

# India-US Partnership in Afghanistan: Challenges Ahead for India

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## Abstract

*India and the US have many shared common interests in the region. The two countries aspire for peace and stability in South Asia. However, the recent developments in Afghanistan have dramatically changed the geopolitical scenario of the region. India and the US are going to face many serious challenges in Afghanistan including terrorism, Chinese presence, and dilution of democratic values. The pathway for India's future engagement with the Taliban Government is mired by serious inherent challenges which India needs to navigate along with the US and other like-minded countries. It also needs to recalibrate its strategy amidst change in its relation with its old allies.*

## Introduction

The US foreign policy initiatives are often criticised for their lack of deep understanding of the complex political and social intricacies of the country where the US intends to bring 'change' — either through diplomatic means or through military interventions. Cold war, and the post-cold war, era are full of examples where US interventions have gone awry due to its lack of understanding of the local and regional dynamics. Since the Vietnam War, inability of the US to take the risk of high casualties is another major reason for some of its failures. In Afghanistan, the other option for the US was to keep minimum military presence and force the Taliban to fulfil its promises. It could have asked the international community to back its presence in Afghanistan and make financing, and funding, conditional on progress in peace talks. However, its risk aversion mentioned above led to a catastrophic result with the overthrow of the democratic government.

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The withdrawal from Afghanistan appears ill-implemented and is similar to its hasty withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Once the US forces left Iraq, the ISIS started to spread its influence forcing the US to redeploy forces back in Iraq. The US had to redeploy a small number of troops in Iraq in the early 2014 which by the end of 2015 rose to 3,500 and by mid-2016 to around 5000 troops.<sup>1</sup> President Joe Biden in his 26 July 2021 meeting with the Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi clearly stated that the US was not going to be involved in any combat mission by the end of 2021. The US inability to take further risks in Afghanistan is again similar to its inability to take a risk in Syria in 2013 when, despite drawing the red line by the Obama administration to act against the Assad regime in case it uses chemical weapons, it failed to act against the regime when it carried out a chemical attack near Damascus that killed more than 1,400 people.<sup>2</sup> The US intervention and its withdrawal from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan suggest lack of a strategic end-goal. To the analyst, the withdrawal does not appear to be based on ground realities.

The complete drawdown of the US forces from Afghanistan, from both combat and non-combat role, the rapid ascendancy of the Taliban, and the quick surrender of the Afghan Government raise a list of questions that needs a comprehensive analysis. It has security and geopolitical implications for the region and for both India and the US.

### **The Withdrawal and the Consequences**

The US had based its withdrawal from Afghanistan on two conditions: reduction of violence and formation of an inclusive government based on the intra Afghan dialogue. A cursory look at the data from May-August 2021 suggests the violence increased many folds once the international troops started withdrawing from Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> The “in together, out together” plan was welcomed by the Taliban with increased attacks on the government officials, media person, and Afghan forces. According to a United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report, “It was particularly concerned about the acute rise in the number of civilian casualties in the period from 01 May 2021, with almost as many recorded in the May-June period as in the entire preceding four months”.<sup>4</sup>

The Afghan Taliban had announced its interim government formation on 07 September 2021. The list of the ministers was contrary to what was promised by the Taliban. The list includes top terrorists, some including Sirajuddin Haqqani<sup>5</sup>, the new acting interior minister, with huge rewards for their arrests. It hardly reflects the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan, as most of the ministers are Pashtuns, and there are no women ministers. The Taliban's deliberate attempt to not fulfil its promise portrays both the US and its policy and influence in the region in poor light; rather US inability to force the Taliban to stay committed to its promises.

### **Fine-tooth Comb Policy vs Wait and Watch Policy**

Under the Biden administration, India's and US interest in Afghanistan differed. For the US, it was clearly an exit at any cost policy. For India, it was that the US withdrawal should be based on a condition that is conducive for regional peace. At the moment, the outcome is clearly at odds with what India would have expected.

The Indian Foreign Minister, when he spoke at the 'India@75: The Freedom Summit', said, "While India's interests converge with the US' in the east, there are divergences in the west, particularly Afghanistan".<sup>6</sup> Clearly, he was suggesting to the US unwillingness to stay in Afghanistan until it shows signs of stability. India had, since 2018, shown reservations on the manner and the mandate of the US-Taliban peace negotiation and the agreement. Although, India in principle has agreement with the US that there is no military solution to Afghanistan, it has its share of reservations on the kind of leverage the US is giving to the Taliban and its patrons in Pakistan. Despite the growing synergy between India and the US, and relationship moving from bilateral to multilateral levels, India had little option but to engage the US in whatever ways it can on the issue of Afghanistan.

The complete withdrawal of the international forces leaving behind a messy Afghanistan operated by the Taliban and controlled by the Pakistan is a likely scenario India was worried about. Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla, during his three day visit to US, had said that the situation in the war-torn country was a key part of discussions and India and the US would assess Pakistan's actions in Afghanistan with a 'fine-tooth comb'<sup>7</sup>. Mr Shringla also said that both India and the US are adopting a 'Wait and Watch

Policy'. India is closely engaged with the US on developments in Afghanistan and is calibrating its actions in response to the evolving situation.

The US and India have shown willingness to act together on the regional issues. However, particularly considering recent developments in Afghanistan, there are little military and diplomatic options for India to make both the Taliban and Pakistan accountable for what is happening in Afghanistan. Pakistan's long tested strategy of double games, polished with the strategy of denial, has many buyers among US policy makers and it has been successful in selling its story to the US forces. Ryan Crocker, former US Ambassador to Pakistan from 2004 to 2007, recalls his meeting with the former Pakistan Army Chief General Ashfaq Kayani in the leaked 'Afghanistan Papers' by Washington Post. Kayani said to former Ambassador, "You know, I know you think we're hedging our bets, you're right, we are because one day you'll be gone again and it'll be like Afghanistan the first time, you'll be done with us but we're still going to be here because we can't actually move the country. And the last thing we want with all of our other problems is to have turned the Taliban into a mortal enemy, so yes, we're hedging our bets".<sup>8</sup> Openly, Pakistan officials have denied any control over the Taliban. The conversation aptly summaries Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan and the US' limited options vis à vis Pakistan in Afghanistan.

Indian investments in Afghanistan in the last 20 years have been exceptionally high. It has made investments in people-oriented projects meant to directly benefit the masses. Its ultimate aim has been to balance Pakistan and safeguard its interest through its strategic investments in the region. Therefore, with the fall of the democratic government in Afghanistan and ascendancy of the Taliban, India can no longer gain the same preferential treatment and condition in Afghanistan. The development also implies that the US has little leverage left over the Taliban, and even Pakistan, as far as the Afghan affairs are concerned. The situation ultimately demands India to work with other players in the region to safeguards its interests.

### **New Dynamics and Turbulent Way Ahead**

India has a few major concerns in Afghanistan. Firstly, the favourable conditions for India in Afghanistan since 2001 have

ended. Pakistan at the helm of affairs in Afghanistan might exploit Afghanistan for anti-India activities, particularly terrorism in Indian Union Territory Kashmir.<sup>9</sup> There is all likelihood that Afghanistan may become a hotbed of anti-India terrorist groups. The Taliban spokespersons are giving conflicting statements as far as their views on India are concerned. On one hand, the Taliban leader Anas Haqqani in an interview to an Indian news channel said, “Kashmir is not part of our jurisdiction and interference is against our policy”.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, another Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen told the BBC’s Hindi service, “As Muslims, we also have a right to raise our voice for Muslims in Kashmir, India or any other country”.<sup>11</sup> Recently, Indian Ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, met with the head of the Taliban’s political officer Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai and discussed various issues including India’s concern that “Afghanistan’s soil should not be used for anti-Indian activities and terrorism in any manner”.<sup>12</sup> According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) statement, the Taliban leader said that all the issues would be “positively addressed”.

Secondly, the Taliban is looking for international legitimacy and recognition. The attempts made by it to pacify India’s concern can be short lived as it also requires backing from the China and Pakistan to govern Afghanistan. A future India Pakistan tension will test the words of the Taliban spokesperson who has assured India of positive response. However, the conflicting views on the Kashmir issue clearly suggests influence of the Pakistan military on the Taliban. This portends that as far as their stand on the Kashmir issue is concerned, India will be less assured than what the Taliban has promised.

**Geopolitical Scenario.** Another major concern of India is due to change in the geopolitical scenario. In a China dominated region, geopolitics is no longer as favourable as what it was in late 1990s. The situation is at the cusp of many inflection points. Two of the main pillars of India’s Afghanistan policy in 1990s were Iran and Russia. In the recent times, when the India-China relations reached its nadir with serious erosion in their relationship, Iran and Russia have built a solid relationship with China. Ironically, India’s long term partner Russia has shown deep inclination towards Pakistan on the behest of China. India was deliberately kept out by the Russians from the TROIKA on Afghanistan, which included

Pakistan. The recent resolution against the Taliban at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) under India's chair, sponsored by France, UK, and the US, was adopted with 13 members including India. Russia and China abstained from voting. Vassily Nebenzia, Russia's envoy had said Moscow "was forced" to abstain during the vote on the resolution on Afghanistan "because the authors of the draft ignored our principled concerns".<sup>13</sup> This clearly brings out the growing fissures in India's relation with Russia.

India's closeness with the US has also strained its relationship with Iran. Iran has been vocal against the US policies in Afghanistan and had welcomed its withdrawal. Although Iran shared its reservations on the Taliban regime, it is less likely that it will oppose a force that has risen in its backyard and which might hit its own regional interests and local sectarian sentiments. Recently, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has called for the enhancement of security and economic cooperation between Iran and Pakistan.<sup>14</sup> Given the fact that India has invested heavily in the Iranian Chabahar Port primarily to navigate the Pakistan's blockade of its trade with Afghanistan, it will be interesting to see how the new developments will impact India's capacity to utilise the port for its trade with Afghanistan.

Traditionally, India has always backed the Northern Alliance, an umbrella of largely non-Pashtun groups from the northern Afghanistan since the emergence of the radical mujaheddin Taliban. The response of the Northern Alliance to the Taliban ascendancy has surprised India. The way the Northern Alliance was unable to mount a united counter challenge to the Taliban has eroded its credibility in New Delhi. Political infighting between the groups could be one of the reasons. Therefore, the possibility of India supporting a faction, or a sub-group, of the Northern Alliance is very low, and naturally would be very limited even if India tends to do so, primarily because earlier Iran and Russia were sympathetic to India's concerns and were anti-Taliban which now appear to be diluted by the recent developments. India, despite announcing e-visas for the Afghan nationals, has also not yet started giving e-visas after invalidating all visas in August.<sup>15</sup>

The most crucial concern of India is the China-Pakistan nexus in Afghanistan. Recently, the Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid had said, "China is our most important partner and



represents a fundamental and extraordinary opportunity for us because it is ready to invest and rebuild our country". He further said, "There are rich copper mines in the country, which, thanks to the Chinese, can be put back into operation and modernised. In addition, China is our pass to markets all over the world".<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the Taliban rule appears to give more prominence to its relations with China; therefore, increasing Chinese footprints in Afghanistan are inevitable. Taliban, at the helm of Affairs in Afghanistan, is certainly going to open a new frontier for India-China rivalry, with India's limited role as the most possible scenario.

The developments in Afghanistan are certainly going to widen the gap on regional issues between New Delhi and Russia, as suggested by Professor C Raja Mohan. Russia fraternising with the Taliban, building relationship with Pakistan and strengthening ties with China is not a good signal for India. With India's growing distance with Iran, India is at the likelihood of losing another valuable strategic partner. The Pakistan China nexus in Afghanistan will openly compromise India's security and strategic interests in Afghanistan and beyond.

### **The Afghan Questions**

The questions are what can India and the US do about it? Will the Taliban be obliging its promises on non-interference, will it be accommodative of Indian and the US interests, and at what cost? The Taliban needs international support, both financially and institutionally, to function else it might face internal challenges. However, there is a limit to what international pressure can do given the fact that the international community itself is divided on the issue of terrorism and has less endurance now. India may, likely, give some recognition to the Taliban Government based on conditions and short of legitimising its rule. It will wait for the outcome of such condition based recognition and then only will look further to build its ties with the Taliban. At the same time, India would like to promote the idea of democracy, inclusiveness, and pro-people governance in Afghanistan. The effectiveness of all these strategies will be based on balancing and counterbalancing each other's interests. India has only Hobson's choice. Therefore, it is better to wait and watch and then do what is required in a manner that its choice compliments its strategic interests out of this region. India will have to work with the smaller Central Asian

countries, including its former partner Tajikistan, as well as European countries like France and Germany to reshape its Afghan Policy. With the Taliban at the helm with Pakistan's support, the task for India is cut out to look for new strategy and new alignments for the region.

### Endnotes

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