

Resurgence of Taliban and Its Consequences to India's Strategic Concerns in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Afghanistan has been a long-standing strategic partner of India in South Asia, but the recent takeover of the country by the Taliban has posed new challenges and uncertainties for India's foreign policy. India has invested heavily in Afghanistan's reconstruction and development, and has supported its democratic aspirations. However, the Taliban's rise to power; threatens India's interests and security, as well as the rights and freedoms of the Afghan people. How should India respond to this changing geopolitical scenario? What are the opportunities and risks for India's engagement with the Taliban? How can India protect its past investments and prevent the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan? This research paper will analyze these questions and explore the implications of the Taliban's resurgence for India's foreign policy. It will argue that India needs to adopt a pragmatic and principled approach that balances its engagement with the Taliban's with its support for the Afghan people and their democratic aspirations. It will also suggest that India should collaborate with other regional and international stakeholders to ensure peace, security and stability in Afghanistan and the region.

Keywords: - India, Afghanistan, Taliban, Relations, Terrorism, Peace, Kashmir

Introduction

In the big turn of events the relations between India and Afghanistan have gone upside down all due to the dramatic resurgence of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. This has happened largely due to the quick and disastrous withdrawal of the US from Afghan soil. Afghanistan has always been an ultra-poor, deeply conservative, mostly Islamic divided on tribal lines, very sparsely populated and very poorly governed landlocked nation lying between the warring great powers of the day. In the 19th century it was the buffer state between the Imperial British empire and Tsarist Russia so 'The Great Game' was played there in the periphery of the Indian subcontinent and then Afghanistan was a victim in the 20th century of the cold war. And from these two events came the two clichés that are 'The Great Game' and "The Graveyard of Empires" (Pant, 2014). The 21st century too have not been kind to the people of Afghanistan as in 2001 the 9/11 terror attacks on US by Al-Qaeda from Afghan soil provided another justification for the big power of the day i.e.US to wage a war on Afghan soil as all the Al-Qaeda networks were traced to the Afghan region. Afghanistan once again became the main battle field of a global war as American power, or the NATO power versus its biggest threat then was the global pan-Islamic network of terrorists headquartered in Afghanistan. The American war in Afghanistan lasted for two full decades. The agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban in Doha on 29th February 2020, led the path for the end of America's longest ever war (Qazi,

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2020). Accordingly, the US troops started pulling out and the last American military personnel left the Afghan soil on 31th August 2021, But the end of decades of war have brought new challenges for the Afghan people as the militants are back in charge 20 years after a US-led invasion forced them out. With the American war in Afghanistan over, the hardened Taliban fighters are back on the streets as now they are responsible for keeping peace, often using captured US equipment left behind by the US forces. Since the US withdrawal there have been several deadly attacks by Pakistan based terror group Islamic state-Khorasan (ISIS-K) as Taliban failed to provide the security and peace which it promised to Afghan people earlier (Sayed, 2021). The Afghan economy has also descended into chaos since the Taliban takeover. Funding by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund is also suspended. Job losses, a cash shortage and soaring food costs have millions now depending on relief aid while some are trying to leave in search of better opportunities abroad.

According to a UN World food programme estimate, more than 22 million people are expected to face acute food insecurity from November 2021. Stable and peaceful Afghanistan is essential to peace in the South-Asian region and especially for India which has already been a victim of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. There is a growing influence of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, which has close ties with the Taliban, especially the Haqqani group which is a part of the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan. During the US led attack on Taliban, most of the Taliban's leaders had sought refuge in Pakistan's territory which shows that the Taliban's reliance on Pakistanis unlikely to change very soon. India has extended aid worth \$3 billion to Afghanistan in the last two decades building Salma Dam, Zaranj-Delaram highway, Parliament building etc. (Price, 2013) and now India faces a situation where it may have no role to play in Afghanistan, which would be a reversal to its efforts in the region.

India's security concerns in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is an important neighboring country of India, which shares historical and cultural ties with India since ancient times (Price, 2013). Afghanistan has been a place of turmoil due to its strategic and regional position in the midst of Central and South Asia. Its location provides a crossroad to connect South and Central Asia. Due to the Afghanistan strategy positions in Asia, it plays a very important role in India's external security and India's connect to Central Asia policy. New Delhi always supported a stable and multi ethnic government in Afghanistan to prevent the spread of terrorism and radicalization in South-Asia and internal part of India territory. In 1979, after the military intervention of the USSR forces in Afghanistan to retain the communist government in Kabul (Mishra, 2014, pp. 51-54). At this time the situation in Afghanistan got bad to worse and war started between the USSR and the regional warlords. The US government considered its part of the Cold War and provided weapons and financial resources to warlords through the Pakistan secret-Agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Mishra, 2014, p. 94). The Inter-Services Intelligence organized the training camps for Taliban militants and provided the new recruits from different parts of the country and the continued war against the USSR army. In February 1989, after the withdrawal of the USSR forces, civil war started in Afghanistan. Taking advantage of this situation Taliban capture the Kabul and become the main actor in Afghanistan affairs. During the first regime of Taliban (1996-2001) Afghanistan faced instability, and lack of poor management. Afghanistan became the main epicenter of global terrorism. After the 9/11 attacks, the US expelled the Taliban from the center of power in Afghanistan, but Taliban continued to expand its terrorist activities Against the US-Led NATO forces and retained a foothold in Afghanistan (Mishra, 2014, pp.104-108). In August 2021 after two-long decades Taliban returned to power and became the main political and military power in Kabul. The

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presence of the Taliban at the center of power, restricted India's interest in Afghanistan. India has been already the worst victim of Pakistan sponsored cross-border terrorism. Pakistan provided the Weapons and financial assistance to the extremist and terrorist group. The terrorist organizations used these assets to spread proxy war inside the India's border area. The presence of fragile states in India's neighborhood such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, which are currently facing political and economic crises, pose a special threat for India's internal security especially in Kashmir. Kashmir has been a major factor of India and Pakistan territorial hostility. Islamabad has always supported terrorist outfits and promoted proxy wars against India's territory and destabilized the Kashmir valley (Mishra, 2014, pp. 220-221). India and Afghanistan share its border through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) which is under control by the Pakistan. Afghanistan produces 90% percent of the world's heroin supply, which can be used to provide financial resources to terrorist organizations against India. At present, the Taliban's pro-Pakistan orientation provides Pakistan special privilege in Indo-Afghan relations, and Islamabad can easily utilize this opportunity to increase the proxy war and promote the drug trafficking against India (Nag, 2022).

Pakistan Taliban Nexus

Pakistan has always supported the Taliban, and relations between Pakistan and Taliban have also been affable. Due to the Pakistan duplicity policies regarding the Afghanistan Taliban survive the last two decades in Afghanistan. On one side Pakistan cooperates with US-led forces in the war against terrorism, on the other hand it provides the protection and resources within its border to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda Militants. After the intervention of US-led forces in Afghanistan, Taliban made Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), the center of their terrorist activities in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region (Zaidi, 2010). This mountain region provided safe Paradise for the militant's groups and his special strategic location provided protection from the American forces operations and they could easily operate militant's activities against western forces in Afghanistan. Taliban and Al-Qaeda are not the only terrorist outfits operating from this region. It mainly consists of Kashmir oriented terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), Harkat-ul-mujahideen (HUM), Harkat-e-jihad-Islami (HUJI), used this area to spread the terrorism and disturb the South and Central Asia security environment (Zaidi, 2010). The inclination of Taliban towards Pakistan is a matter of concern for India which Pakistan can use to spread the proxy war and Narco-Terrorism in Kashmir valley and other parts of Indian territory.

In the past Pakistan used the Taliban to restrict India's interest in Afghanistan. Relations between India and the Taliban have been controversial and the Taliban has not exhibited a friendly approach toward New Delhi. Even now the Haqqani network is an independent and best armed trained faction, which played a dominant role under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. In 2008 Attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul killed 16 Indian workers including an Indian service officer. In 2009 targeting the Indian embassy in Kabul for the second time a car suicide bombing outside the Indian embassy left killing 17 persons and injuring over 80 people (South Asia terrorism portal). This is the biggest terror targeting India interest in abroad. The Haqqani network takes responsibility for all these terrorist attacks on the Indian mission in Afghanistan. At present Pakistan's intelligence agency holds controlling position on the Haqqani network and Islamabad can easily utilize this opportunity to target India's positions in Afghanistan. After the resurgence of Taliban Pakistan became an important player in Afghan affairs and want to neutralize India's interest in Afghanistan. It can be seen as a big threat for India's policy towards Afghanistan in upcoming times.

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India's Policy Towards Recognition of Taliban

The future trends in Indian engagement in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime are uncertain and evolving. India has reportedly opened a channel of communication with some factions of the Taliban, and reopened its diplomatic mission in Kabul. This is a significant change in India's foreign policy, as India had previously supported the democratic government in Kabul and opposed the Taliban as a terrorist group. India's engagement with the Taliban is driven by its strategic interests in Afghanistan, such as protecting its investments, countering Pakistan's influence, and preventing terrorism. However, India's engagement with the Taliban also faces many challenges and risks, such as the Taliban's human rights violations, their ties with other militant groups, their relations with Pakistan and China, and their legitimacy and stability (Aryal & Bharti, 2021). India has a long history of involvement in Afghanistan, dating back to the ancient times when both countries were part of the Indus Valley Civilization. India has also been influenced by the cultural and religious traditions of Afghanistan, such as Buddhism and Sufism.

In modern times, India has been a major donor and partner of Afghanistan, providing humanitarian and development assistance, as well as training and education. India has also supported the Afghan people's aspirations for democracy and peace and has condemned the violence and oppression by the Taliban and other extremist groups (Saxena, 2021). India's engagement with the Taliban is a pragmatic move to adapt to the changing realities in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. New Delhi realizes that it cannot ignore or isolate the Taliban. Indian government, also wants to safeguard its interests and influence in Afghanistan, which are threatened by Pakistan and China, who have closer ties with the Taliban. India hopes to establish a dialogue with the Taliban and persuade them to respect human rights, especially women's rights, further to prevent terrorism, especially against India and its interests, and to form an inclusive government that represents all sections of Afghan society (Amnesty international).

However, India's engagement with the Taliban is not without challenges and risks. The Taliban are not a monolithic or cohesive group, but rather a loose alliance of different factions with different agendas and ideologies. Some of these factions are more moderate and nationalist, while others are more radical and transnational. Some of these factions are also allied with other militant groups that are hostile to India, such as Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). The Taliban also have complex relations with Pakistan and China, who have their own interests and agendas in Afghanistan. Pakistan sees Afghanistan as its strategic backyard and wants to limit India's role there. China sees Afghanistan as a potential partner for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and wants to exploit its natural resources (Sanchez, 2018). The Taliban may not be able or willing to accommodate India's concerns or demands on these issues.

Therefore, India's engagement with the Taliban is a gamble that may or may not pay off. It depends on how the situation in Afghanistan evolves in the coming months and years, and how the Taliban behave in power. It also depends on how India balances its engagement with the Taliban with its support for the Afghan people and their democratic aspirations. India will have to tread carefully and cautiously in this complex scenario (Chaudhuri & Shende, 2020).

India's Trade Policy with Afghanistan under Taliban Regime

India's trade policy under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan may face several challenges and uncertainties, as the Taliban regime may not be conducive for trade and investment, and may have

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complex relations with Pakistan and China, who may seek to limit India's role and influence in Afghanistan (Pant, 2014). India's trade policy may also face security risks, as the Taliban regime may not be able to prevent attacks by other militant groups that are hostile to India. India's trade policy may also face international isolation and sanctions, which may affect its trade relations with other countries. The confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) said "that the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan will impact bilateral trade relations with India, as prices of some commodities imported from Afghanistan may go up in the Indian markets due to uncertainty over bilateral relations and trade, the CAIT also said that import and export shipments have been stranded in the wake of the Taliban takeover, and that huge amounts of payments are likely to be blocked, putting traders in a vulnerable situation" (Paliwal, 2021).

India has closed all its consulates and evacuated 140 of its embassy staff from Kabul, leaving behind only a few officials at its mission. India has not yet announced its stance on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and whether it will recognize it or not (Haidar, 2021). The decision will get tough, especially if Moscow and Beijing decide to acknowledge the Taliban government in some form. The Taliban regime may pose a serious threat to India's security, as it may not be able to prevent attacks by other militant groups that are allied with or inspired by the Taliban, such as al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). These groups have carried out several attacks against Indian interests and citizens in Afghanistan in the past, and may seek to target India again (Patil, 2022)

India's trade policy under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan may also have some opportunities, as India may seek to establish a dialogue with the Taliban and persuade them to respect human rights, especially women's rights, to prevent terrorism, especially against India and its interests, and to form an inclusive government that represents all sections of Afghan society. India's trade policy may also seek to cooperate with other regional and international stakeholders to ensure peace, security and stability in Afghanistan and the region. India has reportedly opened a channel of communication with some factions of the Taliban, and has reopened its diplomatic mission in Kabul. This is a significant change in India's policy, as India had previously supported the democratic government in Kabul and opposed the Taliban as a terrorist group.

India has participated in several regional initiatives and platforms to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for the region. For example, India attended a meeting in New Delhi on 10th November 2021, which hosted senior security officials from Russia, Iran and five Central Asian countries to discuss Afghanistan (Roy, 2021). India also attended a meeting of foreign ministers of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries in Dushanbe on July, 2021 (Negi, 2021) India's trade policy under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan may have to adapt and adjust to the changing realities in Afghanistan and the region, and balance its trade interest with its security interest and its support for the Afghan people and their democratic aspirations. India's trade policy may have to tread carefully and cautiously in this complex and dynamic scenario.

China's Position in Afghanistan

China's growing influence in Afghanistan is a serious threat for India's position in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule, as it may undermine India's trade, security and strategic interests in the country and the region. China has been a close ally and supporter of Pakistan, which has been a key player in facilitating the Taliban's rise to power and limiting India's role and influence in Afghanistan

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(Krishnan & Jhony, 2022) China has expressed its willingness to engage with the Taliban government, while India has not yet announced its stance on the Taliban regime and whether it will recognize it or not. China has shown interest in expanding its economic and strategic interests in Afghanistan, such as exploiting its natural resources, investing in infrastructure projects, and integrating it into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Krishnan & Jhony, 2022) China has sought assurance from the Taliban that they will not allow any anti-China activities or groups, such as the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), to operate from Afghanistan.

China may seek to cooperate with other regional and international stakeholders, such as Russia and Iran, to ensure peace, security and stability in Afghanistan and the region, while sidelining India. These factors may pose a serious challenge for India's trade, security and strategic interests in Afghanistan, as well as its support for the Afghan people and their democratic aspirations. India may have to adapt and adjust to the changing realities in Afghanistan and the region, and balance its engagement with the Taliban with its cooperation with other partners. India may also have to counter China's growing influence in Afghanistan by enhancing its own diplomatic, economic and cultural ties with the country (Krishnan & Jhony, 2022)

Conclusion

India's Afghanistan relation in the Taliban regime is a delicate and dynamic one that requires a pragmatic and principled approach. India has shown its willingness to engage with the Taliban, but also its commitment to uphold the values of democracy and human rights. India's engagement with the Taliban is not only important for its own interests, but also for the future of Afghanistan and the region. India should continue to work with other like-minded countries and organizations to support the Afghan people and their aspirations for peace, development and dignity. By doing so, India can play a constructive role in shaping the outcome of this historic and challenging transition in Afghanistan.

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