

India's Evolving Afghan Policy amidst US withdrawal

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Summary

India's primary objective in Afghanistan is to reduce Pakistan's strategic influence so that Afghan soil is not used as a haven for anti-India terrorist groups. However, the end of American military presence is likely to put significant constraints on India's ability to operate inside Afghanistan. The prospect of a Taliban-led government brings with it a new and dangerous reality for India: expansion of Pakistan's strategic footprints in Afghanistan. But New Delhi's policy toolbox for responding to the unfolding Afghan crisis remains limited because India's Afghan policy has generally suffered from the tension between idealistic thinking and the constraints imposed by regional power politics.

This paper attempts to explain the prevailing situation in Afghanistan from the Indian perspective and the policy options India could exercise in the near future. It is argued that New Delhi has so much to gain from peace and stability in Afghanistan that it should grant the Afghans the necessary political support and resources to work out a political settlement.

American Exit Emboldens the Taliban

With the Joe Biden administration's decision to pull out American troops from Afghanistan, the spectre of a pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul looms large. The Taliban's preference for a military solution threatens the breakdown of Afghan institutions, created and nurtured with so much blood and treasure over the last two decades. The Taliban appear strong on the battlefield while peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban have proved fruitless. The growing instability has reached Afghanistan's international borders, with most of its neighbours trying to both engage the Taliban and bolstering deterrent measures to contain the immediate spill-over of the conflict.¹ For India, the danger is real that Afghanistan under the Taliban could provide shelter to anti-India terror groups.

With the hope of negotiating peace receding, there are apprehensions that things might take a turn for the worse if central authority collapses in Afghanistan. The strategic cities of Kandahar and Kunduz are essentially under siege. According to a recent United Nations document, al-Qaeda has presence in about 15 Afghan provinces, and the global terror group is said to be functioning under the Taliban's protection.² The media has extensively reported about the brutal imposition of the Sharia dictates in areas falling under the Taliban control.³

¹ Arif Rafiq, "Afghanistan's neighbors contend with Taliban at their borders", Middle East Institute, 29 July 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghanistans-neighbors-contend-taliban-their-borders>.

² Anwar Iqbal, "Al Qaeda present in 15 Afghan provinces: UN", *Dawn*, 26 July 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1636932>.

³ Gul Rahim Niazman and Roshan Noorzai, "Taliban Impose New Restrictions on Women, Media In Afghanistan's North", *Voice of America*, 9 July 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/taliban-impose-new-restrictions-women-media-afghanistans-north>; and ANI, "Dark days return for Afghan women, Taliban re-imposes repressive laws in newly captured areas", 15 July 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/>

The Taliban are showing no qualms about killing Afghans to achieve the political objectives they have been struggling to accomplish through diplomatic means. Recently, the Taliban brutally killed members of the Afghan Special Forces in Dawlat Abad in Faryab Province as they were surrendering. India's photojournalist Danish Siddiqui was also murdered by the Taliban after they verified his identity.⁴

The establishment of an Islamic Emirate has been the long-standing objective of the Deobandi-oriented Taliban, which are keen to expand Pashtun influence all over Afghanistan at the cost of other minorities.⁵ This has alarmed all who experienced the Taliban's brazen authoritarian rule 25 years ago. However, the Taliban's apparent refusal to accommodate the interests of all Afghans would only exacerbate the civil war conditions.

Among all the regional countries having a stake in peaceful Afghanistan, India is the only country that has viewed the United States' (US) departure with a great deal of concern, trepidation and pessimism. The primary aim of the US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 was to defeat those responsible for the 9/11 attacks and to ensure that Afghan soil could not be used as a terrorist haven. However, these threats have remained resilient as highly contested nature of regional geopolitics and enabling conditions for regional alliance building have given the terrorist and radical outfits the traction they need for survival and expansion.

Though one can sympathise with President Biden's decision to end America's "forever war", there is a sense of betrayal and abandonment among the Afghans.⁶ With the departure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops from Afghanistan, the bargaining power they once had will also be gone. Washington's leverage to preserve the hard-earned rights of Afghan women and minorities is also diminishing fast. Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, is technically correct that the US "really messed it up in Afghanistan",⁷ but he did not disclose the main reason. Why the US lost the Afghan plot is not difficult to understand. Disgraced and defeated, the US has been forced to leave Afghanistan because it never fought the real enemy – Pakistan's security establishment which has been consistent in its support of the Taliban. It goes without saying that Pakistan has played the most lethal role in undermining America and NATO in Afghanistan, thereby significantly reducing the West's offensive capabilities.

Pakistan's noted intellectual, Pervez Hoodbhoy, has rightly argued that neither Pakistan nor Islam faced any danger when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, but General Zia-ul-

[world/asia/dark-days-return-for-afghan-women-taliban-re-imposes-repressive-laws-in-newly-captured-areas20210715131933/](https://www.indiatoday.in/world/asia/dark-days-return-for-afghan-women-taliban-re-imposes-repressive-laws-in-newly-captured-areas20210715131933/).

⁴ Press Trust of India, "Taliban executed photojournalist Danish Siddiqui after verifying his identity: Report", *India Today*, 30 July 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/photojournalist-danish-siddiqui-executed-brutally-murdered-by-taliban-afghanistan-spin-boldak-us-magazine-report-1834434-2021-07-29>.

⁵ Barnett R Rubin, "Constitutional Issues in the Afghan Peace Negotiations: Process and Substance", United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 488, November 2020.

⁶ Lynne O'Donnell, "A Taliban Victory Would Be 'The Return of a Dark Age for Afghanistan'", *Foreign Policy*, 28 July 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/28/taliban-afghanistan-military-us-withdrawal-womens-rights-governance/>.

⁷ Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan PM: 'US Really Messed It Up in Afghanistan'", *Voice of America*, 28 July 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/pakistan-pm-us-really-messed-it-afghanistan>.

Haq manipulated Pakistan's entry into the *jihad* juggernaut. Underlining the irony, Hoodbhoy remarked that "when a slightly different brand of godless communists did eventually reach the coveted waters, the heavens didn't fall. In fact, an eager and willing Pakistan rolled out the red carpet upon which the Chinese walked down to Gwadar. Contrary to General Zia's dire pronouncements, Islam remains safe from communists even if Uighur Muslims are not."⁸

Pakistan's Afghan policy has single-mindedly focused on the elusive quest for strategic depth against India. Therefore, despite facing the most powerful military force in the world, the Taliban have flourished only because of Pakistan's patronage of the Sunni insurgent force.

Currently, there are two wars in Afghanistan: one inside the country against foreign intervention that has gone on for the last four decades, and another against the Afghan government from Pakistani soil, causing parallel internal unrest. Since Pakistan's key objective has been to establish its hegemony in Afghanistan, it views an independent Afghanistan that has a vibrant relationship with India as the main obstacle in the achievement of its hegemonic ambitions. Pakistan has always engaged in assertive security-seeking behaviour, even at the cost of its global reputation. Islamabad views New Delhi in strongly hostile terms based on its experience of British India's partition and the birth of Bangladesh. India has often attempted to alter this relationship through various confidence building measures. By attempting to create economic interdependence, India seeks to dissuade conflict by raising the costs of any aggressive action on the part of Pakistan. But the positive experiences have proved far less meaningful in shaping the bilateral relationship than the negative experiences of terrorism and extremism.

Following America's ignominious exit from Afghanistan, the Pakistani reaction is mixed as fears of blowback are accompanied by a sense of vindication and euphoria. Even noted Pakistani scholar, Shahid Javed Burki, could not stop himself from conjuring up scenarios such as forming a 'counter-Quad' arrangement comprising the Taliban-led Afghanistan, China, Iran and Pakistan, which would promote the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative while countering the Quad grouping of India, the US, Japan and Australia.⁹ However, there seems to be some introspection as well within a segment of Pakistan's governing elite that an overtly confrontationalist or combatant stance has brought Pakistan nothing except avoidable problems, as reflected in Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa's recent claim that Pakistan is keen to give priority to geo-economics rather than geopolitics.¹⁰ But Pakistan's failure to recognise India's security and economic interests in Afghanistan explains its inability to make geo-economics as the organising principle of its foreign and security policies. Since there is no material evidence showing that Pakistan is willing to give up its

⁸ Pervez Hoodbhoy, "Who messed up Afghanistan?", *Dawn*, 31 July 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1637909/who-messed-up-afghanistan>.

⁹ Shahid Javed Burki, "Afghanistan: a possible component of counter-quad or a quintet," *The Express Tribune*, 12 July 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2310058/afghanistan-a-possible-component-of-counter-quad-or-a-quintet>.

¹⁰ C Raja Mohan, "Tripping on geo-economics," *The Indian Express*, 31 March 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-pakistan-ceasefire-army-general-qamar-javed-bajwa-foreign-policy-7251915/>; and Huma Yusuf, "New engagement", *Dawn*, 19 April 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1619089>.

strategic ambitions in Afghanistan in the foreseeable future, it is the balance of power between India and Pakistan that will most likely determine the ultimate outcome in Afghanistan.

India's Taliban Outreach

India has been the strongest regional supporter of the democratically elected government in Kabul, advocating the "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled" peace process and refusing to deal with the Taliban. However, sensing the futility of this stance, it seems to have reset its approach toward the Taliban. When India's Foreign Minister, S Jaishankar, virtually participated in the intra-Afghan talks in Doha, which began in September 2020,¹¹ it raised the possibility of India's willingness to engage with the Taliban. India's Ambassador to Qatar also witnessed the signing of the US-Taliban pact February 2020.

India-Taliban engagement marks a major policy shift, but India made course correction only when it became clear that the Taliban could not be militarily defeated. India's foreign policy establishment came to the stark recognition that in a rapidly evolving global order, New Delhi no longer has the luxury of being virtually incommunicado with the Taliban. Realisation of the consequences of Pakistan's greater involvement in Afghanistan contributed to this shift. Moreover, there are experts who have been advocating for India to overcome its Taliban aversion. For instance, according to former Indian diplomat, Vivek Katju, "Indian diplomacy was truly flat-footed on openly holding talks with the Taliban, even when the group was gaining global legitimacy. It is also known that it [Taliban] was signalling its interest in contact with India but at that stage, Delhi was rigidly glued to President Ashraf Ghani. A cruel price has always to be paid for diplomatic obduracy."¹² India has already lagged behind other regional players such as Russia, China and Iran in establishing contacts with the Taliban.

India has now opened a direct channel of communication with the Taliban. This diplomatic outreach is said to be limited to the Taliban factions that are considered 'nationalist' in their worldview and not under the influence of Pakistan's security establishment.¹³ The first official confirmation of India's direct talks with the Taliban in Doha came from Mutlaq bin Majed Al Qahtani, the Special Envoy of the Foreign Minister of the State of Qatar for Counterterrorism and Mediation of Conflict Resolution, who remarked, "I understand that there has been a quiet visit by Indian officials to speak to the Taliban."¹⁴ Jaishankar had made a brief stopover at Doha between 9 and 15 June 2021 during his travels to Kuwait and Kenya. He met with Qatar's Foreign Minister and the National Security Advisor (NSA), as

¹¹ Shubhajit Roy, "India attends intra-Afghan talks in Doha, Jaishankar says peace process must be Afghan-led", *The Indian Express*, 12 September 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-to-attend-intra-afghan-talks-in-doha-today-jaishankar-to-join-virtually-6592958/>.

¹² Vivek Katju, "J&K talks through a wide lens", *The Indian Express*, 25 June 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/pm-modi-jammu-and-kashmir-talks-pakistan-7374603/>.

¹³ Rezaul H Laskar, "In a huge shift, India opens channels with Afghan Taliban factions and leaders," *Hindustan Times*, 9 June 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-a-first-india-opens-communication-channels-with-afghan-taliban-factions-101623165405972.html>.

¹⁴ 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>.

well as US Special Representative on Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, who was also there, and discussed Afghan developments.¹⁵

Due to several structural constraints of Indo-Pak relations, the Taliban can neither emerge as India's partner nor can they provide India with any kind of leverage over Afghanistan's future. Moreover, there is no unanimity in the Taliban ranks on how to deal with India as the predominantly Pashtun insurgent group is not a monolith. It is believed that the Quetta Shura and the notorious Haqqani Network are still hostile towards India, and those keen to build a mutually beneficial relationship with India "are sitting in Doha or some of the low or mid-tier fighters in Kabul."¹⁶ However, the Taliban have given some subtle hints that it is not impossible for India to work with them. Therefore, establishing contacts with the Taliban is seen as crucial to securing India's existing economic interests in Afghanistan as well as to ensure that the Afghan land is not exploited for exporting terrorism and extremism. While it is true that we have been examining the Afghan conflict mainly through the coordinates of geopolitics and national security while relegating other factors as either incompatible or irrelevant, but India would think twice before providing developmental assistance to a Taliban-led regime that does not respect the rights of minorities and denies basic dignity to girls and women.

America's Approach Towards Pakistan

Pakistan is situated at the crossroads of a strategic region bordering China, Afghanistan and Iran. At present, most of the al-Qaeda operatives and almost all the top Taliban leaders have their camps in Pakistan. For the above reasons, Pakistan is more important to the US' national security than Afghanistan. As the US withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, Islamabad is keen to rebuild its relationship with Washington and delink it from Afghan developments.

Pakistan's importance for American establishment stems from its geographic location surrounded as it is by countries that have influenced and will continue to influence the US foreign policy – Iran, China and Russia – as well as by Afghanistan and India. Not just the location, the "network of relationships" built by Pakistan over the years are also of strategic benefit to both the US and China.¹⁷ But if the Biden administration decides to "eventually outsource Afghanistan to Pakistan", boosting political engagement and economic incentives between Washington and Islamabad, there will be backlash from New Delhi.¹⁸

¹⁵ Press Trust of India, "It's for Afghanistan people to judge each of their partners based on past actions: India", *The Print*, 17 June 2021, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/its-for-afghanistan-people-to-judge-each-of-its-partners-based-on-past-actions-india/679992/>.

¹⁶ Ayesha Siddiqi, "India playing the Taliban move won't checkmate Pakistan", *The Print*, 28 June 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/india-playing-the-taliban-move-wont-checkmate-pakistan/685258/>; and Karan Thapar, 'India on the Back Foot in Secret Talks With Taliban', Says Afghanistan Expert, *The Wire*, 28 June 2021, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/watch-india-on-the-back-foot-in-secret-talks-with-taliban-says-afghanistan-expert>.

¹⁷ Michael K Nagata and Joseph Votel, "The future of US cooperation with Pakistan", Middle East Institute, 28 July 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/future-us-cooperation-pakistan>.

¹⁸ Nilofar Sakhi and Annie Pforzheimer, "Missing the bigger implications of US withdrawal from Afghanistan", Middle East Institute, 29 July 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/missing-bigger-implications-us-withdrawal-afghanistan>.

Pakistan's closer ties with the US during the Cold War era represent the single highest-yielding foreign policy investment that Islamabad has made because it has allowed it to punch above its military and economic weight. This, however, does not mean that Washington-Islamabad ties have been free from frictions and frustrations. There have been several occasions when the US had to reboot and reset its relationship with Pakistan, and this would not be the first time that a new political compact between Washington and Islamabad is being explored after 11 September 2021. It is difficult to decipher the terms and trajectory of future cooperation between the US and Pakistan, but what remains certain is that they will be tied to the outcome in Afghanistan.

Despite many setbacks, Pakistan's ruling elites still value its relationship with the US, and in the immediate aftermath of American withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan is trying to reinvent its value to the US. Prime Minister Khan has set very high expectations for the Biden administration – he wants same “civilized” and “even-handed” ties with America that the latter has with India and Britain.¹⁹ As C Raja Mohan has rightly argued, “How Pakistan copes with the new dynamic between the US and China as well as manages the deepening crisis in Afghanistan would be of great interest to Delhi.”²⁰

Post-withdrawal, Washington's plans to form a Quad that includes the US, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan²¹ lend credence to apprehensions that America has not taken India's views into account. Though New Delhi cannot hope to influence the Biden administration's approach towards Pakistan, efforts should nonetheless be made to impress upon Washington that the US-Pakistan relationship should be redefined to ensure that any tactical accommodation comes with some strings attached. In other words, there should be conditionalities so that the Pakistani state can steer productive forces in the interest of broadly shared goals, in contrast to what has happened previously.

India's Options

India's role in the Afghan peace process has been marginal. With the Taliban's unstoppable rampage, Afghanistan has entered the most turbulent phase in recent years where a new kind of politics is being fashioned. India will have to come to terms with its complex dynamics. Watching its Afghan allies being routed by the Taliban cannot be a pleasant sight for India. But we live in an anarchical international system where states are required to hedge their bets and keep channels open with all players. We cannot deny the fact that the Taliban are the most powerful armed group in Afghanistan. Therefore, the geopolitical logic would require the core elements of India's Afghan policy to be reshaped. Going forward, India should formulate its long-term Afghan policy keeping in view factors such as the

¹⁹ Chidanand Rajghatta, “Imran Khan wants relationship with US like the one Washington has with New Delhi”, *The Times of India*, 26 June 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/imran-khan-wants-ties-with-us-like-the-one-washington-has-with-new-delhi/articleshow/83874733.cms>.

²⁰ C Raja Mohan, “How Pakistan plays the world”, *The Indian Express*, 1 June 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/lessons-from-pakistan-how-to-win-friends-influence-allies-then-squander-it-all-7338597/>.

²¹ Press Trust of India, “U.S., Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan to form quad group to enhance regional connectivity”, *The Hindu*, 17 July 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-afghanistan-pakistan-uzbekistan-to-form-quad-group-to-enhance-regional-connectivity/article35377295.ece>.

Taliban's growing influence across Afghanistan, America's tactical cooperation with Pakistan and China-Pakistan strategic coordination in Afghanistan.

The Taliban have hailed Beijing as a "friend", implying that China's material and security interests will be protected by them.²² The latter has also been quite explicit in engaging the former, partly in order to press the insurgent group to "deal resolutely" with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, a militant group active in China's Xinjiang province. In the last week of July 2021, China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, hosted the Taliban in Tianjin and termed them "a pivotal military and political force" in Afghanistan.²³ It was the first time that Wang formally met Mullah Ghani Baradar, the deputy leader of the Taliban.

By cultivating closer diplomatic relations with the Taliban, Beijing is also trying to promote greater Chinese trade and investment in Afghanistan. So, India's worry is not just Pakistan, which has been desperately trying to control Kabul, it is also China's growing ambitions to play a larger role in post-exit Afghanistan that will need to be factored into framing India's response. A Taliban-led regime with deep connections to Beijing could represent the worst possible fallout for India as it would add to Jaishankar's list of concerns about China's growing assertiveness.

Due to China's continued inflexibility along the disputed boundary in the Himalayas, India has limited opportunities to cooperate with it on Afghanistan.²⁴ President Xi Jinping's first ever visit to Tibet points to China's hostile posture toward India. As the US exit from Afghanistan has reinforced the popular perception of American decline, China's strategic temptation to offer an alternative to the Western model of global governance would also rise.²⁵ India would not remain unaffected if Beijing gets intoxicated with the belief that American defeat in Afghanistan is China's ideological victory.

From the Indian perspective, an important factor that could inspire some optimism is Pakistan's unmistakable inability "to construct a stable and legitimate order in Afghanistan" despite having "the capability to destabilize" any Afghan regime ruling from Kabul.²⁶ Also, India does not seem to be in any hurry to accept the Taliban's public proclamations of pursuing independent policies. The Taliban's conduct has given ample reasons to believe that the group is tied closely to Pakistan's strategic interests. Refusing to accept that Pakistan has provided the Taliban with safe havens, Khan recently argued that "Taliban are

²² Press Trust of India, "Taliban says China a 'friend' to Afghanistan, vows not to host Uyghur militants: Report", *The Print*, 10 July 2021, <https://theprint.in/world/taliban-says-china-a-friend-to-afghanistan-vows-not-to-host-uyghur-militants-report/693666/>.

²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi Meets with Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar", 28 July 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1895950.shtml.

²⁴ Aryaman Bhatnagar, "The Emerging India-China Competition in Afghanistan", *World Politics Review*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29446/afghanistan-could-become-a-flashpoint-in-india-china-relations>.

²⁵ C Raja Mohan, "Taliban 2.0 and the Afghan test", *The Indian Express*, 13 July 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/us-troops-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-pakistan-taliban-7401581/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

not some military outfits, they are normal civilians.”²⁷ Why would Pakistan take action against its proxy, which, in the words of a top American military official, has the “strategic momentum”²⁸ in Afghanistan?

The best course for India lies in helping the Kabul government prevent a military takeover by the Taliban. As a largest regional donor and a fellow democracy, it is India’s responsibility to stand beside the elected government in Afghanistan which has been one of India’s steadfast regional partners against forces of religious terrorism. However, given the ground realities in Afghanistan, New Delhi also views a negotiated power-sharing deal between the Kabul regime and the Taliban as the key to the long-term stability in the conflict-ridden country. That is why India has begun to tactically engage with the Taliban. Nevertheless, short of boots on the ground, New Delhi should continue to assist the Ashraf Ghani regime in its attempts to break the Taliban’s military momentum.²⁹ Despite its multiple flaws and infirmities, the Afghan security forces are battling hard against the Taliban.

To get its Afghan equations right, India will need to work closely with the US, highlighting its importance as a reliable and responsible actor in Afghanistan. Despite its military exit, the US still has substantial sway in Afghanistan’s political, economic and diplomatic circles, which cannot be underestimated by India. Already, convergence on Afghanistan seems to be emerging between Washington and New Delhi as reflected in US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s statements after his meetings with India’s NSA, Ajit Doval, and Jaishankar in New Delhi. Blinken was only echoing India’s long-held views when he remarked that [an] Afghanistan that does not respect the rights of its people, an Afghanistan that commits atrocities against its own people, would become a pariah state.”³⁰ However, it remains to be seen how the US will fulfill its promise of continued engagement in Afghanistan, while demonstrating that it identifies with India’s cause.

The Taliban’s capture of the border areas is a sufficient reason to make Russia and Iran anxious. In early July 2021, a Taliban delegation went to Tehran to talk peace with the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, playing host.³¹ Coinciding with this crucial meeting, Jaishankar called on Iranian President-elect, Ebrahim Raisi, during his visit to Tehran where he also met Zarif to discuss security situation in Afghanistan.³² It is difficult to say what specifics were discussed behind closed doors, yet given the fact that India and Iran

²⁷ “‘How Can Pakistan Hunt Them Down?’ PM Imran Khan Calls Taliban ‘Normal Civilians’ as Afghanistan Sees Red”, *News18*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.news18.com/news/world/how-can-pakistan-hunt-them-down-pm-imran-khan-calls-taliban-normal-civilians-4021208.html>.

²⁸ AFP, “Taliban seem to have ‘strategic momentum’ in Afghanistan: Top US general”, *Hindustan Times*, 22 July 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/taliban-seem-to-have-strategic-momentum-in-afghanistan-top-us-general-101626898513980.html>.

²⁹ Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaeen has asked India not to give any military support to the Ghani government. See Elizabeth Roche, “India should not give current Kabul administration any military support: Suhail Shaheen”, *Livemint*, 15 July 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/india-should-not-give-current-kabul-administration-any-military-support-11626363762086.html>.

³⁰ AFP, “Afghanistan will become ‘pariah state’, fears US”, *Dawn*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1637551/afghanistan-will-become-pariah-state-fears-us>.

³¹ “Afghan gov’t delegation meets Taliban in Iran”, *Al Jazeera*, 8 July 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/8/afghan-govt-delegation-meets-taliban-in-iran>.

³² “Jaishankar meets Iranian President-elect”, *The Hindu*, 8 July 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jaishankar-meets-iranian-president-elect/article35204258.ece>.

were key supporters of the 'Northern Alliance' that fought the Taliban in the late 1990s, it is possible that both are keeping an eye on the Afghan theatre in order to evolve a common strategy.

Since Moscow and Tehran also share some of India's goals in Afghanistan, New Delhi should unhesitatingly invest diplomatic energies in coordinating a tripartite consensus on Afghanistan. Finding greater convergence with the US on Afghan situation does not mean that India would align its security interests with the West. New Delhi must work to build bridges between Tehran and Washington, who find themselves in different geopolitical camps. Moreover, India is also advised to engage with Turkey if it gets the responsibility to guard the Kabul International Airport.³³

Conclusion

Abandoning Afghanistan in unusual haste has always led to unmanageable chaos. In view of Afghanistan's likely descent into instability and civil war, which will have undesirable consequences for the Afghan people and all of Afghanistan's neighbours, India's strategic approach needs to be framed by weaving the political, economic, military and diplomatic dimensions together into a coherent whole.

Since the Taliban are trying to create facts on the ground, any political reconciliation is likely to be on the Taliban's terms since the major global powers seem to have turned a blind eye to the military seizure of power by the Taliban. Realising that the Taliban are a reality in Afghanistan, India has opened a channel of communication with them. This is an unprecedented situation where the argument is for additional tools and the diversification of the toolset, but this does not necessarily translate into discarding of existing tools. India, which has relied on soft-power and non-military instruments to secure its interests in Afghanistan, will continue to rely on its ability to contribute developmental assistance.

India must keep up its diplomatic efforts to maintain communication with all key stakeholders, particularly within Afghanistan. New Delhi, which fears being buffeted by the consequences of the predatory behaviour of Pakistan, cannot realistically hope to have a government in Kabul that will favour New Delhi. Even though the possibility remains dim, but if the political negotiations pave the way for a neutral government in Afghanistan, it will also bring huge relief in New Delhi.

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³³ Shyam Saran, "If India can't contribute to Taliban's defeat, it must prevent their victory", *The Print*, 28 July 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/if-india-cant-contribute-to-talibans-defeat-it-must-prevent-their-victory/704368/>.