

India's Afghanistan Policy

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Contents

Introduction	2
India's Aim in Afghanistan	3
The Pakistan Factor	3
Gaining Access to Central Asian Energy Markets	5
Establishing a Stable Government in Afghanistan	6
Shifting Regional Dynamics.....	7
The Pakistan Dilemma	11

Introduction

As the United States plans its exit from Afghanistan, the international community is widely anticipating the return of the Taliban to Kabul. The Taliban are expected to take the reins, either as part of a weakly enforced coalition supporting an elected government or even perhaps as sole administrators of Afghanistan. Up until recently, there is a sense of urgency in Washington's overtures towards the Taliban. Earlier in October, US Special Representative to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad met delegates of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" in Doha. With growing prospects of the Taliban eventually becoming a legitimate party in a future political settlement, the international community is visibly altering its method of engagement with the group.

The November 9 talks on Afghanistan, which also included Taliban representatives, put India's policy towards the Taliban in question, once again. After much evasiveness over the subject, India sent two ex-diplomats to Moscow to "listen in" on the talks. Any hopes of a policy reversal on Afghanistan were however quickly put to rest when the Indian government subsequently stepped up and repeated its long-held stance, reiterating India "would not be talking with the Taliban". Members of government further pointed out that India was not represented by officials of the Indian government at these talks; they were "non-official" members, who were actually retired Foreign Service officers and maintained their strict observer-status throughout the duration of their attendance.

Given the emerging ground realities in the Afghan region, New Delhi's unwillingness to change its Afghanistan policy and alter course on engagement with the group, beyond being confusing, also puts the region's security-balance at risk. With Washington's protective blanket soon to vanish and the future of the Afghan region being decided, perhaps it is time for the Indian leadership to re-evaluate India's long-standing Afghanistan policy.

This paper aims to explore India's aim in Afghanistan amid the evolving regional realities, in an attempt to build a broader understanding of the Indian stance on Afghanistan and decipher its wider implications.

India's Aim in Afghanistan

The Taliban seek to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate in the region, which will be governed by Sharia Law. The existence of radical outfits such as the Taliban and the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan's power structures puts the security and stability of not only India, but the entire region at risk. If the Taliban are to strengthen their hold over Afghanistan, their influence could spread to Pakistan and Kashmir. Harsh Pant, a distinguished fellow at Indian think tank Observer Research Foundation wrote:

"A gradual descent into a civil war is likely as various regional stakeholders try to reshape the battlefield in accordance with their own strategic priorities counting on American forces to eventually leave."

Given the Taliban's ascent, it is important to study factors currently steering India's policy position on Afghanistan.

The Pakistan Factor

New Delhi's Afghanistan policy is to a great degree guided by the 'Pakistan factor', which means in deciding policy India is simultaneously devoting its energies towards deconstructing Pakistan's supposed 'anti-India agenda' in Afghanistan and otherwise. According to the Indian government, the Taliban were not only created but also continue to be backed by Pakistan, which is nurturing radical groups to forward its strategic and security objectives in the Afghan region. Perhaps India isn't even that opposed to the idea of coming to an understanding with the Taliban—the real issue remains that of emboldening state and non-state actors in Pakistan who are believed to be plotting against Indian interests.

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Prominent New Delhi-based defense analyst, Retired Brigadier General Venkataraman Mahalingam, was quoted in The Diplomat, saying:

"It is a misnomer to state that Pakistan is merely providing military support to the Taliban and Haqqani Network. ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence, the Pakistani intelligence agency] created them as its proxies. The argument that the Taliban and Haqqani Network are two different organizations is yet another folly. To exemplify this

point, I will quote the announcement of appointments posted in the Taliban's website "Shahamat" by Quetta Shura, the Taliban's governing body. It declared Maulavi Haibatullah Akhunzada, the Taliban's former judiciary chief, and Mullah Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of Haqqani Network and the son of its founder Jalaluddin Haqqani, are the two deputy heads of Taliban. How can the leader of Haqqani Network become the deputy leader of Taliban if they are two different outfits? Pakistan owns these terrorist outfits."

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supports the idea that Pakistan provides safe havens to terror organizations in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). On March 1, 2016, adviser to Pakistan's prime minister on foreign affairs, Sartaj Aziz, made a speech at the Council of Foreign Relations in Washington, where he admitted that Islamabad has 'considerable' influence

over the Taliban. He noted this is because the Taliban leaders and families live and have access to medical facilities in the country. Furthermore, the Taliban leader appointed under Pakistan's directions, Mullah Mansour, was also discovered living in an open unrestricted complex called "Satellite Town" in Quetta, Pakistan.

One of the leading priorities for the Indian government in the region is to limit Pakistan's influence and stop its agents from plotting against India. Any change in India's 'Pakistan policy' will be met with significant backlash. India is adamant that the movement of terrorists and weapons from across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border needs to be stopped through intervention by the international community; the Taliban must be forced to surrender, and a democratic government must be set up through elections in Afghanistan. In order for this to happen, India's 'Afghanistan policy' has maintained focus on the need to restrain Pakistan internationally and curtail its influence in Kabul.

Gaining Access to Central Asian Energy Markets

India is the fourth largest energy consumer in the world. Its energy demands are rising still, with frequent national power shortages in the country and an energy infrastructure that is inadequate to satisfy its

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growing energy needs. Amid these realities, Central Asia and its abundant oil, gas and uranium reserves, along with its vast hydroelectric potential provides an attractive option for India. Surely, if India is to diversify its sources of energy and move beyond the Middle East, Central Asia offers excellent prospects. India recognizes this reality; it launched its Connect Central Asia policy in 2012, which centered on promoting cooperation in education, medicine, IT and energy. Earlier in 2006, India announced a \$17 million grant to support the development of the Varzob 1 hydropower station, hoping to

tap into Tajikistan's hydroelectric potential. India however still has a long way to go in establishing its energy footprint in the region.

India also faces tough competition by regional rivals, China and Russia in Central Asia. China possesses vast economic resources and far more superior state machinery which can be used to develop communication, transport and pipeline infrastructure in Central Asia. India previously in competing for an 8.4 percent stake in Kazakhstan's giant offshore Kashagan oil field, lost to China. Russia is also known to have strong relations with Central Asian states, through the operation of energy giant Gazprom in the region, which gives Russia control of much of Central Asia's pipeline architecture.

For India, gaining access to energy markets in Central Asia is important. However as long as India's relationship with Pakistan and the situation in Afghanistan remains complex, access to Central Asian markets will remain within reach but difficult to pursue, especially since the region is also of interest to Russia and China.

Establishing a Stable Government in Afghanistan

India's aim in Afghanistan includes providing assistance to the Afghan government in addressing the needs of the Afghan population. India is one of the staunchest supporters of an "independent" government in Kabul. India hopes to see Afghanistan governed by an inclusive and

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In order to secure this aim, India has been working closely with the Afghan government in several regional and international issues of concern. India is willing to provide training to Afghan forces and even military equipment from its own resources and capabilities, if need be. India has spent more than \$2 billion on infrastructure development in

Afghanistan. It has agreed to provide 1.1 million tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan on a grant basis. India has also provided support in the reconstruction of the Salma Dam in Afghanistan's Herat Province, which can irrigate 75000 hectares of agricultural land. Moreover, India has expressed its willingness to provide assistance to future projects with the Afghan government.

Shifting Regional Dynamics

Typically in the past, each time Washington would publicly blame and shame Pakistan for sheltering Taliban elements members of the Indian

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government would rejoice, celebrating a diplomatic win. India's idea of an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" peace process has shared much of the same priorities as that of the US agenda in Afghanistan. India's Afghan policy in the 1990s was also in line with Russian and Iranian objectives in the region. All three countries jointly supported the anti-Taliban "Northern Alliance", and

later following the 9/11 attacks also stood united in support of the US war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Lately, however, the Afghan reality has changed.

Russia and Iran no longer have the same priorities as before. Russia for instance has now changed course substantially. Its emerging relationship with Pakistan in fact poses new challenges to India. Pakistan's relationship with China has also come a long way. China's investment in Afghanistan, both political and economic, it seems has not been enough for it to pressure Pakistan into any reassessment of policy positions.

More recently, the US-Pakistan relationship also seems to be shifting gears.

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US Secretary of Defense James Mattis submitted his resignation in December over differences with President Donald Trump on the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. America today is pursuing an isolationist and anti-interventionist foreign policy to please its core political base. There is little doubt that the decision to withdraw precipitously from Afghanistan and reduce the American military presence in the region before concluding a peace deal with the Taliban could be highly dangerous. American policy up until

recently gave India a prominent position in Afghanistan, pushing it to do more in assisting the country. At the same time, much to India's

pleasure, Trump maintained being critical of Pakistan's security establishment, publicly making statements, on Twitter and otherwise, regarding 'terror as emanating from Pakistan'. But Trump's readiness to exit Afghanistan now has taken precedence over other regional priorities.

Trump reached out to Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in a letter, wherein he proposed greater cooperation between the two nations in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Considering Trump's

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impatience in Afghanistan, it seems the US-Pakistan relationship is once again now important for both countries. Meanwhile, India's objections to US willingness to engage with the Taliban have been ignored by the international community. The fact that India is not invested in the region—in terms of having actual boots on the ground, has a lot to do with how Indian protests to ongoing talks have so far received little support.

From Pakistan's side however there has been an attempt to include India, even as India opposes the country internationally.

On December 11, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi not only acknowledged India's stakes in the Afghan region but also invited India to the table. Qureshi highlighted the importance of collectively viewing 'bringing peace to Afghanistan' as a matter of sharing responsibility between all regional powers that have stakes in the Afghan conflict. He urged India to join the United States, Pakistan and the Taliban in the dialogue process that is currently ongoing.

While Pakistan demonstrated an unforeseen and pronounced change in stance towards the idea of including India in Afghanistan, India's reaction was predictably dismissive and Indian analysts remained suspicious of Pakistan's true intentions. Counter-arguments from the Indian side to Qureshi's statement related to Pakistan's actual willingness to alter its foreign policy strategy in Afghanistan; according to speculations, Qureshi's statement could be nothing more than a way to improve Pakistan's image in the global community, making Pakistan seem as though it is leading the peace process in Afghanistan. Previously, Qureshi was quoted saying Pakistan's efforts led to the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi agreeing to open the Kartarpur corridor—a claim that India would certainly not like to be repeated in

the Afghan region. Moreover there were questions raised over whether Qureshi's remarks on a greater Indian role were at all reflective of where Pakistan's powerful military stands on the Afghan issue.

A Mumbai-based newspaper The Economic Times warned that if India complies, a greater Indian role in the Afghan region would only add to and further exacerbate Pakistan's long-standing fear of 'strategic encirclement'.

Retired Major General Harsha Kakar, who served in the Indian military from 1979-2015, too commented on the issue, saying that if Pakistan is reaching out to India owing to its limited capability in dealing with the Afghan issue, India should take this opportunity to force Pakistan into more compromises—while maintaining its own position on the issue as is and has been. One area where India would like to push Pakistan into taking action would be in extraditing the Lakshar e-Taiba (LeT) terrorists, who according to reports in the Indian media are based in Pakistan. The group is accused of perpetrating the November 2008 Mumbai attacks and hence the issue is a high priority one in Indian circles.

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The timing of Qureshi's statement is also significant to note in any analysis of the Indian response; with the 2019 Indian general elections around the corner, PM Modi is highly unlikely to show any flexibility towards Pakistan, regardless of how sincere Qureshi may be in proposing a greater Indian role in Afghanistan. The fear of losing the Indian audience is felt throughout the Indian leadership. The same sentiment motivated external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj's decision to call off the meeting with her Pakistani counterpart

earlier in September, barely twenty four hours after agreeing to it. Swaraj cited the brutal killing of three policemen in Jammu and Kashmir and Islamabad releasing postage stamps "glorifying" Kashmiri terrorist Bruhan Wani, as the reason to call off talks at the UN General Assembly.

Showing openness towards a possible rapprochement with Islamabad would also diminish the Modi-led BJP's efforts so far to cast Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi as partial to Pakistan. If, however, PM Modi emerges victorious in the upcoming elections, the possibility of swaying

India may improve. As of now, Modi's campaign constitutes a focus on collective security preservation in the Indo-Pacific region. It must be noted, if India is to consider dialogue with Pakistan, showing greater openness towards bringing a peaceful solution to Afghanistan would certainly put India in a positive light in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Nitin Pai, director of the Takshashila Institution, a Bangalore-based think tank, was quoted saying, it's time for New Delhi to revisit its policy toward Afghanistan, Pant argued: "India should be prepared to fight its own battles", considering the Taliban's expected rise. Avinash Mohananey, a former Indian intelligence official wrote, New Delhi must forgo its current hostile attitude towards the Taliban. It is becoming more and more obvious now that changing regional dynamics require a re-evaluation of old policy positions.

Presently, historic mistrust between India and Pakistan and electoral pressure are all reasons for the Indian leadership's unwillingness to accept Pakistan's overtures, despite compelling changes in regional realities. Perhaps in the second half of the New Year, India will consider a change in stance. For now, the aforementioned factors are central to India's inflexibility towards a change in its stance on Afghanistan.

The Pakistan Dilemma

Allowing Pakistan to dominate the Indian narrative on Afghanistan and subsequent policy position in the region complicates any attempts by India to find a peaceful solution to the Afghan conflict. Once policy is

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guided by the ‘Pakistan dilemma’, India runs the risk of confusing its national security priorities with its strategic interests. Curbing Pakistan’s influence and the danger it poses to India is a national security issue, for instance. On the other hand, taking part in the Afghan peace process and joining the international community in ending the Afghan conflict is a strategic issue. It is important to not only

differentiate between the two but to also understand that the two can be pursued separately. Confusing and mixing the two could however significantly compromise India’s position in the region.

India’s focus on its relationship with Pakistan has been central in steering the India-Taliban relationship as well—notably influencing the way it has progressed. For India, the standard for its support to any party in Kabul has been the intensity with which it showcases an anti-Pakistan tilt. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, India has supported any party in Afghanistan that harbors anti-Pakistan sentiments. During the 1990s, when the Taliban came in power, India supported the Northern Alliance—hoping to curb Pakistan’s influence by supporting a group opposed to the Taliban. While its policy of trying to isolate Pakistan has garnered some short-term victories to make the leaderships in India complacent for a little while, India’s averseness towards engaging with the Taliban now has hurt not only its own ability to secure its strategic interests but also its standing in the international community as a rising power.

Its strict focus on Pakistan has kept India from seeing the larger picture; the Taliban have come a long way. The group has overtime improved both in maturity and sophistication. Since their ouster in 2001, the Taliban today hold far more territory than at any other time. In contrast, the writ of the Kabul government has significantly weakened, owing to Taliban carrying out successful terror attacks on both security personnel and civilian population in the country. A 2017 report under the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction revealed, that the Taliban controls and administers about as much territory as the Afghan government itself.

Knowing that the US is adamant on pulling out, the Taliban have grown even bolder in their 'no engagement with the Afghan government' stance. An increase in the Taliban's influence in war-torn Afghanistan could also impact the security dynamics in the restive Kashmir Valley. It is perhaps good news for India that the Taliban leadership too has regularly expressed a desire to have greater and better relations with the Indian government. What's more, Russia and Iran-both Indian allies-are cooperating with the Taliban and can help influence the Taliban's relationship with India.

India recently strongly criticized the UN for failure to show resolve in sanctioning new Taliban leaders. While India holds its ground on the issue, the Afghan situation is predictably evolving. Whether it chooses to engage now or at a later date, once the Taliban are established in Kabul, India will eventually have to make a choice; stakes are high and time's running out.