

INDIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH TALIBAN-LED AFGHANISTAN AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Establishing a liberal government in post-Taliban Afghanistan allowed India to fulfil its foreign policy goal, i.e., investment in Afghanistan to acquire leverage for its anti-Pakistan agenda. However, the twenty-year war ended with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, resulting in the Taliban's rise to power, diminishing Indian influence and reversion of its interests. India halted its investment and diplomatic engagement with the Taliban government due to its previous position, which led India to compromise on its strategic interests outlined in the presence of US forces. To safeguard its strategic interests, India has resumed its diplomatic and economic engagement with the Taliban government at a critical time when other regional states are analysing the US' future course of action towards the war-torn country. Therefore, this paper examines how India evaluates the newly structured regional environment while finding a new role in Afghanistan. It also analyses the implications of India-Afghanistan re-engagement for Pakistan.

Keywords: India, Afghanistan, Taliban, Strategic Interests, Terrorism.

Introduction

Indian foreign policy always remained inspired by the Monroe doctrine, which urges a nation to increase its regional influence while evicting external forces from violating its sphere of influence.¹ This aspiration has led India to interfere in other countries, curtailing China and Pakistan and exploiting the presence of extra-regional forces in the region, especially the US tilt towards India. Excelling to become an influential regional power, the presence of the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the installation of an anti-Taliban coalition government in Afghanistan created a favourable environment for India to increase its standing in the conflict as a regional power. India engaged the Afghan government politically, diplomatically and economically through enhanced cooperation, exchange of mutual visits, military training, and massive investment in rehabilitation and development projects.

Concurrently, India pursued an anti-Pakistan strategy in Afghanistan by provoking border disputes and stirring ideological differences between the two Muslim neighbours by exploiting the US presence in the region and the rule of anti-Taliban forces. India also adopted a stringent stance against the Taliban and their connection with al-Qaida, causing the Taliban's annoyance. Indian strategic objectives overtly

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remained the rehabilitation of Afghan people, development of Afghanistan, and the pursuit of peace and stability in the region. However, the involvement of the Indian spy agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), in covert operations, selective investment in development and infrastructure projects, and restructuring of Afghan defence forces allowed India to engage Pakistan through terrorist activities. RAW and Afghan intelligence-sponsored terrorist groups under joint operations frequently entered Pakistan and carried out terrorist attacks. Pakistan was also blamed for suicide and terrorist attacks on Afghan forces, Indian nationals and development projects without providing evidence. Such covert measures aimed at distancing two neighbours, instigating a trust deficit between the two nations, a resurgence of rivalry, relegating Pakistan from regional integration, increasing its security issues, and helping India isolate Pakistan at the world level.

The US-Taliban peace deal in September 2020 diminished the chances of a prolonged Indian stay in Afghanistan and exploitation of porous Afghan borders against Pakistan's security and stability. Pakistan facilitated the peace deal and reconciliation process between stakeholders and thus emerged as an influential regional state in the Afghan context. The peace deal gave a big blow to the growing Indian influence in Afghanistan, resulting in the suspension of development projects and anti-Pakistan activities. With the withdrawal of US-led ISAF from Afghanistan, Afghan leadership fled the country, and the Taliban stood victorious on the heels of US forces, which forced India to close its embassy and pack up its ongoing projects.

Indian investment in Afghanistan could not be wasted, especially in the presence of the Northern Alliance and like-minded influential people in the country. However, the splendid victory of the Taliban convinced Indian think tanks and policymakers that the future in Afghanistan and peace in the region could not be imagined without the active involvement of the Taliban; hence Indian government would appreciate the situation and engage the Taliban. The economic crisis, freezing of assets and sanctions from the international community provide a window of exploitation for the Modi government through which India could establish its foothold again in Afghanistan, revive their relations with the Taliban government and appease them through the resumption of already launched projects. It was also appreciated that the Taliban, desirous of holding the government firmly, would positively reciprocate such an initiative from India, leading to another opportunity to secure their interests in the region.

This paper, therefore, analyses the parameters India has initiated to restructure its foreign policy towards the Taliban government and the steps taken to engage the Afghan nation. It also encompasses the avenues available to the Modi government, which would form the basis for Indian overture in Afghanistan while recommending how Pakistan can curtail Indian hegemonic design in its neighbourhood and what would impact its security and economic growth.

Background of India-Afghanistan Engagement

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1980, India being a close ally, supported its illegitimate unilateral action.² The control of Afghanistan through a Soviet-backed puppet government provided India an opportunity to establish itself in the country and initiate anti-Pakistan agenda. India exploited the situation in Pakistan for fulfilling its strenuous design of isolating Pakistan in the region, denying access to Central Asian states for energy needs, provoking disputes between two neighbours, and mitigating its influence in Afghan affairs. To disregard Pakistan's relevance, secure Indian interests, and engage Pakistan in a web of security and economic crises, Afghanistan surfaced as the best option in the Indian strategic calculations, which could help engage Pakistan from two fronts. However, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan forced India to align with the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance, which enjoyed significant backing from Soviet Russia and close association with India. Being a larger group, the Northern Alliance was expected to win control of Kabul but sustained resistance from Pashtun Taliban. The rise of the Taliban gave a blow to strategic interests set by India for its foreign policy in Afghanistan.

During the Taliban's rule in the 1990s, India was restrained from furthering its strategic interests and anti-Pakistan agenda. However, it pursued a greater opportunity to accelerate its interests which came up with the invasion of Afghanistan by the US-led ISAF in the aftermath of 9/11. India switched its loyalties to the US to secure its regional interests. It offered all-out support to counter the threat of the Taliban-al-Qaida alliance hindering global and Indian interests. With the ousting of the Taliban government, India reengaged in Kabul to drive its national interests through frequent visits and military, diplomatic and economic engagements with Afghan institutions. India increased its development projects in Afghanistan to win the international focus and Afghan support aimed at projecting itself as a regional stakeholder in the peace and stability of Afghanistan. The investment paid dividends, and Hamid Karzai's government further inclined towards India. The US entrusted India with reconstructing Afghanistan and leading stakeholders in converging all efforts for peace and stability in the war-torn country. India-Afghanistan engagement during the US presence remained significant.

President Hamid Karzai Regime (2001 – 2014)

Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun leader, became head of the interim government under US patronage in December 2001. His education record from India attracted more Indian focus, which became a close association with large investments committed by India for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. India upgraded its diplomatic structure by establishing a formal embassy instead of keeping a liaison office in 2002 with additional staff. The purpose was manifold, i.e., developing collaboration and contributing to restructuring the Afghan government and political authority under Bonn Conference. Moreover, intelligence sharing and economic reforms were handled through the presence of concerned staff on the ground. Simultaneously, India engaged

all ethnic and political groups through a policy for reconciliation on a power-sharing agreement. Hamid Karzai was conferred with commitments to different projects and investments during each visit to India. Indian investment of US \$70 million for the construction of the 218-km Zaranj-Delaram road, preferential trade agreement, cooperation in aviation, armed forces training, education, reconstruction, transport, commerce, agriculture and construction of dams were significant.³ India provided training and defence equipment to Afghan Army, further improving bilateral relations.

In 2011, India and Afghanistan entered into a strategic partnership agreement during Hamid Karzai's visit to New Delhi.⁴ Under the agreement, India commenced providing military training to Afghan forces and undertaking social and economic development with people-to-people contact, trade deals, cultural associations, and military visit exchanges. Under a joint mechanism, the construction of 202-km long and 220-KV DC transmission lines was carried out, bringing electricity to Kabul. The construction of major infrastructure projects, such as the parliament building and Salma dam, commenced in Afghanistan. In the education sector, India consented to scholarships for Afghan students for higher education in India while mentoring Afghan civil services and public servants. To act as a springboard for regional collaboration, India supported the membership of Afghanistan in SAARC and regional initiatives like the Istanbul process and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA).

President Ashraf Ghani Regime (2014 – 2021)

The government transition from Hamid Karzai to Ashraf Ghani did not affect India-Afghanistan relations, and it increased bilateral engagement between the two countries. President Ashraf Ghani ensured the continuity of Indian-sponsored development projects for which he maintained a favourable tilt towards India. By then, Indian investment had crossed US \$3 billion with an accelerated pace of visit exchange, resulting in Indian commitment to further investment in reconstruction and development projects. India pledged the provision of MI-25 helicopter for the Afghan Air Force. The inauguration of the dedicated Air Cargo Corridor in June 2017 between Kabul-Delhi and Kandahar-Delhi provided a fresh impetus to bilateral trade. In September 2017, India announced another US \$1 billion assistance package for Afghanistan. India also kept projecting its interest in Afghanistan, consistently alleging the Taliban-Pakistan alliance responsible for terror activities in the region and supported the Northern Alliance.

Post-US Afghanistan – Prospects for India

While investing in Afghanistan, Indian policymakers thought of a prolonged US presence, which would facilitate India to strengthen its roots in Afghanistan and consolidate its influence. The intended relations with Afghanistan withered away when the US announced its withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Taliban were acknowledged as an important stakeholder in the country's political course who pledged to honour the

peace deal. The victory of the Taliban surprised world analysts, who attributed it to Pakistan's assistance to the Taliban and their long-term association. India closed its embassy in Kabul, fearing a negative response from the Taliban government, and wound up its projects and reversed its investment. The anti-Pakistan agenda was foiled due to Pakistan's active and sincere efforts in line with international peace efforts between the US and the Taliban. The world acknowledged Pakistan's efforts for peace and stability in the region and Afghanistan and its efforts in facilitating the US withdrawal from the region. Similarly, the Afghan Taliban would remain inclined towards Pakistan due to its efforts for peace and diplomatic initiatives for the country's economic stability.⁵

India never tried to establish relations with the Taliban due to their inclination towards Pakistan, and it maintained a distance from the Taliban to secure its interests through Northern Alliance. The Taliban's supportive stance on Illegally Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJK) offended India. After coming into power, the Taliban announced during a press conference that they always support the oppressed in IIOJK and will always stand by them.⁶ The association between Pakistan and the Taliban drove India to an opposing club towards Northern Alliance. India has always alleged the Afghan Taliban for terrorist attacks against Indian security interests in collaboration with Jaish-e- Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT). LeT was allegedly held responsible for the Mumbai attacks of 2008 in India.

India's Future Strategy Towards Taliban

At the moment, Afghan Taliban are consolidating their gains and establishing control over the country amid severe global sanctions and the resultant economic crisis due to the denial of foreign aid and destruction of indigenous industry. The US has also abandoned the Afghan nation leaving them in a financially challenged environment. The Russia-Ukraine war has diverted the West's attention to the issue of NATO response, refugees' control, and Russian containment; hence Afghanistan is in dire need of humanitarian aid. Among the regional players, Pakistan and China have pledged assistance for reconstruction and rehabilitation projects, creating uncertainty and suspicion for India. Taliban were always considered as Pakistan's proxy and condemned for their human rights violations and extremist policies in Afghanistan. Through intensive diplomatic outreach, Pakistan urged the global community to provide economic and financial support to Afghan people else growing threats of terrorist elements could exploit the country. In September 2021, during the SCO summit, India opposed recognizing the Taliban government for its non-inclusive nature. It raised a question about formulating a Taliban interim government and human rights violations.⁷ In November 2021, India hosted the third regional security dialogue on Afghanistan in New Delhi, which was attended by the US and Russia, but no Afghan Taliban representative was invited. Moreover, China and Pakistan refused to participate, knowing India's intentions.⁸

Despite allegations and divergence of interests with the Afghan Taliban, Indian think tanks supported the policy of discreet talks with the Taliban to gain their favour and use them for their interests.⁹ Presently, India is pursuing a policy of engaging the Taliban government to counter Pakistan's influence in the region. Modi's orientation is to prompt negative Afghan sentiments regarding the international border between two neighbours and fencing along it. India is trying to accelerate its engagement with the Taliban government through diplomatic and economic ties. The challenging environment has become an avenue coupled with incomplete development projects for India to regain a foothold in Afghanistan and soften the Taliban's position for themselves. During a virtual address at the SCO-CSTO outreach summit, Modi pledged to continue development and humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan in infrastructure development, education, health, and capacity building. He announced a supply of food, medicines and routine items to meet the catastrophic situation.¹⁰ In line with Modi's announcement and to secure its strategic objectives, India has initiated some steps to win the ground with the Taliban government.

India views bilateral engagement with the Taliban as a strategic requirement and thinks a complete disengagement with Kabul would let Pakistan enhance its regional influence. Taliban have come up as a reality, and after a successful resurgence, Taliban have become a major political stakeholder in the region who would form part of all future discourse in the country. Therefore, abandoning the Afghan Taliban would be a strategic mistake compromising India's national interests, including its ambition to secure regional influence. India also presumes that the Taliban government is struggling to overcome economic and financial crises due to international sanctions. The lack of resources and scarcity of funds to undertake development projects in the public domain have forced the Taliban to rely on regional countries. Pakistan, the main source of assistance for the Taliban government, cannot address the needs of the Afghan public alone; therefore, the Taliban are looking at other options. In this scenario, an increased wheat supply from India would help them to manage the food crisis. It will also help in resuming stalled development projects in Afghanistan that would support regaining India's lost position.¹¹

Indian officials have started engaging the Taliban government, realizing that India would again be strategically relevant in their resurgence. Considering the shortage of food and basic amenities, India has committed to providing 50000 metric tons of wheat to Afghanistan through the Wahga border, Pakistan. The provision of wheat to Afghanistan resonates, adopting a pragmatic approach to the Taliban regime. With food assistance and official engagements, India is trying to bridge the gap between the two governments. Considering close Indian relations with the US and European countries, India has continued dialogue on Afghan stability with the European Union and other world powers. To further improve bilateral engagement, India has reopened its embassy in Kabul to ensure the security of its interests and monitor its investments.¹²

India has been committed to training Afghan cadets in the Indian military academy since the time of previous governments. In July 2022, twenty-five Afghan

military cadets returned from India after completing their training.¹³ India has also pledged to extend training and language course facilities to Afghan soldiers in India.¹⁴ India is exploiting such platforms to improve bilateral relations with Taliban-led Afghanistan. Similarly, at the request of the Taliban government, India has allowed the commercial operation of airlines which would facilitate the treatment of Afghan patients in India and enable students to travel to India for research and education purposes. Such operations would allow Afghanistan to access the Indian markets for its agriculture and horticultural products to generate revenue for the Taliban government.¹⁵

India intends to establish a link with the Central Asian states for economic and strategic gains. To secure its strategic interests, India is trying to contain the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (including CPEC) and ensure its trade route through Chabahar Port to Iran and further to CARs. To achieve these strategic interests, India is developing cordial relations with Kabul relegating past differences with the Taliban regime.¹⁶

Implications of India–Taliban Engagement

With the onset of a new era in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, analysts speculate the dawn of a new phase of rivalry between India and Pakistan. Indian policies in Afghanistan aim to deny Pakistan's influence and provoke its differences with the Taliban regime. On the other hand, the Taliban government is regaining control of the country and acquiring maximum foreign assistance for public rehabilitation. Under international sanctions, the Taliban are willing to work with regional states for better revenue. Indian strategists have exploited the humanitarian crisis in the country and thus started engagement with the Taliban regime on multiple fronts. It would encourage India to reinstate its anti-Pakistan policies by provoking vulnerabilities between neighbouring states, i.e., international border and water distribution of the Kabul River. India would soon finance terrorism inside Pakistan through Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to convince the world and Afghanistan that Pakistan is unstable and cannot assist peace and stability in Afghanistan. It would also seek to destabilize Pakistan economically and politically, relegating its position to influence Afghanistan.

Countering Pakistan's position in the region, especially in Afghanistan, is India's primary policy objective. During the coalition government, India used Afghan soil to train and infiltrate anti-Pakistan insurgent and terrorist elements for covert operations inside Pakistan. Though with improved bilateral relations with the Taliban, India would not be able to undertake training; however, funding and moral support to anti-Pakistan elements would continue by Indian spy agencies.¹⁷ India would extensively launch media campaigns to link terrorist attacks inside Afghanistan with Pakistan, thus creating mistrust between the two Muslim states. Though with limited staff, opening an embassy in Kabul would allow India to create a link between the Taliban regime and the US-led western community. It can be a forum for the Taliban to initiate talks with the US and realign their policies in line with the international community's demands. Such initiatives would project India as an arbitrator with more regional influence. India would

achieve a position to exercise its policies and initiate intelligence sharing with the Taliban for enhanced security.

Conclusion

In its sincere efforts, Pakistan has always aspired for peace and stability in Afghanistan due to natural association and spillover effects on each other. Pakistan facilitated the US-Taliban peace deal and initiated diplomatic outreach to global forums for immediate economic and financial support to control the humanitarian crisis before its emergence. Immediately after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Pakistan arranged a troika plus conference on the issue attended by the US, Russia, China and Taliban government representatives pledged to ensure stability and development.¹⁸ Pakistan urged the international community to provide humanitarian assistance and help the Taliban government to improve the health and education sectors. Pakistan has also undertaken a diplomatic campaign to inform the world about the crisis developing in the country, which can be averted with foreign assistance and relegating chances of the rise of terrorism in the country. Despite Pakistan's efforts, India is making headway threatening Pakistan's interests in the region. The increased political, diplomatic, security and economic engagement between India and the Taliban regime would encourage India to use Afghan soil against Pakistan again. India would financially support TTP in undertaking anti-Pakistan activities to destabilize Pakistan and detract it from its interests in Afghanistan.

However, Pakistan has consistently been working with the Taliban regime to support them in addressing the humanitarian crisis. The international community has appreciated its sincere efforts in the past and today. The geographical proximity and cultural linkage provide a greater opportunity for both countries to engage each other in security, economy and diplomacy naturally. Pakistan should continue its reconciliation efforts between Afghan groups and earn support for the Taliban government to improve its economic and security situation. The interdependence of Pakistan and Afghanistan on each other will not be deterred through Indian economic and diplomatic manoeuvring.

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