghanistan land route but also make Pakistan's efforts to restrict the movement of Indian goods through Pakistani territory to Afghanistan, irrelevant¹². Although establishing diplomatic ties with the Taliban at a bilateral level would require increased efforts by India but the involvement of Iran in the equation would increase inter-dependency and thus act as a safety net. Lastly, their cooperation would also

¹¹Tim Willasey-Wilsey, "Afghanistan: Limited Options for Regional Powers." Gateway House. August 26, 2021. Accessed September 04, 2021. <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/afghanistan-limited-options-for-regional-powers/>.

¹² Rajeev Agarwal, "Post Afghanistan 2014: Options for India and Iran," *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 2014, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep09145>.

prove to be constructive in the concurrent scenario and the likelihood of revival of the Northern Alliance.

NORTHERN ALLIANCE 2.0

While countries like China and Pakistan have accepted the fate of Afghanistan as being governed by the Taliban, many within the country remain determined to oust the regime. Due to which a renewed Northern Alliance is speculated to come to place. Currently in the northern Panjshir province, Amrullah Saleh who has assumed the position of the legitimate care-taker President of Afghanistan, is believed to be leading a coalition of anti-Taliban groups. Panjshir has long been the base of the anti-Taliban resistance, home to Ahmad Shah Massoud, the “Lion of Panjshir”, who fought a fierce resistance against Taliban expansion after Soviet withdrawal in 1979. Panjshir, to date, remains the only Afghan province that has not fallen into Taliban hands. Now his son Ahmad Massoud along with Saleh and Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, the country’s defence minister, is believed to be rallying the Resistance by reviving the Northern Alliance. India could play an active role in stimulating Northern Alliance 2.0. Not only in providing warfare equipment and intelligence but also by providing patronage to prominent figureheads of non-Pashtun communities, such as - Atta Muhammad Noor, a Tajik, the Uzbek General Dostum and Haji Muhammad Muhaqiq, a leader of the Shia Hazara community. Iran’s contribution would be crucial in providing intelligence and exerting militaristic pressure. For India, an Afghan government with Saleh at the forefront is in its best interests, particularly due to the latter’s recognition of Pakistan giving homage to the Taliban and encouraging its expansion. Whereas Iran would not limit itself from exerting power against a radical Taliban to establish itself as an influential player in the region. Thus, a coalition of the two countries in the context of a renewed Northern Alliance could pan out.

CONCLUSION

While many states have assumed Afghanistan’s fate but conditions on the ground level remain uncertain. There persists a broader resistance against the Taliban’s rule not only domestically but globally, as the risk of expanding terrorism would impact stability worldwide. If violence exacerbates in Afghanistan and spills to the neighbouring region, the likelihood of the West providing back-channel support to the Northern Alliance becomes very high. While overthrowing the Taliban is an ambitious goal but persuading or coercing, if necessary, it to come into a power-sharing structure with the Afghan government should be made central to Indian policymaking. Therefore, in addition to opening lines of communication with the Taliban, India should simultaneously gauge other strategic options at its perusal.

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