

Redefining India's Role In Afghanistan

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Summary

The return of the Taliban had been in the making for a decade. Convinced that they have come to power through military means, the Taliban do not feel the need to form an inclusive government. Unlike other neighbouring countries, India had been hesitant in exploring engagement with the Taliban and ended up withdrawing from the country. However, it has legitimate interest in the stability of Afghanistan and enjoys goodwill among all communities.

Introduction

The Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, at the level of National Security Advisers (NSAs), was hosted by Delhi on 10 September 2021. An Iranian initiative, the first two meetings of this forum were held in Tehran in 2018 and 2019. NSAs from Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan responded positively to Indian NSA Ajit Doval's invitation. There were two significant no-shows. Pakistani NSA Moeed Yusuf had publicly rejected the invitation, stating that "a spoiler (India) can't be a peacemaker" while the Chinese authorities cited "scheduling difficulties". Given the state of relations with Pakistan, the rejection was expected. Chinese absence suggests that China's Afghanistan policy will continue to be guided and shaped by Pakistan. No one from Afghanistan was invited.

The Delhi Declaration,¹ issued at the conclusion of the NSAs' meeting, was along predictable lines. It "condemned" the recent terrorist attacks in Kunduz, Kandahar and Kabul, but reaffirmed a shared commitment to ensuring that "Afghanistan would never become a safe haven for global terrorism". It stressed the need for "an open and truly inclusive government" and ensuring the "rights of women, children and minority communities". While emphasising a central role for the United Nations and underlining the need for urgent humanitarian assistance, it reiterated that this should be distributed across the country "in a non-discriminatory manner" through "unimpeded, direct and assured access". The declaration sought collective cooperation in tackling extremism and drug trafficking in the region.

This paper suggests that the basic message of the meeting was that though India no longer has a presence on the ground (India had withdrawn its personnel and shut down its embassy on 17 August 2021, two days after the fall of Kabul), it has legitimate political and strategic interests – something the Central Asians, Iran and Russia acknowledged. The United States (US) Special Representative Thomas West also visited Delhi for ongoing

¹ Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan, Ministry of External Affairs, 10 November 2021, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34491/Delhi_Declaration_on_Afghanistan.

bilateral exchanges on Afghanistan on 16 November 2021. Regular dialogue on Afghanistan continues with leading European nations and the European Union.

India's Role Post-2001

Following the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001, India returned to reopen its embassy. Indian presence had been scaled down in the early 1990s as Afghanistan gradually became a war zone due to the infighting between the Mujahideen groups. In 1996, the embassy was closed as the Taliban approached Kabul. Together with Iran and Russia, India supported the Northern Alliance, a resistance front against the Taliban, led by the charismatic Ahmed Shah Massoud, operating from the Panjshir Valley.

The hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight IC814 enroute to Delhi from Kathmandu in December 1999 that ended up in Kandahar led to protracted negotiations with the Taliban, hardening anti-Taliban perceptions in India. The 1990s had also witnessed a ratcheting up of cross-border infiltration of trained militants into Kashmir.

In a post-Taliban Afghanistan, India found a welcoming environment with the Northern Alliance leaders now holding key positions. Though not a traditional donor, it became Afghanistan's biggest regional development partner. During the last two decades, India committed nearly US\$3 billion (S\$4.08 billion) towards humanitarian assistance, infrastructure development and rebuilding governance capacity with special focus on human resource development. A million tonnes of wheat, rebuilding hospitals, running half a dozen medical camps across the country providing prosthetics and undertaking minor surgeries were the major humanitarian projects. Power transmission lines enabling electricity import from Uzbekistan, road connectivity, a multipurpose hydel project, a machine tool workshop, television uplink and downlink systems, a new parliament building and cold storage units for local agricultural produce were among the infrastructure projects.

Over a thousand Afghan students received scholarships every year for college and university education, and nearly an equal number attended short-term professional courses (like information technology, management and accounting) and basic skilling courses (refrigeration, electrical repairs, plumbing, carpentry etc). The United Nations Development Programme partnered with India to train Afghan civil servants. More than 60,000 Afghans returned to help rebuild their country after completing their education in India. To strengthen local governance, India funded over 400 small development projects that were both proposed and implemented by local non-governmental organisations and district level officials. Special projects for skilling and reviving women's enterprises were undertaken.²

As a landlocked country, Afghanistan was dependent on Pakistan, as Karachi was the only port it could access. India undertook a project to develop an alternative access route by

² *India and Afghanistan: A Development Partnership*, Publication by Ministry of External Affairs, 2009, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewi6mJOAsqTOAhVExzgGHf83BccQFnoECAQQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fmea.gov.in%2FUploads%2FPublicationDocs%2F176_india-and-afghanistan-a-development-partnership.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2hYz6_2UgRkCa5a7Ekf7A4z; and *India-Afghanistan: A Historic and Time Tested Friendship*, 2019, https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/30860_India-Afghanistan_Map_Book.pdf.

developing Chabahar port in Iran and also built a 200-kilometre highway in Afghanistan to help connect it to the Iranian border town of Zahidan. This was part of reviving Afghanistan's traditional role as the crossroads between South and Central Asia and West and South Asia. Chabahar became part of this regional connectivity. India also spearheaded Afghanistan's membership into the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

In 2011, India became the first country with which Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement, though Indian involvement in the security sector was minimal, largely due to US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization sensitivities, as they were dependent on communication and supply lines through Pakistan. Gradually, as the Afghan army expanded, it began to make increasing use of Indian defence training establishments. In recent years, India has also supplied the Afghan forces with three helicopters.

India's development role was acknowledged by the Afghans and the international community. There was one exception – Pakistan – which tried hard to limit India's role and presence. As Taliban insurgency grew, India was often targetted. Indians working on road projects were kidnapped and killed, guest houses where Indians stayed were often targetted and in 2008, there was a suicide attack on the embassy in Kabul. Four Indians, including the Defence Attaché and a senior diplomat, were killed; the bombing also claimed over 50 Afghan lives. Intelligence pointed the finger at the Haqqani group that was later described by Admiral Mike Mullen in a briefing to the US Senate Armed Services Committee as "a veritable arm of the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence)".³

Return of the Taliban

Nobody could have predicted in 2001 that the US would be in Afghanistan for two decades or that its exit would be so ignominious. The searing image of Afghans falling off the C-17 Globemaster as it took off from Kabul will remain as abiding as those of the exit from Saigon in 1975. The tragedy is greater because the US went into Afghanistan with the support of the international community, and its presence there was initially welcomed by all Afghans, except the Taliban. How did it go so wrong?

In December 2001, the Taliban sent an emissary to suggest a surrender to Hamid Karzai who was being tipped to head the transition, in return for being allowed to stay in peace in Afghanistan. But the US rejected it outright, assuming the Taliban had been eliminated. Even as the US got embroiled in Iraq, the Taliban were regrouping in safe havens in Pakistan, reconstituting their cadres and re-establishing their financing links with Islamic charities. By 2006, the insurgency was back with increasing numbers of suicide attacks and improvised explosive devices, undermining the government and exploiting growing local disaffection.

The US kept insisting that it was not into nation-building, but it pushed a new constitution, conducted elections, set up new judiciary, new army and police: in short, established a completely new governance structure. The new constitution adopted the US model and centralised power in the presidency, but the system lacked the checks and balances of a

³ Elisabeth Bumiller and Jane Perlez, "Pakistan's Spy Agency Is Tied to Attack on U.S. Embassy", *The New York Times*, 22 September 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/world/asia/mullen-asserts-pakistani-role-in-attack-on-us-embassy.html>.

Congress, a judicial system, media and civil society. Corruption began to grow, and governance suffered. There was lack of coordination among the donors as Germany took charge of the police sector, Italy of the judiciary and the United Kingdom was given the counter-narcotics dossier. One example will suffice – after having spent tens of billions, Afghanistan today produces over 80 per cent of the world’s illicit opium. The reason was that projects were funded based on reports by highly paid foreign experts who were totally divorced from Afghan ground reality.

Barack Obama came to power as US president, distinguishing Iraq as the “bad war” while Afghanistan was the “necessary war”. He announced a military surge to bring the insurgency under control but also announced that drawdown would begin 18 months later, leading to the Taliban joke, “You have the watches, we have the time.” The generals knew that it is impossible to defeat an insurgency that enjoys safe havens and sanctuary, but it was an inconvenient truth. During the 1980s, the Mujahideen wore out the Soviets because the latter could not take the fight where the supply lines and the training camps were; the US forgot the lesson, but the Taliban and the ISI did not.

The time was ripe to change the narrative. From a terrorist organisation, the Taliban were first rebranded as insurgents and now emerged as a political group. The opening of the Doha office in 2013 was the formal beginning of the legitimisation process. Various peace processes began – in Doha, Istanbul, Moscow and Islamabad. The final breakthrough came when the US opened direct talks with the Taliban in 2018 and eventually capitulated to sign the 2020 Doha Agreement⁴ by committing to a withdrawal deadline in return for vague assurances about the Taliban cutting ties with Al Qaeda and other groups and engaging in a peace process with other Afghan sections. By committing the Kabul government to release over 5,000 Taliban fighters held in custody, the US fatally undermined it. Even as the US forces withdrew, the Taliban continued with their military advances, occupying key districts and border check posts; the intra-Afghan talks remained at an impasse, unable to agree on an agenda.

Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani’s flight from Kabul while the US was undertaking its evacuation process only ensured the peaceful fall of Kabul. It ended the US’ longest war but for the Afghans, a new chapter of uncertainty and violence was just opening. The Taliban’s backers showed greater staying power while the supporters of the Kabul regime lost patience and quit. Two days after the Taliban entered Kabul, India closed its embassy and evacuated its personnel, leaving open the field to the Taliban, Haqqani network and the ISI.

A Regional Reset

While presenting the Doha agreement as a peace deal, an impression was generated that the Taliban had changed into a moderate political entity. However, there has been little evidence. Their first decision was to replace the Islamic Republic with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and bring back the old flag. There are some differences though. The Taliban of the 1990s were a politically unknown, militarily untested entity with a single leader, Mullah

⁴ United States Department of State, “Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan”, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>.

Omar. Today, the Taliban are politically known, with a decade of experience on the conference circuit in many capitals and a proven military entity, having waged a successful insurgency against the US. It is not as united though. The Amir ul Momineen Mullah Haibatullah has appeared only once at a *madrassa* in Kandahar on 30 October 2021 but no images or videos were permitted.

The Doha group that had been the public face led by founding member Mullah Barader appears to have been side-lined, with Mullah Barader appointed as one of the two deputy prime ministers. News appeared of a showdown between him and the Haqqanis who have got the all-powerful interior ministry and intelligence as well as de-facto control of the eastern region of Afghanistan. Some of the old hard-line clerics have emerged as ministers but many of the military commanders who did the actual fighting are still waiting for the fruits of office to be able to keep control of their militias, who are getting restive. There are reports that some of the more ideologically driven cadres are drifting towards the Islamic State – Khorasan (IS-K).

In addition, there are other groups too – Al Qaeda, Uighurs (East Turkestan Islamic Movement), Uzbeks (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), Tajiks (Khatiba Imam al Bukhari) and Pakistani groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Jamaat ul Ahraar, Lashkar-e-Islam and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Clashes have been reported between the IS-K and the Taliban as the former mounted bomb attacks against Shias in Kunduz, Kandahar and Kabul. The Taliban may have promised Pakistan, China and Russia that they will prevent any attacks from Afghan soil, but the foreign militants have set their sights outwards and are unlikely to choose peaceful retirement. In terms of ideology, all the groups share the Salafi-Jihadi ideology. Iran is watching carefully to see for any signs of persecution of the Shias, as had happened during the 1990s.

The Taliban ideology may not have changed, but Afghanistan certainly has in the last 20 years. Its population has gone up from 21 million in 2001 to 38 million; it is a young population with a median age of 18.5 years. More than two-thirds of the population are below 30 and have grown up in a conservative albeit open society with television, mobile phones and a patchy Internet. With growing urbanisation, the number of people living in urban areas has gone up from 4.6 million to nine million. Kabul has seen the biggest increase, from a city of about 70,000 through the 1990s, it is today home to over three million Afghans straining the creaking urban infrastructure. All this poses governance challenges of a different order compared to the 1990s. There is no revenue stream to pay salaries. Reserves abroad have been frozen and pledges to provide humanitarian assistance have yet to materialise. With winter approaching, all of Afghanistan's neighbours are concerned about an impending refugee influx.

For the last five years, Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan have been vocal in calling the US to leave, describing its continued presence as the cause for violence and instability. With the US now out, the region is left with a highly unstable Afghanistan that is fast approaching a failed state.

Pakistan's triumphalism was evident when the ISI chief Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed made a highly visible visit to Kabul to resolve differences over power sharing among the

different factions that enabled the announcement of the first cabinet list. The Haqqanis are now brokering a peace deal between Pakistan and the TTP with the latter demanding that they be allowed to govern their region in accordance with their version of the Shariah, something Pakistan finds difficult to accept. As the old saying goes – be careful what you wish for, it may come back to bite you.

Conclusion

The Taliban are discovering that running an insurgency is easier than governing. They face multiple challenges – factionalism and disgruntled cadres, lack of resources and governance experience, tackling a hostile IS-K, a looming humanitarian crisis, potential pockets of resistance and an increasingly wary neighbourhood. They welcomed the Delhi Declaration though they were not invited and have repeatedly suggested that they would welcome the reopening of the embassy by India. However, the Indian government is unwilling to take any chances, given the influence of the Haqqanis, and by extension, the ISI. Nevertheless, unlike the West, India is part of the region and cannot disengage. It has responded to the humanitarian call by offering 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat and urgent medical supplies. Pakistan has stated it would allow for their overland transit as soon as modalities are finalised. Diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan is likely to remain through Doha or at forums where Pakistan cannot veto Indian presence.

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