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- ★ A CRITIQUE OF A FILM NAMED 'HIDEKO THE BUS CONDUCTRESS'
- ★ HOW ELECTIONS GOVERN PEOPLE
- ★ REGISTERING VOICE: WOMEN WRITING POETRY IN CONFLICT SOCIETIES
- ★ TIGER SIBLINGS AND THE IDU MISHMIS
- ★ CAN THE SUBALTERN PROTEST? TEA PLANTATION WORKERS OF ASSAM AND INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT
- ★ 'DEVELOPMENT' IN THEORY AND PRACTICE : THE CASE OF INDIA
- ★ DEVELOPMENT AND WEAKER SECTIONS : UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM AND ITS IMPACT IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM
- ★ CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ECOLOGICAL ABJECT : THE POLITICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE IN GUN ISLAND
- ★ CHINA'S HUMANITARIANISM: AID, PANDEMIC AND FOREIGN POLICY
- ★ THE PROPAGANDA MODEL AND DEVELOPMENTS IN INTERNET AGE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INDIAN POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT WITH REFERENCE TO ASSAM LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION, 2021
- ★ CLASS QUESTION IN THE WRITINGS OF BISHNU PRASAD RABHA
- ★ COMMENTARY ON THE DYNAMICS OF US-GERMAN RELATIONS : FROM 'GUARDIAN-WARD' TO PARTNERSHIP IN CRISIS?
- ★ THE NEO-LIBERALISM AND THE STATE : A DISCURSIVE FORMATION OF THE POST-LIBERAL INDIA
- ★ REVISITING AMARTYA SEN'S NOTION OF JUSTICE : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS
- ★ LANGUAGE AND GENDER: INTERACTION AND CONTESTATION
- ★ RE-VISITING THE IDEA OF POWER THROUGH NEHRU'S IDEALS OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY : A THEORETICAL ESTIMATE
- ★ ECOLOGICAL CRISIS OF LABOUR PROCESS UNDER CAPITALISM : A CRITICAL INTROSPECTION
- ★ THE CHINA FACTOR IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY : IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NORTHEAST INDIA
- ★ STATUS OF PESTICIDES PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN INDIA
- ★ INDIA-MYANMAR STRATEGIC CO-OPERATION THROUGH NORTH EAST : BILATERALISM TO SUB-REGIONALISM
- ★ THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC STATE AND POLICE IN INDIA
- ★ POOR AND ELECTRICITY POLICY: AN ASSESSMENT IN ASSAM
- ★ AFGHANISTAN IMBROGLIO-OPTIONS FOR NEW DELHI

AFGHANISTAN IMBROGLIO-OPTIONS FOR NEW DELHI

Mallika Pegu

Abstract

The withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan and the resurgence of Taliban have had major implications for the Indian security establishment. The pursuit of 'look west' policy will depend on securing peace, security and connectivity in Afghanistan which are vital ingredients for India. With the Taliban regime back in power and China increasingly making its presence felt in Pakistan's backyard, alarm bells have surely been rung for India. Increasingly, Af-Pak region presents a major security challenge for India; New Delhi must have clear answers as to how to address these security concerns; furthermore, the delay in taking important decisions will hurt India's long term national interests. While it may not be an ideal solution, a 'late strategic entry' into the affairs of a Taliban dominated Afghanistan maybe the need of the hour.

Keywords: *Taliban, strategic, Af-Pak region, security, national interest.*

I. Introduction

The hurried exit of the US from the ‘graveyard of empires’ in August 2021 also marks the beginning of the second innings of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The rapid fall of Afghanistan to the hands of Taliban was completely unanticipated by the Biden administration. While it does mark the beginning of the end of ‘American century’, additionally, as events in Afghanistan unfolded, it has turned out to be a major foreign policy challenge for India. Engaging with the Taliban regime or the lack of it is a Pandora’s Box for the current Modi administration. With the rapid ingress of China to the Af-Pak region, this paper identifies the key foreign policy concerns for India. Divided into two key sections it will first identify the strategic and security challenges for New Delhi ; second, it will seek to analyse the multiple ‘paths’ available for the Modi regime to engage with the Taliban Afghanistan.

II. India –Afghanistan political relations: an overview

While the relations between the people of India and Afghanistan can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization, over a period several factors have strengthened the same as well as tested the fragile social and political fabric between the two countries. Post-independence, relations between India and Afghanistan started on the front-foot. In January 1950, a five year ‘Friendship Treaty’ was signed between Prime Minister Nehru and then Ambassador to India Mohammad Najibullah (Ashraf, 2007, p.90). Being at the centre of the Cold War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 ‘did not produce peace and stability, but rather broke the political balance both inside and outside Afghanistan’(Wang , 2017, p.113). In the 1980s, India sought to strengthen its political relations with pro-Soviet political regime in Afghanistan. Additionally, India had invested substantially to strengthen its relations with the USSR as it ‘served as the crucial bulwark against Pakistan and as a counterweight to both China and the United States’(Horn,1983, p.224). It must be recalled that ‘India abstained from the vote on a resolution calling for the immediate, unconditional, and total withdrawal of foreign troops in

Afghanistan' (Prasad, 1980, p.636). An autonomous Afghanistan was India's best route to maximizing its relational control (Chadda, 1997) over Pakistan. The denial of Pakistani hegemony and domination in Afghanistan directly corresponds with stability and security in India (Yadav & Barwa, 2011, p.117).

The end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan certainly did not augur well for the Indian establishment. India, which had supported the Najibullah Government in Kabul was caught on the wrong foot. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 1996 marked the beginning of turbulent period between New Delhi and Kabul. Things further got complicated with the hijacking of IC-814 (Kandahar,1999) and the Taliban secured the release of three terrorists including MasoodAzhar who went on to form the Jaish-e –Mohammed, who were subsequently responsible for the 2001 attack of the Indian Parliament. The relations between India and Afghanistan reached its nadir during 1996-2001; it was seen as a 'diplomatic black hole' (Paliwal, 2015, p.9) as there was no Indian diplomatic presence in Kabul.

The course of India-Afghanistan relations have been additionally shaped by the United States and Pakistan. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent US intervention in Afghanistan and topple of the Taliban, renewed India's strategic interests in that region. In 2001, an Interim Government led by Hamid Karzai was formed and by 2003 'major combat' was declared 'over'. In 2005 , the US pledged its commitment to Afghanistan through a joint declaration which declared that the two countries were 'strategic partners' and both were committed to 'long-term security, democracy, and prosperity'. By 2010, the number of US troops in Afghanistan swelled to 150,000. According to Patnaik, the US presence in Afghanistan rather than being seen as a 'breach' in its strategic periphery, but was seen as an important step which enhanced India's security (Pattanaik, 2012, p.572). The success of 'Operation Geronimo' (May 2011) was a major fillip to the Obama administration. The US soon announced the gradual withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan as it shifted focus on rebuilding of Afghan economy and

infrastructure and capacity building of people and its institutions. However, India had been rather cautious in moving too deep into the affairs of Afghanistan. Part of the 'reluctance' (Destradi, 2014) has been because of the US-Pakistan relations. As Praveen Swami puts it, the United States is 'subcontracting the task of keeping the peace in Afghanistan to the Inter-Services Intelligence' (Joshi, 2014, p.88). For New Delhi, while dealing with the Af-Pak region, the US and its allies and have failed to take India's national security into account. Washington's continued dependence on Pakistan's for its operations in Afghanistan after 9/11 has been a concern for India (Destradi, 2014, p112).

India, on its part has become more involved in rebuilding this war torn country through 'multipronged strategy' (Pant, 2010, p.134). Over the last two decades, New Delhi has played a key role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement (2011) which sought to strengthen political, security, trade and economic cooperation was based 'upon the principles of sovereignty, equality and territorial integrity of States, non-interference in their internal affairs, mutual respect and mutual benefit' also was committed to 'capacity development' of Afghan people (MEA, Govt, of India, 2011). Built at an estimated cost of \$90 million, the Afghan Parliament building was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015. As of 2019-20, bilateral trade has consistently moved in northwardly direction and was estimated to be over \$1 billion. With over 400 infrastructure projects spread across all provinces in the country, India has invested more than \$3 billion in Afghanistan. India has funded key projects like the 42 MW Salma Dam or the Afghan-India Friendship Dam project and the 218-km path The Zaranj-Delaram highway as well as the restoration and inauguration of the Star Palace in 2016. Besides, these projects, India have helped construct of power supply and telecom infrastructure (Das, India Today, 2021).

However inspite of all efforts by the Afghan and the US government, the Taliban could not be completely vanquished, rather it grew bolder with time as it

launched series of terror attacks in Kabul (2018). Soon the US and the Taliban were engaged in negotiations in Doha and the Trump administration also renewed its commitment for orderly withdrawal of American troops. The Biden Government announced the complete withdrawal of US soldiers from Afghanistan (April 2021). In a swift turn of events, facing little resistance, the Taliban fighters made rapid strides towards Kabul and took over the presidential palace (August 15, 2021). Importantly, while the US and its allies withdrawn its troops and officials from Afghanistan and adopted a wait and watch approach, countries such as China and Russia left their embassies open and officials to oversee the 'humanitarian needs'. Pakistan on its part has stepped up its diplomatic efforts to recognize the Taliban Government in Afghanistan; for India, it is a major concern. For China and Russia, the withdrawal of the US presents opportunities and challenges. Relations with the Taliban are strategically important for Beijing; not only is this region mineral rich, it has invested heavily in the CPEC corridor. Furthermore, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Xinjiang does not bode well for Beijing; hence, some degree of stranglehold over Afghanistan is required. While secretly gloating the weakening of the United States, Russia may lack the financial resources, but it is concerned about regional security and securing its borders in its 'backyard' - Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

For India, it is *deja vu* all over again. The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to Kabul has surely upset India's regional aspirations and has hurt India's 'look west' policy. India which had invested in capacity building of the Afghans, played key role in training and education of officials and drafting the Afghan Constitution, suddenly felt the ground shift; the Government of India was clearly not taking any risks and decided to pull out its official from Afghanistan. One of the key concerns New Delhi is that the Taliban's interim government in Afghanistan contains names of global terrorists like Sirajuddin Haqqani and several others who had been earlier held at Guantanamo Bay prison. Furthermore, the relations between the Haqqani network and Pakistan based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) have been scrutinised by the Indian security

establishment. Clearly, the ability to distinguish the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ Taliban as well as ISIS and Taliban is far from easy and this dimension has added a new challenge for policy makers of India.

III. Dealing with the Taliban: India’s options

India’s tense relationship with Pakistan has to a large extent shaped its policies towards Afghanistan. There is a lurking fear in New Delhi that the Taliban Government in Afghanistan will become an extension of the Pakistan security-military establishment. The issue of Afghanistan providing ‘strategic depth’ (Raghavan , The Hindu, 2001) to Pakistan has only got rekindled. Another key concern is that Afghanistan might become a training ground for terror groups who are controlled by people sitting in Islamabad. Additionally, Pakistan too does not want any kind of Indian involvement in Taliban controlled Afghanistan. In the past too ‘Pakistan has played a major role in preventing India from becoming more active in Afghanistan’(Destradi, 2014, p.106). Though officials of eight countries took part in the Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan (Nov 2021, it clearly identified ‘deep’ concerns which largely overlaps those of the Indian Government- that ‘Afghanistan’s territory should not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing any terrorist acts’. Again, the need for cooperation to tackle ‘radicalization, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking in the region’ and the stress on ‘forming an open and truly inclusive government that represents the will of all the people of Afghanistan’ has been reiterated from all the nations concerned. For the eight nations, including India, the immediate concern is ‘humanitarian assistance’ and the need for ‘dialogue’ and greater ‘engagement’ with Afghanistan (MEA, Government of India,2021).

Therefore the dilemma for New Delhi is whether or not to engage with the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban have managed maintain its throttlehold over nearly all of Afghanistan and given the power vacuum in the region, with active support from Pakistan, China and Russia, they are here to stay. Essentially, it presents a herculean task for policy makers of India- How and when to engage

with the Taliban? It becomes a bigger problem given the fact that the Taliban have got active support from the Pakistani establishment and they in the past have engaged in terror acts across continents and are supporting the *jehadis* in Kashmir. The Modi government will find it hard to justify to its domestic audience the need for dialogue with a party that has waged a war against *akhand* or united India.

As India adopts a wait and watch approach, there is a concern that any further delay to engage with the Taliban will create greater space for Pakistan and China in Afghanistan. India's engagement with Taliban's Afghanistan has to be through multilateral forums and global institutions. Furthermore, India's nature of engagement with Taliban has to be more 'humanitarian' in approach and security for the time being must be fleetingly touched upon. In India, it is estimated that there are over 40000 Afghans and are demanding refugee status. The present political dispensation has been rather hesitant when it comes to granting refugee status or citizenship to Muslims from neighbouring countries. Clearly, India has sent mixed signals to the Taliban government in Afghanistan. While trade and economic routes have been hampered, for New Delhi, as long as Pakistan continues to be the dominant player in Afghanistan, it is better to lie down and let the tide pass.

IV. Conclusion:

According to Joshi, three factors – 'security, ambition, and energy' – inform India's Afghan strategy and its judgment that it requires a coherent Af-Pak strategy (Joshi, 2010, p.20), the advent of the Taliban had only complicated the already precarious scenario. Many analysts concluded India's policy towards Afghanistan as rather "soft" (Wang, 2017, p.118). There is a rather growing disconnect when it comes to relationship between the 'deep' Afghan state and the people of Afghanistan. While Pakistan will play a key role in influencing the foreign policy of Afghanistan, India has the 'potential' (Destradi, 2014, p.111) to do more in shaping of public opinion of the same. However, like the past, if New Delhi continues to marginalize itself by complaining from the 'sidelines' (Joshi, 2014, p.95), India will

cede more ground in Afghanistan to other powers like China. Perhaps, under the fluid political environment, the Taliban is yet to prove its legitimacy and hence the issue of international recognition continues to be sidelined; the Taliban will have to do more than just impose the Sharia law on women. Barring Pakistan, for the Taliban government to be accepted by other neighbouring countries, issues of 'inclusion and participation' of all sections of Afghan society is truly paramount. Unless it happens, the Taliban will continue to remain a 'militia' and its quest for its government for global recognition will be delayed.

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