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The Paradigm Shift in India's Policy in Afghanistan Post August 2021

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Abstract

On August 15, 2022, the Taliban had been in rule in Afghanistan for one full year. There has been almost no stability in the last one year under its administration. Despite the fact that the Taliban has been trying to get international recognition by pointing to the humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan, not a single country (not even Pakistan) has recognized its rule. India has shown no evidence of recognizing the Taliban administration, likely out of concern for the country's national security. In spite of this, New Delhi has adjusted its approach to Afghanistan by maintaining informal contacts with the regime, dealing with security challenges emerging from within Afghan territory, and fostering continued people-to-people contacts. Despite communication difficulties and the lack of a fully operational embassy in Kabul, it was able to send urgent humanitarian aid. In spite of ideological disagreements, India plans to deepen its interactions with the Taliban in the coming months by capitalizing on tensions between the Taliban and Pakistan. This research paper deals with Indian policy shift towards Afghanistan after Taliban take control over Afghanistan due to American withdrawal.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, South Asia, Terrorism, Pakistan, Soft Power, Foreign Policy.

Introduction

An important security setback for India was the Taliban's toppling of the democratically elected Ashraf Ghani regime in Afghanistan. The hijacking of the IC-814 Indian Airlines plane in December 1999 profoundly altered how the Indian public had seen Taliban. From Kathmandu, the plane was taken over by terrorists operating in Pakistan, and it ended up in Kandahar, the capital of Afghanistan during the time of the first Taliban government. The Indian negotiators seeking to free the hostages came to the conclusion that the hijackers had received active support from the Taliban and the Pakistani Army. India released the three of the most wanted militants, including Masood Azhar, the founder of the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist organisation in Pakistan, and Omar Saeed Sheikh, who was responsible for the 2002 murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl.

India's security concerns were largely resolved after the Taliban were toppled in 2001 as a result of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. As a result of their cooperation with the new government in Kabul, India has spent more than \$3 billion on Afghanistan over the past two decades. This includes the 218-kilometer long Zaranj-Delaram highway, the Afghan parliament, the country's educational and healthcare facilities, and a massive hydroelectric project. However, with the Taliban now in control in Kabul, India is worried that its development efforts may have been in useless. The Indian government fears that the spread of a radical Islamic Sharia-based government across the subcontinent would boost the morale of Islamist terror groups already active in India, leading to an increase in recruitment and violence on the part of these organizations. The Taliban's insistence on creating a "Islamic Emirate" rather than a "Republic," which could have indicated an attempt to establish a democratic and open government, gives support to this view.

Every year, more than a thousand Afghan students receive scholarships to attend college or university, and almost as many enroll in intensive professional training programs (in fields like IT, management, and accounting) or attend intensive basic skills training programs

(refrigeration, electrical repairs, plumbing, carpentry etc). In order to better equip Afghan government officials, the United Nations Development Programme teamed up with India to provide training. After finishing their studies in India, around 60,000 Afghans returned to their home country to aid in its reconstruction. Over 400 modest development projects were developed and completed by local non-governmental organizations and district level authorities with funding from India in an effort to improve local administration. Women's business ownership was prioritized, and special initiatives were launched to help women acquire new skills and revitalize their businesses.

In 2011, India was the first country to sign a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan. However, India didn't do much in the security sector, mostly because the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization didn't like it and because they had to use Pakistan for communication and supply lines. As the Afghan army grew over time, it started to use Indian defense training centers more and more. In the past few years, India has also given three helicopters to the Afghan forces.¹

Return of Taliban

It had now time to reverse the narrative's direction. Originally known as a terrorist group, the Taliban have now remade themselves as rebels and have risen on the political scene. The legitimization procedure formally began in 2013 with the inauguration of the Doha office. Doha, Istanbul, Moscow, and Islamabad all launched peace procedures. Finally, progress was made when the United States began direct talks with the Taliban in 2018, eventually signing the 2020 Doha Agreement and committing to a withdrawal deadline in exchange for nebulous assurances from the Taliban that they would sever ties with Al Qaeda and other groups and begin a peace process with other Afghan factions. The US severely weakened the Kabul administration by pressuring it to release more than 5,000 Taliban militants in captivity. There was a stalemate in intra-Afghan discussions, and the Taliban maintained its military advances, taking up strategic regions and border checkpoints even as the United States withdrew its personnel.²

India's concerns were adversely affected by the sudden and unexpected and acrimonious U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and by the fact that it had not been included in any potential settlement on Afghanistan. According to New Delhi, United States appeared to place too much faith in Pakistan in order to speed up its departure from Afghanistan. United States still appears to be putting pressure on Islamabad to resolve the crisis in Afghanistan. This arrangement makes India uncomfortable because it increases Pakistan's sway and influence in Afghanistan.

Al Qaeda, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Khatiba Imam al Bukhari in Tajikistan, and the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Jamaat ul Ahraar, Lashkar-e-Islam, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Pakistan are just a few more. As the IS-K launched bomb assaults

against Shias in Kunduz, Kandahar, and Kabul, reports surfaced of clashes between the group and the Taliban. Despite the Taliban's assurances to Pakistan, China, and Russia that they will not allow assaults to be launched from Afghan territory, foreign terrorists are likely to continue looking for opportunities elsewhere rather than settling down. Ideologically, all these groups are aligned with the Salafi-Jihadist movement. Iran is keeping a close eye on the situation to see whether the Shia are being persecuted again like they were in the 1990s.

Afghanistan may not have altered in the previous 20 years, yet a lot has happened there. The country's population has grown from 21 million in 2001 to 38 million now, and its median age is only 18.5 years. More than two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30, and they were raised in a rather open and conservative culture where television, mobile phones, and the Internet all play major roles. The population of cities has increased from 4.6 million to 9 million as a direct result of urbanization. The largest growth has been in Kabul, which went from a population of roughly 70,000 in the 1990s to over 3,000,000 now, putting a strain on the city's already aging infrastructure. All of this presents new kinds of difficulties in governing, compared to those in the 1990s. Inability to pay wages due to lack of income. Funds held in foreign banks have been blocked, and promised humanitarian aid has not materialized. All of Afghanistan's neighbors are anxious about the coming flow of refugees as winter approaches.

It is assumed in New Delhi that under the Taliban's leadership, Pakistan would utilize Afghan land to more freely train, equip, and encourage anti-India terror organisations like Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and JeM to eventually create instability in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). That concern has been compounded by the Taliban's control in Afghanistan, which has resulted in a deteriorating law and order situation. As before, New Delhi's top priority is making sure that Pakistan doesn't utilize Afghanistan's instability to launch terrorist attacks against India, especially in J&K.

Rethinking India's Policy Towards the Taliban Government

In a meeting with Taliban leaders on August 31, 2021, just than two weeks after the Taliban took over Kabul, Indian officials in Qatar signaled the importance of friendly visit to India's security assessment. Reports indicate that India expressed its worries about terrorism's impact on national security to the Taliban and obtained assurances from them.³ The humanitarian and economic disasters in Afghanistan may have given India an opening to rethink its strategy in the region. Since the Taliban's takeover, India has provided Afghanistan with humanitarian supplies, including wheat and other food products as well as 500,000 COVID-19 vaccinations. To continue this partnership, the Indian government has allocated USD \$27 million in aid to Afghanistan in its budget for 2022–2023.⁴

As tensions between Islamabad and Kabul continue to rise over problems like border skirmishes, and as peace

¹ Gareth Price, "India's Policy towards Afghanistan" Chatham House, August 2013

² United States Department of State, "Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan"

³ "Joint Declaration Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," U.S. Department of State, February 29, 2020

⁴ <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/taliban-afghanistan-violence-india-aaj-ki-baat-rajat-sharma-opinion-724528>

negotiations between the Taliban and Islamabad stall, the Taliban may hand more power to New Delhi for further involvement. All depends on whether or not the Taliban are willing to meet India's primary security concerns in return. Interestingly, India has sent aid to Afghanistan via Pakistan despite initial resistance from Islamabad.⁵

While most of Afghanistan's neighbors are reexamining their stances toward the Taliban rule, India convened a regional security discussion in the country in the month of November. Officials from India, Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan issued a joint declaration expressing their shared concerns about terrorism, terror financing, and radicalization originating in Afghanistan and calling for a more inclusive government that represents all segments of Afghan society. Following the talks in New Delhi, Pakistan had a similar meeting with the United States, Russia, China, and the Taliban-led government. The major focus was on gaining worldwide legitimacy for the Taliban regime. On December 19, 2021 foreign ministers from Islamic nations will gather in Pakistan for another session to discuss the Afghanistan conflict.

Pakistan and Afghanistan share strong historical, religious, cultural, economic, and political links, and the recently successful Taliban in Afghanistan have become an important voice in discussions about Pakistan's national identity. The Taliban leadership is sympathetic to the concept of New Delhi mending relations with Kabul, which is good news given that the Pakistani security apparatus is likely to stymie India-led attempts in Afghanistan. It would be naive to anticipate a restoration to the past era of friendly Indo-Afghan ties under the Taliban, as the Pashtun-dominated Taliban have publicly announced that Islam would be the organizing framework of Afghanistan's governmental systems. 2.0.

Diplomatic work requires a certain degree of ambiguity and adaptability. Maintaining a steady equilibrium between morality and realism calls for ongoing adjustment. Engagement with the Afghan Taliban has been in the works since the start of the Doha peace negotiations, despite New Delhi's view of the Taliban as Pakistan's proxy. The Taliban leadership has not yet developed a coherent vision, thus India's decision to resume aid to Afghanistan reflects a pragmatic approach. However, whether India will take the next big step and reopen its embassy in Kabul remains to be seen.

New Delhi expects it can continue cooperating with the United States to compel Pakistan into resolving India's security concerns in Afghanistan despite worries over Washington's attitude. As a reaction to cross-border terrorist activities, India looks to recent events like the Balakot airstrikes (February 2019) and the surgical strike (September 2016) in Pakistan-administered Kashmir for guidance. If a significant terror attack were to occur on Indian territory at the hands of a Pakistan-based terror group, New Delhi would not hesitate to escalate again. For regional peace and security, the United States must do everything it can to curb Pakistan's anti-India efforts in Afghanistan.

The best approach for India would be a hybrid of the three. India should reach out to its former friends, most of whom

are currently living in exile, while concurrently pursuing dialogue with the Taliban. India, which wants peace and prosperity in Afghanistan and supports an inclusive administration, should leverage its relationships with the exiles to encourage reconciliation. India should not abandon its current allies in favor of potential new ones. Along with the reopening of its embassy, India will also be allowed to reopen four consulates as part of the terms of its engagement. In a way, this will serve as a barometer for how free the Taliban are from Pakistani control. Economic, development, and humanitarian aid are all part of an active engagement.

Conclusion

The Taliban are learning through experience that insurgency is simpler to sustain than government. Faced with hostile IS-K, a developing humanitarian catastrophe, potential pockets of resistance, and an increasingly cautious neighborhood, they face a number of obstacles. Even though they weren't invited, they nonetheless expressed their approval of the Delhi Declaration and implied that they'd be happy to see the embassy reopened in India. As a result of the Haqqani network and the ISI's ties to them, the Indian government is hesitant to take any risks. However, India cannot just withdraw from the area way the West can. The country has offered 50,000 metric tons of wheat and emergency medical supplies in response to the humanitarian appeal. Pakistan has said it will let them overland movement once the details are worked out. There will likely be continued diplomatic contact with Afghanistan through Doha or other forums where Pakistan cannot reject Indian participation.

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