

The Good, the Bad and the Nationalist Taliban: Are we seeing a Change in India's Stance?

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Summary

India's outreach to the Taliban must not be read simply as a reversal of its existing policies. Instead, it must be seen and projected as an attempt by New Delhi to shore up the Ashraf Ghani-led government of Afghanistan to create an internationally conducive environment for the peace talks to take shape. While the Taliban is yet to respond to the evolving Indian signals, it will be safe to claim that the group would not risk alienating a powerful neighbour, especially when the same country has invested billions of dollars in Afghanistan. In a way, then, India's decision to engage with the Taliban might as well assist the Afghan government to intensify collective pressure on the Taliban to start acting like a reasonable political group and renounce its violent, insurgent tactics in its wake.

Introduction

The Afghan conflict was in its 10th year when the international forces, led by the United States (US), arrived at an unsurprising conclusion¹ on the need to talk to the Taliban to bring the war in Afghanistan to a sustainable end. As much as this conclusion was banal to the point of being too obvious, the devil, or should I say, the angel, was in the details. Enter the 'good Taliban'.

Beginning 2010, the war weariness arising out of the then-decade long struggle in Afghanistan had convinced the international stakeholders to transform "a broad international conflict into an internal political struggle largely handled by Afghans."² Besides all the money that was going to waste, the declining domestic support for the continuation of the American war necessitated a shift in the discourse. In a strategic turnaround, the US, which was once entirely opposed to the idea of reconciling with the Taliban, decided to bring the 'good' Taliban to the table for talks, launching its (unsuccessful) quest to "buy out mid-level Taliban figures willing to renounce violence and abandon their fight."³ In fact, a pool of money worth US\$140 million⁴ (S\$190 million) was created at the 2010 London Conference to specifically fund this buy out.

¹ Helen Cooper and Thom Shanker, "Push on Talks With Taliban Confirmed by NATO Officials", *The New York Times*, 14 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/15/world/asia/15nato.html>.

² The Associated Press, "Good and bad Taliban? U.S. tries to separate", *NBC News*, 2 February 2010, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna35202374>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Prakash Nanda, "'Good' Taliban: Where do you find them?", *India News and Features Alliance*, 6 February 2021, http://www.infa.in/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1447&Itemid=40.

By dissecting a movement that was hitherto understood as a monolithic national enemy of the US, the American intentions were majorly geared at re-framing the war in Afghanistan as a domestic issue that was in need of a national, and not international, solution. Consequently, where the US, on the one hand, sought to rupture the elision between the insurgent Taliban and its transnational ally, Al-Qaeda, on the other, it appeared interested in cultivating factions within the Taliban that were amenable to the idea of reconciliation and peace talks. As such, the removal of some of the “less active⁵” members of the Taliban from the United Nations sanctions’ list, starting 2009, signalled the emergence of a new international discourse on the Afghan conflict in which the Taliban was not seen as a singular entity but a coalescent group of individuals and ideological entities, some of which were reconcilable.

Although it would not be entirely baseless to suggest that such a divisionary approach towards the Taliban was, in part, animated by the old imperial motto of *divide et impera*,⁶ it is equally true the international stakeholders were mindful of the dangers of incipient factionalism, which was eventually witnessed years later.⁷ Yet, notwithstanding these anticipated difficulties, most of the international stakeholders latched on to this ideological bandwagon, including Pakistan,⁸ which used the good/bad distinction to launch a sustained attack against the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan while continuing to provide succour to its Afghan counterparts. Similarly, Afghanistan, then under the leadership of President Hamid Karzai,⁹ did not dither from embracing the good/bad schism, which since then has taken many shapes.

Shades or No Shades of the Taliban – India’s Evolving Position

Amid the evolving rhetoric, India was amongst the only countries that opposed the distinction between the good/bad Taliban. It believed that any “superfluous”¹⁰ attempt to disassociate the different “incarnations”¹¹ of terrorist organisations from one another was only a disservice to the common cause of fighting against terrorism. In fact, India’s then-Foreign Minister, S M Krishna, suggested that having seen through the “games”¹² of the Taliban, India was rather convinced that the Taliban is a “sheer terrorist organisation”.¹³

⁵ The Associated Press, “Good and bad Taliban? U.S. tries to separate”, *NBC News*, 2 February 2010, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna35202374>.

⁶ Helen Cooper, “Dreaming of Splitting the Taliban”, *The New York Times*, 7 March 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/weekinreview/08COOPER.html>.

⁷ Jared Schwartz and Yelena Biberman, “A divided Taliban could unleash a new proxy war in Afghanistan”, Atlantic Council, 29 June 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-divided-taliban-could-unleash-a-new-proxy-war-in-afghanistan/>.

⁸ Suhasini Haidar, “Taking on good, bad, all Talibans”, *The Hindu*, 2 January 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/opinion-on-pakistani-and-afghan-taliban/article6745657.ece>

⁹ “Hamid Karzai: Modi’s Decision to Call Off Meeting with Pakistan wasn’t Wrong”, *The Hindustan Times*, 21 January 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YUBG60K2Ts>.

¹⁰ Press Trust of India, “Nothing like good or bad Taliban, Krishna tells Miliband”, *The Times of India*, 27 January 2010, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/nothing-like-good-or-bad-taliban-krishna-tells-miliband/articleshow/5506148.cms>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “No Good or Bad, Only Terrorist Taliban: Krishna”, *Outlook*, 24 September 2009, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/no-good-or-bad-only-terrorist-taliban-krishna/666667>

Refusing to cede space to the international narrative, India found itself literally at the backseat of the subsequent international negotiations on Afghanistan. Despite the cultural and popular clout it enjoyed in Afghanistan, the Indian representations on matters concerning the Afghan conflict were at best ignored by shoving the minister(s) to the second, inaudible tiers of the meetings¹⁴ and, at worst, excluded¹⁵ from the dialogue altogether such as in Istanbul in 2011.

The diplomatic censure meted out to India continued for years before the other stakeholders came to a bitter realisation that, amongst other things, the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda continued to work hand-in-glove.¹⁶ However, this did not amount to a vindication of the Indian stance. Far from it, the US ended up concluding a deal with the entirety of Taliban in 2020, making the good/bad distinction look like a poorly thought gambit. The Doha deal of February 2020¹⁷ between the US and the Taliban announced the arrival of the latter as a political force that could no longer be reduced to an insurgent antagonistic.

Having made the Taliban an inescapable reality on the political landscape of Afghanistan, it has become increasingly difficult for countries to continue to ignore it. Where Russia and Iran¹⁸ are reported to be already in talks with the Taliban, China,¹⁹ on its part, has stepped up its involvement in the ongoing Afghan peace process by offering to host a discussion between the Afghan government and the Taliban. For Pakistan, which finds itself at the centre of the collective, international negotiations once again, its ostensible control over the leadership of the Taliban has given it greater leverage to influence the nature of the political settlement that will emerge in Afghanistan.

In view of these changes in the region and its own bitter diplomatic experiences, India appears to have acknowledged the need to engage with the Taliban in the present circumstances. However, in so doing, it has chosen not to deal with the Taliban in entirety but focus on the “nationalist”²⁰ elements within it instead. In what seems to be a repetition of the good/bad distinction, it is rather surprising to see India come up with its own schisms, especially when it was staunchly opposed to such categorisations previously. It is possible

¹⁴ Prakash Nanda, “Good Taliban: Where to Find Them?”, *India News and Features Alliance (INFA)*, 6 February 2010, http://www.infa.in/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1447&Itemid=40.

¹⁵ Gareth Price, “India’s Policy towards Afghanistan”, Chatham House, August 2013, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0813pp_indiaafghanistan.pdf.

¹⁶ ANI, “UN report claims Taliban and Al-Qaeda remain closely aligned, no changes”, *Business Standard*, 5 June 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/un-report-claims-taliban-and-al-qaeda-remain-closely-aligned-no-changes-121060500089_1.html.

¹⁷ US Government, “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America”, 29 February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

¹⁸ Avinash Paliwal, “New Alignments, Old Battlefield: Revisiting India’s Role in Afghanistan”, Carnegie India, 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/6152017_Paliwal_IndiasRoleinAfghanistan_Web.pdf.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Roche, “China offers to host peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban”, *Mint*, 18 May 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/china-offers-to-host-peace-talks-between-afghan-government-and-taliban-11621346265014.html>.

²⁰ Suhasini Haidar, “Ministry of External Affairs hints at talks with Taliban”, *The Hindu*, 10 June 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ministry-of-external-affairs-hints-at-talks-with-taliban/article34784006.ece>.

that India's use of distinctions is a result of its historical apprehensions, which have made its willingness and openness to engage with the Taliban both conditional and partial.

What should have been a distant memory, the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane (IC-814) and the negotiations that ensued in the Taliban-captured Kandahar in 1998, continues to loom large in the diplomatic alleys of New Delhi. As such, India's prior (and somewhat standing) resistance to the Taliban stems from a legitimate concern about the intent and objectives of this largely puritanical group. At the same time, the Taliban's explicit ties between the Pakistani Army and the Inter-Services Intelligence are only expected to make India circumspect about the dealings it may have to do with this group. It comes as no surprise then that the belated, but limited, turn to political discussions with the Taliban is informed by India's own strategic history, which has largely been cautiously pragmatic²¹ vis-à-vis the Afghan affairs on the whole.²²

Perhaps, it is for this very template of engagement that India's reported outreach to the members of the *Rehbari Shura*,²³ including the co-founder of the Taliban, Mullah Abdul Ghani Biradar, was neither fully acknowledged nor outrightly denied. After all, an explicit indication of interest in engaging with the Taliban, which was once declared as "irresponsible and disturbing"²⁴ by the Bharatiya Janata Party that is currently at the political helm in India, is only bound to create major domestic and international ripples that are ill-afforded at a point in time when South Asia is facing extreme uncertainty.

However, we can expect the lines of communication to take a more concrete and formal shape in the coming days, especially in view of the imminent withdrawal of the American forces from Afghanistan. In fact, according to Mutlaq bin Majed Ali Qahtani, Special Envoy of the State of Qatar for Counterterrorism and Mediation of Conflict Resolution, an Indian delegation is said to have paid a "quiet visit"²⁵ to the political leadership of the Taliban in Doha, creating further scope for direct talks to place between them. This claim, however, was recently denied by the Indian government.²⁶

²¹ Chayanika Saxena, "India is right in its cautious pragmatism on Afghanistan", *Indian Defence Review*, 3 October 2017, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/india-is-right-in-its-cautious-pragmatism-on-afghanistan>.

²² C Raja Mohan, "What does US departure from Afghanistan mean for South Asia?", *The Indian Express*, 11 May 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-pakistan-relations-us-in-middle-east-afghanistan-7309907/>.

²³ Suhasini Haidar, "Ministry of External Affairs hints at talks with Taliban", *The Hindu*, 10 June 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ministry-of-external-affairs-hints-at-talks-with-taliban/article34784006.ece>.

²⁴ "Krishna 'goofs up' on Taliban, govt denies it", *The Economic Times*, 25 September 2009, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/krishna-goofs-up-on-taliban-govt-denies-it/articleshow/5053436.cms?from=mdr>.

²⁵ Suhasini Haidar, "Indian delegation met Taliban in Doha, says Qatari official", *The Hindu*, 21 June 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indian-delegation-met-taliban-in-doha-says-qatari-official/article34895560.ece>.

²⁶ "Completely False': India on Claims of Jaishankar Meeting Taliban Leaders in Qatar", *The Wire*, 29 June 2021, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/completely-false-india-on-claims-of-jaishankar-meeting-taliban-leaders-in-qatar>.

Conclusion

As the largest South Asian donor to Afghanistan,²⁷ it is only incumbent on India's part to protect its advances in Afghanistan both for its own sake and that of Afghans even as it may upset other countries, particularly Pakistan. Describing India's outreach to the Taliban as "shameless",²⁸ Pakistan's National Security Advisor, Moeed Yusuf, has demonstrated both Pakistan's growing anxiety towards increasing Indian participation in the ongoing Afghan peace efforts and Pakistan's declining control over the Taliban. It must be recalled here that the Taliban, which was once bound by the dictates of Pakistan's general headquarters in Rawalpindi, refused to take part in the latter's clamour around Kashmir as it acknowledged the re-organisation of the state of Jammu and Kashmir as India's domestic matter instead.²⁹

While such instances may be instructive insofar as they reveal the changing political moods of the Taliban, they must be taken with a pinch of salt particularly in view of the latter's organisational make-up that has largely been split on the matters related to India's diplomatic outreach to it. That said, it will be safe to claim that the Taliban would not run the risk of alienating a powerful neighbour that has invested billions of dollars in Afghanistan. In a way then, India's decision to engage with the Taliban might as well assist the Afghan government in creating collective pressure on the Taliban to start behaving like a reasonable political actor and renounce its violent, insurgent tactics in its wake.

Having contributed to the redevelopment of Afghanistan's civic, social and political spheres over the last two decades, it is critical for India to continue supporting the political class and the masses of Afghanistan in their ongoing quest for peace, especially when the current National Unity Government of Afghanistan, led by Ghani, is also seeking to reconcile with the "reconcilable"³⁰ Taliban. In view of this, India's outreach to the Taliban must not be read as simply a reversal of its existing policies. Instead, it must be seen and projected as an attempt on India's part to shore up the Ghani-led government to create an internationally conducive environment for the peace talks to take shape.

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²⁷ Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "India, Afghanistan and the 'End Game'?", *ETH Zurich*, 14 March 2011, <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/127965>.

²⁸ Riazul Haq, "India should be ashamed of meeting Afghan Taliban: Moeed Yusuf", *Dawn*, 28 June 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1632009>.

²⁹ Shishir Gupta, "Kashmir is India's internal matter, says Taliban; denies plan to target Delhi", *Hindustan Times*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kashmir-is-india-s-internal-matter-says-taliban-denies-plan-to-target-delhi/story-sOgG3yPsMenP4nZDKRbygL.html>.

³⁰ Nayanima Basu, "Many Taliban leaders ready to reconcile, India should engage with them: Afghan envoy Mamundzay", *The Print*, 28 June 2021, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/many-taliban-leaders-ready-to-reconcile-india-should-engage-with-them-afghan-envoy-mamundzay/685396/?fbclid=IwAR3J3mjig-wQMFPZ6jj0wEljscznPphKrPzSostAWBDi78-naCSukm5g8cE>.